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Anthony Benezet, Antislavery Rhetoric and the Age of Sensibility

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Abstract

Anthony Benezet (1713–84) is familiar to historians of slavery, abolition and Quakerism for his important role in disseminating Pennsylvanian Quaker antislavery to a wider and ecumenical audience. This article argues that an important reason for this success was Benezet's considered deployment of a fashionable sentimental rhetoric, or rhetoric of sensibility, that allowed him to reach out to wide audiences and to engage them both through their reason and through their emotions. This strategy enhanced Benezet's ability to encourage the Quaker discourse of antislavery, as it had developed over a century, to inform Atlantic discourses more widely. To support this argument, the article demonstrates that, in his time and for some time afterwards, Benezet was regarded by many as a man of feeling in terms familiar from contemporary sentimental literature. It concludes by closely reading a selection of passages from his antislavery writing to show that, while Benezet's rhetoric was by no means purely sentimental, he nonetheless frequently had recourse to a rhetoric of sensibility which he deployed as a powerful tool in his campaign to alert the world to the evil of slavery.

Keywords

abolition, Anthony Benezet, Pennsylvania, rhetoric, sensibility, slavery

> What I write is from the abounding of an affectionate heart, deeply feeling for the welfare of the present & future generation.
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> Anthony Benezet, Letter to Morris Birkbeck, 16 October 1781.[1]

1 Anthony Benezet, Letter to Morris Birkbeck, 16 October 1781, in Brookes, G. S., *Friend Anthony Benezet*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937, p. 358.

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Anthony Benezet is a familiar figure to historians of Quakerism in Pennsylvania as well as to anyone interested in the deep history of the overthrow of the Atlantic slave trade. As a Quaker with connections in colonial America, England and France, and as a superlative communicator, he played a pivotal role in disseminating Pennsylvanian Quaker antislavery to a wider and ecumenical audience. Across his eight antislavery publications, culminating in *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771), he piled up masses of evidence to show that the slave trade was cruel, unnatural, illegal and unnecessary. His method was to use evidence that could not be dismissed as being biased or prejudiced against slavery, and so he drew on the writings of supposedly impartial observers—such as travellers, natural historians and the slave traders themselves—whom no one could accuse of being biased against the trade. Benezet's use of scientific and geographical material has been widely discussed, as has his political and interpersonal work in advocating for change within the Religious Society of Friends. In this article, I take a different turn and argue that an important reason for the successful dissemination of Quaker antislavery thought after 1760 was Benezet's considered deployment of a fashionable sentimental rhetoric, or rhetoric of sensibility, that allowed him to reach out to wide audiences and to engage them both through their reason and through their emotions. This strategy, complemented by his vigorous promotion of his books and ideas, enhanced Benezet's ability to act as a conduit for the Quaker discourse of antislavery, as it had developed over a century, to flow into and inform Atlantic discourses more widely.

Anthony Benezet was born Antoine Benezet in Saint-Quentin, northern France, in 1713. His family were Huguenots who fled to London in 1715, when Benezet was two years old. Here he received an education suitable for the son of a prosperous family of merchants. In 1731, when Benezet was 17 years old, the family moved to Philadelphia where they joined the Religious Society of Friends. His early attempts at a career in trade were unsuccessful and, in 1739, he started as schoolteacher at Germantown and later at the famous Friends' English School of Philadelphia where he was noted for being a fine teacher and for his dislike of the severe discipline then common. In 1750, in addition to his day duties, he set up an evening class for enslaved children which he ran from his own home. In 1754, he set up the first public girls' school in America and in 1770, with the support of the Society of Friends, he set up the Negro School at Philadelphia. He subsequently taught at both of these schools almost until his death in May 1784. He is buried in the Friends' Burial Ground, Philadelphia.[2]

Benezet's life coincided both with the development of Quaker antislavery and with the growth of sentimentalism as an important literary and cultural mode.

2 As well as Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, the most significant biographies of Benezet are Vaux, R., *Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet*, Philadelphia: James P. Parke, 1817, and Jackson, M., *Let This Voice be Heard: Anthony Benezet, father of Atlantic abolitionism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

From at least the 1750s, he became a firm opponent of slavery, writing and publishing at his own expense a number of antislavery tracts and pamphlets, most famously *Some Historical Account of Guinea* in 1771. Benezet's antislavery was not his alone; Quakers had been the first group of people to develop and articulate a corporate policy of opposition to slavery. Friends in Barbados and Pennsylvania had grappled with the problem of slavery as far back as the 1670s. By the early years of the eighteenth century it was a familiar topic for discussion in meeting houses throughout Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and occasionally elsewhere in England and America. From the 1720s to the 1750s, the question was repeatedly raised in meetings, in everyday conversations, and in a growing number of publications, with Friends such as Benjamin Lay and Ralph Sandiford making impassioned pleas on behalf of enslaved people. By the 1740s, more Quakers opposed than supported slavery, at least publically, opening the way for a new generation of Friends, which included Anthony Benezet, to embed antislavery sentiment in the corporate identity of the Quakers. First the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, and, shortly after, the London Yearly Meeting, came out against slave trading and slave holding. Although compliance was not universal nor agreement complete, Quakers were from the early 1760s onwards at the forefront of antislavery movements in both Britain and America.[3]

