

Sweetness, Capacity, Energy

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The first time I encountered Sydney Mintz's writing on sugar, I actually lost my breath. To my mind, Mintz's work is still the single most important and foundational text to take up the history of food in the context of the Americas. It's probably, too, the book that made me believe that writing about the matter we call "food" might ultimately yield a lifetime of rich material to think with.

Here is a passage from *Sweetness and Power* that has stayed with me, harassed me even, through several years of teaching and writing on food, matter, race and the biopolitical:

Substances like tea, sugar, rum, and tobacco were used by working people in accord with the tempos of working-class life. Those centuries when England was transformed, albeit irregularly and unevenly, from a predominantly rural, agrarian, and pre-capitalist society were centuries of novelty in consumption. Sugar was taken up just as work schedules were quickening, as the movement from countryside to city was accelerating, and as the factory system was taking shape and spreading. Such changes more and more affected the patterning of eating habits. We have already seen how hot liquid stimulants sweetened with calorie-laden sugar, and tobacco, among other novelties, transformed meals "even the definition of the meal, while economic changes transformed the schedules of eating."

It is at this point that the ideas of meaning and power touch. Surely none of the sugar touts of the seventeenth century foresaw the nation of sucrose eaters their England was soon to become, yet they, and the classes they endorsed, ensured the steady growth of a society ever richer in sugar, and enriched by the slave trade, the plantation system, slavery itself, and, soon enough, the spread of factory industry in the metropolis. As the exemplar of luxuries turned into affordable proletarian goodies by dint of individual effort, sucrose was one of the people's opiates, and its consumption was a symbolic demonstration that the system that produced it was successful.¹

Why, we might ask, is this landmark book not called "Sugar and Power"? Why is the key word for Mintz "Sweetness"? Why this turn to the sense of sweetness and not the commodity itself? Rereading Mintz almost twenty years after I first encountered his work, I am struck by how he approaches but never entirely speaks to the question of this caloric energy source as a shift in the sensory

textures and affective nature of everyday life.² I'm struck by the repetition of words like *calorie*, *stimulants*, *opiates*. I am struck, too, by how he approaches and then steps away from questions of aesthetics, here loosely organized around words like *sweetness*, *hot*, *liquid*, and *bitterness*.

I'm doing something of a quantitative reading here, revisiting the book in electronic form. I keep going back to my Google book copy of *Sweetness and Power* to count how often he uses certain words: *energy*, eighteen times; *stimulant*, twenty-five times; *bitter*, forty-two times; *sweeten*, eighty-six times. Engaging with Mintz electronically, it's easier to see that over and over he wonderingly returns to but never entirely unpacks the changes in taste and flavor attached to this single commodity, a sweetening of the world that accompanied the global reorganization of race, capital, labor and knowledge. Mintz was one of the first scholars of food to approach the shifts in palate that accompanied the transformation of labor regimes in the back and forth between slavery and industrialism as a question of human energy and human aesthetics, even though he never quite allowed that connection to be the central problem of the book. This is not a criticism: the link between affect and aesthetics was not at the heart of the project in which Mintz was engaged, and critical conversations about the relation between capitalism and slavery in the Euro-American academy were at a different stage, although as ever, Black and Caribbean scholars such as the economic historian Eric Williams got there first.³

In *Sweetness and Power* Mintz developed an argument about the directional flow of ideas, commodities, and labor patterns from the colonies to the metro-pole, refuting the analytic assumption that had limited anthropological and historical work for decades, that culture and social form flowed from Europe to the colonies. This is without a doubt *the* key methodological intervention of *Sweetness and Power*. By linking the enslaved and forced production of sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco and chocolate on plantations in the colonial geopolitical order shaped the resultant reorganization of labor in the reorganized white proletariat class of the global North, Mintz critiques Eurocentric narratives of the development of capital.

And yet, while the great work of this book is to rewrite the center-periphery model of the Wallerstein world-systems theory, at the lower frequencies in the book—one might even say at a symbolic level—this is a book that also wonders about the place of the palate in a history of the senses.⁴ What does it mean for us today that sugar and other stimulant commodities were so central to racial modernity? More clearly, and here I am borrowing from Sharon Holland, how is the erotic history of racism, of extractive capitalism, how is this bitter afterlife of slavery linked to a biopolitical organization of pleasure and reward,

and then to the energetic pulse of sweetened stimulant energy followed by its jagged depressive crash? How biological is the biopolitical, after all?

One example of this engagement with biology would be Mintz's micro-historical discussion of a shift in another center-periphery model: that of the English working-class palate.⁵ What he means by his use of "center-periphery" here is that whereas earlier on in the history of the English diet complex, carbohydrates formed the bulk of the meal, with protein or flavoring forming the lesser part of caloric intake, by the rise of the Industrial Revolution, the English palate was very different: meat became more central and simple carbohydrates like sucrose provided even more of the working-class English person's energy. Borrowing again from Ellison's idea of listening on the lower frequencies, this is what I mean by Mintz's flirtation with aesthetics and affect: the homology between these spatial arguments—colony/metropole and protein/carbohydrate—points to an argument that is immanent to the book, that ties its argument and promise to current conversations exploring the relationship between affect, aesthetics, and biopower. This is a book, that is, that wonders about how to link the sphere of intimate biological existence, including hunger, to racial modernity. It is an argument that effectively uses homology—an aesthetic formation—to pose a question about how power crosses scales at what Immanuel Kant saw as the basest level of the aesthetic: flavor, not taste.