In America, some newly independent states such as Pennsylvania moved quickly to outlaw slavery, with others in the north and east following over the coming decades. In Great Britain, a vigorous public debate was opened in the 1780s. The first wave of antislavery activism thus coincided with, and was arguably a manifestation of, the literary and cultural movement known as 'sensibility' or 'sentimentalism'. This movement, which encompassed art, music and philosophy as well as literature, emphasised the importance of emotions and the necessity of feeling sympathy with others. Sentimental literature often paid great attention to the physical manifestations of emotional suffering, such as sighs, groans, blushes and, especially, tears. Although frequently overlooked as either an aesthetic or a moral category until the mid twentieth century, often because later generations found sentimental literature's weeping heroes and heroines embarrassing, from the 1950s onwards, critics and historians increasingly recognised the late eighteenth century

3 For detailed histories of the growth of Quaker antislavery, see Carey, B., *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker rhetoric and the birth of American antislavery, 1658–1761*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2012. Drake, T. E., *Quakers and Slavery in America*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950. Soderlund, J., *Quakers and Slavery: a divided spirit*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985. For histories that examine the internal Quaker debate about slavery after the 1760s, see Carey, B., and Plank, G., (eds), *Quakers and Abolition*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014. Jordan, R. P., *Slavery and the Meetinghouse: the Quakers and the abolitionist dilemma, 1820–1865*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. McDaniel D., and Julye, V., *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans and the myth of racial justice*, Philadelphia: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2009.

as an 'Age of Sensibility', to use Northrop Frye's memorable phrase.[4] Eighteenth-century sensibility was not merely a cultural phenomenon. Sentimental writers urged for political and social reform on a broad range of issues that we might today categorise as 'humanitarian'. These included children's employment rights, animal welfare, the care of the elderly, the plight of veterans and the condition of the 'deserving' poor, as well as slavery and the slave trade. To tackle these issues, sentimental writers and campaigners made use of a rhetoric of sensibility, or sentimental rhetoric, which, as I have argued elsewhere, consisted 'of a number of loosely connected rhetorical tropes and arguments, available for the rhetorician to choose from when attempting to persuade an audience that a person, or group of people, are suffering and that that suffering should be diminished or relieved entirely'. At the philosophical core of this rhetoric was 'a belief in the power of sympathy to raise awareness of suffering, to change an audience's view of that suffering, and to direct their opposition to it'.[5] This article considers the extent to which Benezet made use of this rhetoric. It demonstrates that, in his time and for some time afterwards, Benezet was regarded by many as a man of feeling in terms familiar from contemporary sentimental literature. It concludes by closely reading a selection of passages from his antislavery writing to show that, while Benezet's rhetoric was by no means purely sentimental, he nonetheless frequently had recourse to a rhetoric of sensibility which he deployed as a powerful tool in his campaign to alert the world to the evil of slavery.

Benezet and the Age of Sensibility

Anthony Benezet's 'deeply feeling' letter to Morris Birkbeck in October 1781, the epigraph to this article, describes his motivation for writing a new spelling and grammar book—a subject close to the heart of every schoolteacher. Rather than the narrow pedantry characteristic of grammarians, however, Benezet expresses heartfelt benevolence in language that would not have been out of place in a sentimental novel. Proclaiming that actions derive from the 'abounding of an affectionate heart' is a characteristic of the 'man of feeling'. In literature, and sometimes in life, this figure displayed extraordinary levels of what our age would call 'emotional awareness' but which the eighteenth century called 'sensibility'. The archetype was Harley, the weeping protagonist of Henry MacKenzie's novel *The Man of Feeling*, which was published in 1771, the same year as Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea*.[6] There were many other examples in the literature of the period, including

4 Frye, N., 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', *ELH* 23 (June 1956), pp. 144–52.

5 Carey, B., *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: writing, sentiment, and slavery, 1760–1807*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 2. The words 'sentiment' and 'sensibility' are complex and not quite synonymous in technical usage, although close enough to be interchangeable in this article. For discussion, see pp. 4–5.

6 Mackenzie, H., *The Man of Feeling*, Vickers, B., (ed.), Oxford: World's Classics, 1987 [1771].

many women of feeling, and not all were as endlessly lachrymose as Harley. While some sentimental heroes were portrayed as suffering victims, and some as tearful onlookers of suffering, others performed heroic acts of charity or sought to remedy social ills. Benezet's insistence that his concern for the grammatical competence of his students derives 'from the abounding of an affectionate heart, deeply feeling for the welfare of the present & future generation' is a self-representation consistent with the image of a man of genuine, or active, sensibility.[7] Such people did not merely weep over the world. They changed it.

Benezet is often presented in this role. Numerous accounts from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries hold him up as a model of genuine or active sensibility, sometimes in contrast to those whose sensibility rested on a less secure moral foundation. In his lifetime, however, Benezet was only rarely singled out as a sentimental writer, perhaps because the ability to engage the feelings of the reader was so central to mid and late eighteenth-century culture that it would in many cases be noticed only in its failure than in its execution. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, went so far as to identify Benezet in distinct opposition to sentimental writers. After reading Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journal* in August 1772, Wesley criticised the word 'sentimental' in his journal, noting that it 'is not sense. It conveys no determinate idea; yet one fool makes many. And this nonsensical word (who would believe it?) is become a fashionable one!' The following day, however, he 'read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade'. There is some irony in the Methodist leader excoriating sentimental literature given that Methodism's explicit emphasis on a religion of the heart aligned it perfectly with the sentimentalists' call for a culture and ethics of the heart. Wesley was more sentimental than he knew. His response to reading Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea* likewise reflected his sensibility since he draws attention to suffering, the central interest of sentimental writers; slavery, says Wesley, 'infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries'.[8] Nevertheless, Wesley's comparison of Benezet with Sterne can be seen as part of a wider discussion over whether sensibility could be genuine if it did not result in social action, and since Wesley rejects Sterne's false sensibility and praises Benezet's genuine interest in alleviating suffering, few contemporary readers would have seen this as anything other than confirmation of Benezet's ability to articulate and act upon honest sentiment.

Accounts of Benezet's benevolence and activity to reduce suffering become increasingly common after his death, and some of them focus on his ability to inspire 'tender emotions' in others: one of the hallmarks of a sentimental hero.

7 Benezet, Letter to Morris Birkbeck, p. 358.

8 *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols, Curnock, N., (ed.), London: The Epworth Press, 1938, vol. v, pp. 445–46. For an extended discussion of Wesley, sentiment and slavery, see Carey, *British Abolitionism*, pp. 145–51.

The account of his funeral given in the preface to the 1788 London edition of *Some Historical Account of Guinea* is a good example. The funeral was a very public event, attended, the preface tells us, by 'several thousands of all ranks, professions, and parties' with a procession that was 'closed by some hundreds of those poor Negroes, who had been personally benefited by his labours, and whose behaviour on the occasion affectingly evinced their gratitude and affection for the indefatigable benefactor'.[9] In common with much sentimental writing, which often tends to emphasise the feelings rather than the actions, the behaviour in question is not specified, but its 'affecting' nature is. Benezet, the writer implies, inspired affection and the reader, in turn, is asked to imagine the affecting nature of the public funeral and presumably to draw upon their own emotional reserves to interpret it. Late eighteenth-century readers would have recognised the sentimental cue, and understood that they too were expected to be moved.

The story of Benezet's funeral was widely reproduced. A good example can be found in Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, the book which marked the beginning of abolitionist historiography, written by one of the most active and celebrated of the abolitionists.[10] Clarkson heaps praise on Quakers in general, and Benezet in particular, for their early antislavery activity, but in a more personal, almost confessional, moment Clarkson also credits Benezet with having transformed him from a student anxious to excel in essay writing to an activist dedicated to overturning slavery. Benezet was not actually present in Cambridge in 1785 as the young Clarkson composed the essay that would launch his career as an abolitionist, but his writings certainly were. Clarkson read deeply in these documents, and when the transformation came we should note that it was primarily emotional rather than intellectual. After reading *Some Historical Account*, Clarkson reported being much troubled:

> All my pleasure was damped by the facts which were now continually before me. It was but one gloomy subject from morning to night. In the day-time I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest. I sometimes never closed my eye-lids for grief. It became now not so much a trial for academical reputation, as for production of a work, which might be useful to injured Africa.[11]

Although it is the 'facts' that trouble Clarkson, his response is precisely what might have been expected in the age of high sensibility. He does not simply weigh up those facts. Instead, he experiences continual anxiety and loses sleep as the information which Benezet has provided elicit a physiological response. By representing his ability physically to suffer in sympathy with 'injured Africa',

9 Benezet, A., *Some Historical Account of Guinea, its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants*, London: J. Phillips, 1788, p. xii.

10 Clarkson, T., *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, 2 vols, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808, pp. 144–45.

11 Clarkson, *History*, p. 170.

Clarkson positions himself as a man of feeling, while his desire to 'be useful to injured Africa' establishes that he intends to exhibit active sensibility. Indirectly, the anecdote also implies that Benezet is well able to communicate and inspire those uneasy feelings in addition to laying out the facts. In this account, it is Benezet's sentimental rhetoric that is transformative.

A slightly longer biography of Benezet, written a decade later by Roberts Vaux, more clearly articulates the view that Benezet's sensibility was a driving force in the development of his own antislavery perspective. In Vaux's view, Benezet, like Clarkson, was initially turned to activism by the strength of his feelings rather than by the intellectual weight of the arguments. Vaux argues that, with Benezet's 'enlightened and unbounded philanthropy, it was to be expected that the degraded and suffering condition of the negroes, would occupy a large share of his notice and sympathy. About the year 1750, it began to be observed that his feelings were deeply affected with the iniquity of the slave trade'.[12] In Vaux's view, Benezet's feelings preceded his rational knowledge and although Benezet would later pile up massive scientific and philosophical evidence against slavery and the slave trade it is his feeling nature that drives his antislavery zeal, not his research and learning. This representation of Benezet is no passing comment. Throughout his biography Vaux portrays Benezet as a man deeply imbued with sensibility, and provides further evidence of this feeling nature in a series of anecdotes. He tells us, for instance, that 'the sympathies of [Benezet's] nature extended to every thing that was susceptible of feeling, in so much that he avoided the use of animal food during several of the last years of his life; indeed so exquisitely delicate was his sensibility in this respect that the sight of blood would immediately produce swooning'.[13] Here, as in so much sentimental literature, the mark of sensibility is the transformation of inner feelings to external action, either voluntary, such as writing antislavery tracts, or involuntary, such as swooning at the sight of blood. Benezet's vegetarianism is also a mark of sensibility. Sentimental writers and activists were engaged in redefining the boundaries of sentience, and many abolitionists were also at the forefront of the animal rights movement, in particular asking people to consider dogs, cattle and horses as feeling creatures and to make use of their labour without cruelty. In England, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824 by a group of reformers which included the abolitionist William Wilberforce, but this event was preceded by long tradition in sentimental literature of representing animals as feeling subjects. Vaux's insistence on Benezet's vegetarianism positions him as central to this movement.[14]

Vaux was not alone in applauding Benezet's views on animals. In 1831, an anonymous but highly sentimentalised anecdote appeared in print that built on

12 Vaux, *Memoirs*, p. 19.

13 Vaux, *Memoirs*, pp. 127–28.

14 For an extended discussion of this tradition, see Menely, T., *The Animal Claim: sensibility and the creaturely voice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Benezet's reputation for kindness to animals, as well as on his reputation as a progressive teacher. Apparently told at second hand by a friend of a former pupil, it concerns two other pupils at Benezet's school who test 'his temper and principles' by constructing:

> A *pillory*, in which they contrived to secure a living *mouse*, and having attached to this instrument of cruelty the following lines,
>
> *'I stand here, my honest friends,*
> *For stealing cheese and candle-ends.'*
>
> they deposited the mouse, thus punished, upon Mr. B.'s desk, in his school room, some time before the boys met in the morning.

Benezet, we are told, worked out which of the boys were responsible—W.D. and S.C.—and:

> The interest of the scene now became very great—what would be the sentence which Mr. Benezet would pronounce for this offence, none could conjecture. The good man then said, '*Ah, this poor mouse may have taken the cheese and the candles without leave, for which most people would have deprived it of its life, but W.D. and S.C. more compassionately put it in this confinement*.' Then cutting the strings which fastened the pillory, he added, '*Go, poor thing, go*.' The emancipated mouse soon recovered from the inconvenience of its restrained position, and presently sought refuge in some neighbouring cupboard. But the authors of this device remained to be disposed of. With their heads cast downward, and much confused, the spectacle of their fellows, they awaited their fate. Mr Benezet seized the moment to impart to them a lesson of kindness, and concluded his remarks by saying, '*That as W.D. and S.C. wisely and mercifully imprisoned the mouse, rather than put it to death, they should go out at* 4 *o'clock that afternoon*.' My informant assured me the effect was powerful and durable on the minds of all the boys.[15]

Whether this story is true or not is impossible to say, but the image of Benezet emancipating the mouse is powerful metaphor for his efforts to emancipate slaves and is essentially a reconfiguring of a common scenario in hagiography, biography and literature in which a benevolent person frees a caged animal, often a bird, to demonstrate both their largesse and their sympathetic awareness of the misery of captivity. This image, which sometimes also echoes the well-known tale of Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds, turns up in writing as diverse as Giorgio Vasari's biography of Leonardo da Vinci and Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*.[16] By the eighteenth century, it had become a sentimental fable: that is, a moral-bearing

15 'Anecdote of Mr. Anthony Benezet', *The Friend* 4 (1831), p. 187.

16 Da Vinci is said to have bought caged birds in the market in order to release them. See Vasari, G., *The Lives of the Artists*, 1568, trans. Conaway Bondanella, J., and Bondanella, P., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 280. Laurence Sterne writes of a caged starling calling 'I can't get out', which he later bought, although he sold it on rather than releasing it. See Sterne, L., A *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, New, M., and Day, W.G., (eds), Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002 [1768], pp. 99–100.

extended metaphor on the importance of sympathy and forgiveness using animals as the main point of comparison. In this version, it presents Benezet more clearly than anywhere else as a sentimental figure who is not merely fired by a spirit of active benevolence, although he certainly is, but who also has the sensibility, that is to say the capacity to sympathise with others and act accordingly, to mark him out as a true and extraordinary man of feeling.

This anecdote marked the high-water mark of Benezet's representation as a sentimental hero. As the nineteenth century progressed, the eighteenth-century style of sentimental writing fell from favour, increasingly becoming the favourite target of critics and professors of English literature. Benezet's sensibility accordingly begins to disappear from view. In 1859, for example, Wilson Armistead revised Vaux's biography of Benezet and in so doing excised much of the sentimentality. In particular, while Armistead remains happy to report that 'the sympathies of Benezet's nature extended to every-thing that was susceptible of feeling, so much so that he avoided the use of animal food', he decided that the anecdote about Benezet swooning at the sight of blood was too sentimental, or perhaps insufficiently masculine, to remain.[17] Four decades later, in a somewhat enthusiastic pamphlet based on Vaux and Armistead, Joseph Elkington further elides Benezet's sensibility. Elkington notes that 'his tenderness for the animal creation made him a vegetarian', but the swooning passage is gone. He does not include the mouse story, although he had access to it, and he does not even mention the black followers in Benezet's funeral procession, let alone their 'affecting behaviour'. Although Benezet's 'sympathy' is mentioned several times, Elkington is more interested in representing his 'fusion of noble interest and rare abilities'. Sensibility has all but vanished.[18]

In more recent biography and criticism, the emphasis has increasingly been on Benezet's extensive scientific and geographical knowledge and the ways in which he developed the technique of piling up evidence against the slave trade, evidence gleaned from those with first-hand knowledge, often people who themselves had no particular axe to grind with the slave trade or even those who benefitted by it. Some have seen Benezet's technique as little better than plagiarism. Thomas Drake, for example, for whom John Woolman was always the more significant figure, argues that 'much of his matter, unlike Woolman's work, Benezet had lifted from the writings of others'.[19] Christopher Brown recognises the technique but reached a different judgement. 'Like most successful entrepreneurs', argues Brown, Benezet 'was an opportunist. When drafting his publications, Benezet raided the works of other authorities to document how the Atlantic slave trade destroyed African societies'.[20] Srividhya Swaminathan takes this a step further, arguing

17 Armistead, W., *Anthony Benezet: from the original memoir, revised, with additions*, London: A. W. Bennett; Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1859, p. 132.

18 Elkington, J., *Anthony Benezet and his Times, 1713–1784*, Philadelphia: s.n., 1898, pp. 32, 34, 14.

19 Drake, *Quakers and Slavery*, p. 62.

20 Brown, C. L., *Moral Capital: foundations of British abolitionism*, Chapel Hill: University

that 'unlike most other antislavery documents of this time, Benezet's tracts make innovative use of the extensive travel narratives written by adventurers and slave traders'.[21] Whether as plagiarism, opportunism or innovation, Benezet's method is discussed by many historians of Quaker slavery and abolition, but few have much to say either about Benezet's supposedly sympathetic and feeling nature, or about his writing style, as opposed to the content of his books—although, as we shall see, both Brown and Swaminathan do take positions in this respect.

The three most recent biographies of Benezet largely overlook Benezet's relationship with the wider discourse of sensibility. Neither George Brookes, writing in 1937, nor Maurice Jackson, writing in 2009, considers either this aspect of Benezet's character or of his writing in their important biographies. This is not perhaps surprising: the study of the 'Age of Sensibility' was at its lowest ebb in 1937, while in more recent years the phenomenon has interested literary scholars far more than historians. Nevertheless, an undeservedly unpublished PhD thesis, written by Nancy Slocum Hornick in 1974, attempts to grapple with this side of Benezet's character. In the abstract to her thesis, Hornick argues that Benezet's 'goal was never to overturn the established social structure, but to change it drastically by gradual and peaceful methods. This called for a revolution of sentiments, in which rational people would become convinced of the need to correct various evils that threatened their collective happiness.' This insight is not well followed through in the text, although Hornick does note that Benezet's 'writing also had an urgency about it that makes it fascinating reading even two centuries later. He related anecdotes in colorful, emotional language to describe conditions in Africa, the horrors of middle-passage [*sic*], and the situation of slaves in the colonies—with no details spared.'[22] This promises a nuanced investigation, but no close reading or analysis of that emotional language follows.

By the opening years of the twenty-first century, literary scholars had reversed their opinion of the literature of sensibility, recognising it both as an important literary mode that persisted for more than a generation as well as a manifestation of a more general shift in conceptions of social equity and humanitarianism.[23] Scholars in other disciplines have recognised Benezet's place in the development of the latter, but not always the former. In an important recent study, for example, the sociologist Peter Stamatov identifies Quaker abolitionism led by Benezet as one of the key originating points of modern global humanitarianism. Stamatov does not, however, read Benezet's work, or that of other abolitionists, in the context of the culture of sensibility, even though the aims of sentimental writers were often explicitly

of North Carolina Press, 2006, p. 400.

21 Swaminathan, S., 'Anthony Benezet's Depictions of African Oppression: "That Creature of Propaganda"', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (2006), pp. 115–130, p. 121.

22 Hornick, N. S., 'Anthony Benezet: eighteenth-century social critic, educator, and abolitionist', PhD. dissertation., University of Maryland, 1974, p. 355.

23 For discussion of this transformation, see Carey, *British Abolitionism*, pp. 5–9.

what we would today term 'humanitarian'.[24] Likewise, Christopher Brown notes that 'Benezet's interests mirrored the broader social reform program taking shape elsewhere in the North American colonies and in the British Isles' without tying that to the culture of sensibility. Brown, however, recognises the importance of sympathy to Benezet's scheme, as well as Benezet's conviction that sympathy without action was morally problematic; 'too often among Friends, avowals of sympathy for sufferers like Acadians supplanted genuine benevolence. […] It was indefensible to preach up the Golden Rule and yet withhold sustenance, security, and justice from those in need.'[25] Such questions were not merely confined to Quaker circles; they were at the centre of much of the literature of sensibility as well. Although Srividhya Swaminathan attempts to resist the identification of antislavery writing with either the words 'sensibility' or 'sentimental', she nevertheless concedes that the 'pathos appeal' was central to much of this literature.[26] More specifically, she argues that Benezet 'relies equally on pathetic and logical appeals to his audience', but while he 'invites the reader to sympathise with the slave, Benezet does not poeticise misery or use hyperbolic description'.[27] Although Swaminathan does not say it, this description would accord well with eighteenth-century conceptions of genuine sensibility as opposed to those who, in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, spent their time 'bustling about and shewing off with all the vanity of pretended Sensibility'.[28] Indeed, in Swaminathan's view, 'Benezet drew upon the "compassionate spirit" of his audience to argue that the slave trade was "inhuman" and unworthy of "civilized" peoples. He stated that the practice ran "contrary to the Dictates of Reason, and the common Feelings of Humanity"'.[29] Such an approach, balancing pathos and logos and asserting that all human beings experience the same feelings, is entirely consistent with the central concerns of the more sophisticated pieces of eighteenth-century sentimental literature.

Benezet's Sentimental Rhetoric

Until recently, Benezet's antislavery writings were difficult for non-specialists to obtain. In 2013, however, Louisiana State University Press issued *The Complete Antislavery Writings of Anthony Benezet, 1754–1783*, edited by David L. Crosby,

24 Stamatov, P., *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: religion, empires, and advocacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

25 Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 399.

26 Swaminathan, S., *Debating the Slave Trade: rhetoric of British national identity, 1759–1815*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, pp. 100–10.

27 Swaminathan, 'Anthony Benezet's Depictions of African Oppression', p. 123.

28 Coleridge, S. T., 'Lecture on the Slave Trade', in Patton, L., and Mann, P., (eds), *Lectures 1795: on politics and religion*, Princeton, NJ: Routledge and Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 246.

29 Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade*, p. 57. Swaminathan is quoting from *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes*, Philadelphia: W. Dunlap, 1762, p. 4.

which makes Benezet's eight main antislavery publications easily available to the general reader for the first time, albeit at the small cost of accepting modern American spelling and punctuation. Crosby's edition makes simple the task of comparing Benezet's antislavery texts and charting the development of his antislavery thought as well as his writing style. Crosby himself notes that seeing the texts together allows the reader to follow Benezet's development:

> From his early exhortations to his fellow Quakers; to his broadening of the argument to include appeals to enlightened citizens based on theories of the natural rights of man; to his encyclopedic treatment of the political, economic, and natural history of various African nations and the harm done to them and their citizens by the transatlantic slave trade; to his later concentration on the physical and emotional suffering of individual slaves and slave communities.[30]

Crosby's analysis of Benezet's journey is broadly accurate, but the depiction of physical and emotional suffering is present throughout his writing, even if it does becomes particularly pronounced later in his career. As I have shown elsewhere, both of Benezet's antislavery publications from the 1750s are notable for a degree of sentimental rhetoric, although the expression of Benezet's sensibility in these pamphlets is neither gratuitous nor excessive. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Epistle of Caution and Advice Concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves* (1754) was probably substantially Benezet's work, with some input from John Woolman, as well as a review committee of fourteen others. Although this letter does not deploy a fully developed sentimental rhetoric, it does appeal to its readers' feelings by arguing that it is 'a melancholy but true reflection, that, where *slave* keeping prevails, pure religion and sobriety decline, as it evidently tends to harden the heart' (p. 8). Slaveholders are accordingly warned not 'to lose our tender and feeling sense of the miseries of our fellow creatures' (p. 10). In his short pamphlet *Observations on the inslaving, importing and purchasing of Negroes* (1759), Benezet more clearly deploys a sentimental rhetoric. Referring to American prisoners of war, he asks 'what heart so hard that would not melt with sympathy and sorrow?' He turns this round by asking his readers, 'while our hearts are affected for our brethren and relations', to consider African captives in the same light (p. 16). Invoking sympathy for one group of people and then transferring the emotions generated to another group is a classic rhetorical manoeuvre of the sentimental literature of this period, and Benezet proves himself an expert.[31]

30 Crosby, D. L., (ed.), *The Complete Antislavery Writings of Anthony Benezet, 1754–1783*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013, p. 4. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent quotations from Benezet's works in this article are from this edition, with the page reference given parenthetically in the text. In addition to the texts Crosby prints, 108 letters are reproduced in Brookes, *Friend Anthony Benezet*, many of which concern slavery but which are not considered in this article.

31 For my discussion of *Epistle of Caution and Advice*, see *From Peace to Freedom*, pp. 190–95. For discussion of *Observations on the Inslaving, Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*, see pp. 211–13.

Quakers became increasingly firm in their opposition to slavery following the advice of the London Yearly Meeting in 1761 to 'recommend it earnestly to the care of Friends every where to discourage as much as in them lies a practice so repugnant to our Christian profession'.[32] Benezet responded to this new climate by producing a range of pamphlets that looked beyond Quaker communities in the hope of promoting a universal end to the slave trade. The first of these was *A short account of that part of Africa inhabited by the negroes* (1762). The melancholy opening to this text would have been familiar in tone to readers of sentimental novels. Benezet starts by asserting that 'it is a truth, as sorrowful as obvious, that mankind too generally are actuated by false motives' and asks readers impartially to inspect their own hearts, rather than their conscience or their reason, to provide proof of this (p. 28). He declares his intention is, first, to 'lay before the candid reader the depth of evil attending this iniquitous practice' but, second, to 'lay before such as have unwarily engaged in [slave trading], their danger of totally losing that tender sensibility to the sufferings of their fellow creatures, the want whereof sets men beneath the brute creation' (p. 29). Benezet's use of the term 'sensibility' demonstrates his familiarity with the fashionable discourse, but his concern for the sensibilities of slave traders, rather than for their moral bearings or even their souls, indicates that he is not merely familiar but also fully committed to the sentimental mode. The extended passage that immediately follows accordingly emphasises not the physical but rather the emotional suffering of the captive people taken aboard Atlantic slave ships, and this emotional torment is contrasted with the lack of sensibility of the slave traders. In the Middle Passage, 'many thousands of innocent people are brought under the greatest anxiety and suffering' as they are 'subject to the humors and inhuman lash of some of the most hard hearted and inconsiderate of mankind'. This is certainly emotional, but what follows is more closely aligned with the literature of sensibility. 'Many of these poor creatures whose hearts are broken', argues Benezet, 'perish through misery and grief on the passage'. This is a classic piece of sentimental rhetoric in that it privileges emotional over rational explanations. The slave-traders are hard hearted while slaves in the ship die of broken hearts—misery and grief—rather than, as was actually the case, dehydration, exhaustion, vomiting and diarrhoea. By contrast with the enslaved people, whose emotional response to their situation proves fatal, the slave traders are so 'hardened by the love of wealth as to be void of feeling' (pp. 29–30). This extended emotionally charged passage shortly after gives way to writing with a more tempered tone in which Benezet offers substantive evidence to support his case, but his work is done; he has emotionally prepared the reader to receive sympathetically the more intellectual arguments that follow.

The tempered tone does not last. Benezet's use of a sentimental rhetoric is not confined only to this passage, and the book frequently switches between scientific evidence and heartfelt expostulation. On the one hand, we see Benezet the schoolteacher, keen to educate and inform his readers. On the other, there is

32 Minutes of the London Yearly Meeting, 14/5/1761.

Benezet the campaigner, fired with moral indignation and urging his readers to join in his emotional journey. That Benezet found himself in conflict between these two approaches is evident from the changes he made between the first and the second editions of *A short account*. In the first edition, he breaks off from his measured presentation of the evidence and switches mode, directly attempting to reawaken his reader's sensibility with a piece of carefully deployed sentimental rhetoric. He asks:

> What Distress can we conceive equal to the Alarms, the Anxiety and Wrath, which must success one another in the Breasts of the tender Parents, or affectionate Children, in continual Danger of being torn from one another, and dragged into a State of cruel Bondage. Reader if the Impressions of Grace, or even the common Feelings of Humanity are not suppressed in thy Heart, by the Love of Gain, compare what thou hast read with the Equity, the Sympathy, the Tenderness and affectionate Love, which is the Life of Christianity.[33]

Like much of the literature of sensibility, this passage asks readers to imagine and identify sympathetically with characters in a domestic scene at a time of crisis and separation. It makes use of sentimental keywords such as 'tender' and 'affectionate', which were likely to elicit a predictable emotional reaction from readers used to reading them in sentimental novels. Benezet then breaks the novelistic fourth wall with a direct appeal to his readers, and the appeal is to their hearts rather than their minds. This rhetoric is as sentimental as any to be found in the literature of the antislavery movement of the 1780s, which made widespread use of the technique, and may have been an influence on it. It may, however, have been too rich even for Benezet himself. In the second edition (the edition reproduced by Crosby) this passage is cut in two by an interpolated paragraph recounting the experience of one 'John Atkins, surgeon to Commodore Ogle when on the coast of Guinea' (p. 44). The evidence is useful, but the emotional power of the passage is considerably diminished. In the two editions of *A short account*, Benezet was evidently in the process of working out a writing style that balanced emotional rhetoric familiar from sentimental literature with precise evidence gleaned from natural histories, geographies and legal testimony.

A short account was published in Philadelphia and probably did not circulate widely beyond Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The British abolitionist Granville Sharp later found it in London and reprinted it, but complained that it did not sell well. Before that, in 1767, Benezet issued *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies* with the clear intention of reaching an audience on both sides of the Atlantic. This book, which Crosby describes as 'a user's manual for antislavery activists' (p. 84) was sent to London and distributed to Members of Parliament and others, as well as to Friends, and was likewise reprinted by Sharp.[34] Perhaps with

33 Anthony Benezet, *A Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by the Negroes*, Philadelphia: W. Dunlap, 1762, pp. 29–30.

34 Jackson, *Let this Voice be Heard*, pp. 141, 143–45.

a view to inspiring the British legislature, Benezet opens with a high-minded appeal to British notions of 'rights and liberties' and a clear statement that the book intends 'more fully to make known the aggravated iniquity attending the practice of the slave-trade' and its effects on 'many thousands of our fellow-creatures, as free as ourselves by nature'. Appeals to liberty would have played well with Whig parliamentarians in the ministry of the Elder Pitt as well as to the electorate at large. The following paragraph, which invokes 'the groans, the dying groans, which daily ascend to God, the common Father of mankind, from the broken hearts of those his deeply oppressed creatures', seems aimed at a different public; the readers of sentimental novels who were perhaps more interested in 'broken hearts' than the infection and physical abuse that gave rise to the 'dying groans' of the enslaved (p. 87).

This pattern is repeated several times in *A Caution and Warning*. While much of the text clearly addresses men in public life, Benezet evidently understood that to have an impact on public opinion he needed to reach out simultaneously to those who made the laws, those who elected lawmakers, and those such as young people and women who had no vote but whose contribution to public discourse could nonetheless be significant. In the section of the book that discusses the horrific Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas, he several times focusses on personal suffering in a domestic context. As before, Benezet directly addresses the reader, explicitly asking them to imagine the horror as being in their own home, rather than in a public space of commerce:

> Reader, bring the matter home, and consider whether any situation in life can be more completely miserable than that of those distressed captives. When we reflect that each individual of this number had some tender attachment which was broken by the cruel separation; some parent or wife who had not an opportunity of mingling tears in a parting embrace (p. 97)

Tears are the classic marker of sensibility in sentimental literature and contemporary readers would have understood well that to demonstrate their own sensibility they should first shed tears of sympathy and next take action to relieve the suffering. While the implication is that the captives in this passage are male, Benezet focusses on the tears of parents and wives, suggesting that this passage is aimed at the women who formed a substantial proportion of the readers of sentimental novels. If this is the case, a passage that appears a few pages later seems deliberately designed to shock women readers. Benezet describes the scene as the captive Africans are disembarked from the slave ship and marched into the marketplace. Here:

> They are again exposed naked, without any distinction of sexes, to the brutal examination of their purchasers; and this, it may well be judged, is to many of them another occasion of deep distress, especially to the females. Add to this that near connections must now again be separated to go with their several purchasers. In this melancholy scene, mothers are seen hanging over their daughters, bedewing

> their naked breasts with tears, and daughter clinging to their parents, not knowing what new stage of distress must follow their separation or if ever they shall meet again; and here what sympathy, what commiseration are they to expect? (p. 99)

The rhetorical question is another technique that allows an author to connect directly with the reader. The implied answer is 'none', at which any feeling reader should be shocked. A few lines on, Benezet repeats the technique, but, more directly, asking 'can any human heart that retains a fellow feeling for the sufferings of mankind be unconcerned at relations of such grievous affliction'? The implied answer is 'no', of course, but the reader is forced into the position of examining their own heart and locating their own concern. This is a procedure widely used by sentimental writers when seeking to engage their readers' sympathy through their sensibility, and it is something Benezet often does in passages drawing attention to personal suffering. Like many such passages in sentimental literature, however, the desire emotionally to shock readers into social action may have been in conflict with eighteenth-century notions of decency. Nancy Slocum Hornick describes this passage as 'poignant and titillating', an assessment that corresponds to some recent critics' contention that, consciously or otherwise, abolitionist writing depicting physical violence sometimes resembles sadomasochistic pornography.[35] Certainly, Benezet was pushing at the boundaries of what might be considered acceptable in polite writing, but then, was not the slave trade itself far beyond the pale of decency and humanity?

Benezet's most influential antislavery work was *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771) which reproduces and expands on much of the writing in *A Caution and Warning*. In this, his longest work, he perfects the method of piling up evidence after evidence from impartial observers; much of the book consists of long quotation and Benezet's own voice is often submerged entirely. There are, relatively speaking, fewer sentimental passages in *Some Historical Account*. Benezet seems to have wanted to quieten his rhetoric in this book, to be the facilitator rather than the orator, but nevertheless his passionate opposition to slavery remains evident throughout and this emotion gives rise to some sentimental rhetoric as well. In the main, however, the sections that seem intended to engage with readers' sensibility, particularly Chapters 12 and 13, revise the material discussed above which was originally presented in *A Caution and Warning*. These revisions demonstrate that Benezet was a careful writer who measured every word, but they also reveal that he was anxious to close down any route by which the truth of his writing could be questioned. The line in *A Caution and Warning*, for example, which reads, 'when we reflect that each individual of this number had some tender attachment which was broken by the cruel separation' becomes, in *Some Historical*

35 Hornick, *Anthony Benezet*, pp. 359–60. For the sadomasochism debate, see Favret, M. A., 'Flogging: the antislavery movement writes pornography', in Janowitz, A., (ed.), *Essays and Studies 1998: romanticism and gender*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998, pp. 19–43. Wood, M., *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Account, 'each individual of this number had probably some tender attachment'. The interpolation of the single word 'probably' prevents Benezet's argument from being dismissed for being generalised or imprecise, but it also reveals to us that his sentimental rhetoric was neither accidental nor unplanned. On the contrary, precise textual revisions such as this confirm that Benezet was both a conscious and a committed practitioner of the rhetoric of sensibility.

One further example deserves our attention. Benezet's final antislavery publication, *Short Observations on Slavery*, appeared in the spring 1783, a year before he died and a few months after the drafting of the Treaty of Paris; Benezet, who began life as a subject of the King of France, and who lived for most of his life as a British subject, died a citizen of the USA. This short text opens with a discussion of the declaration that all men are endowed by God with inalienable rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' in which Benezet notes that 'how far the situation of the Negroes still kept in slavery on this continent is consonant thereto is a matter which calls for the most serious attention of all those who indeed believe in a general providence' (p. 228). Benezet was not of course the first to ask 'why is it we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from among the drivers of Negroes?'[36] The paradox of American liberty was nevertheless absolutely clear to him, and, in witnessing the slavery around them, he asked, 'must not every sensible, feeling heart be filled with sympathy and fearful apprehensions?' (p. 229). Benezet understood very well that such abstract notions are rarely persuasive, and he accordingly provides a study of 'the case of a Negro residing near Philadelphia' in order to catch at the hearts of his readers. Benezet tells us that 'from his first arrival he appeared thoughtful and dejected, frequently dropping tears when fondling his master's children; the cause of which was not known till he was able to be understood'. Once able to speak in English, this enslaved African reveals that he was kidnapped unexpectedly, leaving a family behind him, the memory of whom 'were the principal cause of his dejection and grief'. This type of vignette, featuring a tearful, suffering individual in a domestic scene, is a central feature of the rhetoric of sensibility. It was widely used by antislavery writers and others who realised that it is easier to engage the sympathy of the reader for a single, specific story of suffering than for a group of anonymous sufferers.[37] As in his earlier writing, Benezet follows up this case study with a rhetorical question designed to rouse the sensibility of his readers: 'can any whose mind is not rendered quite obdurate by the practice of oppression or the love of gain hear this relation without being affected with sympathy and sorrow'. The implied answer is obvious, but the implied reader perhaps less so. Benezet spells this out clearly, asking 'now, tender parents, and all who are real friends of liberty, and you who are willing to read

36 Johnson, S., *Taxation no Tyranny*, 1775, in Greene, D. J., (ed.), *Samuel Johnson: political writings*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1977, p. 454.

37 In *British Abolitionism*, I called this technique the 'sentimental parable'. See pp. 39–40 for a definition, and *passim* for examples.

the book of conscience and those that are learned in the law, what can you say to these deplorable cases?' (pp. 229–30). The complete formulation is inclusive, but priority goes to 'tender parents'. Like almost all sentimental writers, Benezet privileges family relationships over political ties; the domestic over the public. While politicians and lawyers may well be able to formalise change, it is the emotional response of citizens as parents, siblings and children that will demand that change and drive it forwards.

I conclude, therefore, that Benezet used a rhetoric of sensibility quite extensively in his writing and that he was seen in his time and for some time afterwards as a man of feeling. An important element of his expertise as a writer was his ability to speak to audiences otherwise separated by wide social, religious and geographical distances and, in part, this ability stemmed from a willingness to embrace literary fashions, including the literature of sensibility, that might otherwise have seemed at odds with Quaker notions of plain speech. It was this ability that would make his writing the first port of call for a generation of antislavery campaigners and which allowed him to reach out to and profoundly influence a wide audience on both sides of the Atlantic. While Benezet is now often seen as a writer who primarily used reason and science to make the case against slavery and the slave trade, for him, as for many writers and campaigners of the 'Age of Sensibility', reason was only one side of the human equation. Benezet's final published words on slavery illustrate this belief quite clearly. Slavery, he concluded his life's work by saying, is 'a practice as pregnant with ruin of every kind as it is inconsistent with every idea of reason, feeling, and humanity' (p. 233).

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