My reason for returning to Mintz in this forum is that in this critical moment in which Marxist, feminist, queer, and critical race theorists are thinking at the crossroads of materiality and immaterial labor in late capital, it feels crucial to return to what is without a doubt the central and probably most important book in what is now understood as a "field" of food studies research to excavate what I believe was already conceptually incipient to this work, particularly given its engagement with the history of labor and enslavement. Certainly, in terms of my current work, in which I am searching for better theory and more precise language to describe and define the fields of aesthetics and affects as they are shaped both by capital and by race, I have needed to return to Mintz in order to make *Sweetness and Power's* methodological whispers manifest. But it should be noted that both my and Mintz's arguments were first rehearsed in the proleptic work undertaken by Sylvia Wynter as a scholar of literature and racial modernity, in her visionary and futuristic arguments about human neuroplasticity and the aesthetic disciplining undertaken by the humanist project.

In her essay "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes towards a Deciphering Practice," Wynter sought to expand the study of aesthetics into a far wider field of sociopolitical inquiry than simply the study of beauty. But she also sought to rework the idea of aesthetics itself, to turn it toward those "dense transfer

points of power”⁶ where the senses met those “‘discourses’ whose codings in our ‘nervous system’ regulate our response and sentiments.” “Each mode,” she writes, “of the aesthetic is isomorphic with a specific mode of human being or ‘form of life.’”⁷

This sentence really only makes sense if as readers we understand that Wynter means the idea of the aesthetic to account for the schooling of the human senses at every level of sensory experience, and then with that understanding, if, reading intently, we allow each word in each of her sentences to work its fullest power. As I understand it, for Wynter, an aesthetic is not simply a category of expression; it is a mode, it is a way, or a manner that is also formally congruent—isomorphic or homologous to—a human being or form of life. Being, then, is here a verb in the sense that theorists sometimes use the term becoming. A human is “being” in the sense that aesthetics is modal: a processual doing in time, in space, in a field of sensory possibility, a modality taking effect, causing effects, being/doing its effects. A human is a life form that *does* being human in the mode in which doing/being human, as a sensory project, is made socially legible in time and in space. The human is a life “form” in the sense that to be human is to be made, in the sense that the formation of the senses is a human project, and a historical project, as is indeed, the framework within which we understand the words *life* or *life form* themselves.

The point about time, further, is not cosmetic, since how labor time is organized has everything to do with how human energy is sensed by its practitioners—the *how* of labor-time here doing all the work of forming the *what* of what energy feels like, a pure example of the onto-epistemological. Long before scholars of biopolitics complicated the Foucauldian genealogy of state power by linking it to Europe’s colonial and imperial projects, Mintz made the critical argument that the labor organization of the metropolis was worked out and rehearsed via the forced work-rhythms of enslaved colonial labor. In those work-rhythms,

discipline was probably its first essential feature. . . . the system was time-conscious. This time-consciousness was dictated by the nature of the sugar cane and its processing requirements, but it permeated all phases of plantation life and accorded well with the emphasis on time that was later to become a central feature of capitalist industry.⁸

Taking a leap forward, we might say here that the time-consciousness that Mintz refers to links partly to what Anna Tsing has showed is the crucial co-presence of mold and fungi with other flora and fauna in the Caribbean ecosystem: left to sit too long without processing (say by allowing enslaved

peoples to rest, a use of time we might think of as almost completely anathemic to the necropolitical and extractive imperatives of the Caribbean sugar plantation), sugar cane juice would begin to ferment and rot, rendering the next stage of sugar processing impossible.⁹ Because of how environmental bacteria use up sugar energy to produce carbon dioxide, fermentation would also have rendered the sugar source sour. Consider, then, that in the Western history of the senses, sourness is sweetness gone bad; sourness is sweetness rendered unprofitable. This, then, is what Wynter means by aesthetics: the sweetness so beloved to the Western palate is the literal referent of capitalist time discipline put to the service of one of the cruelest labor-extraction schemes ever known to human history, a labor- and life-extraction project that alongside settler colonialism and the genocide of native peoples produced the human as a “form of life” that could be abstracted from and against the nonhuman environment, such as mold and fungi. Sweetness, too, is the flavor of time discipline as it is deployed in the service of producing cheap energy for the working class in the metropole: “Just as work schedules were quickening,” Mintz writes in the passage with which I opened this essay, “sucrose was one of the people’s opiates, and its consumption was a symbolic demonstration that the system that produced it was successful.”¹⁰

This historical question of the sensory qualities of everyday biopolitical life is, to me, where performance studies and affect studies meet archival inquiry, and my question here, as in my current project, is this: how can we build a fuller analytic tool kit to explore Karl Marx’s proposal that “the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.” What I get from my current work in the study of the matter we sometimes call food is that to consider the history of matter alongside the history of affect is to consider the history of biopolitics alongside the disciplining work of sensory aesthetics, a critical frame-to-come that Mintz in his brilliance circles but never quite lands on. Thus although he repeatedly wonders out loud about the human propensity to desire particular flavors, he never quite allows himself to speculate what all these changes felt like or, even more, what it meant to the enslaved and to “free” labour in the global North to have their energies increasingly calorically and neurologically stimulated and extracted in these accelerating labor and time regimes: “By the opening of the twentieth century, sugar epitomized the times; it supposedly provided “quick energy.”¹¹

Time, of course, is key in another sense. Not only did the different but interrelated modern time disciplines of the plantation and the factory hinge on differently coerced understandings of racialized labor capacity; they also, in

their intimate reordering of desire, agency, and physical capacity at the level of the individual, expressed the ongoing centrality of class and race to biopolitics itself, as social expressions of affective capacity, which we can now see as historically linked to the chemical stimulation of human energy flows and rhythms. For if in the metropole the time-discipline of the emergent industrial order of the global North was upheld by what Mintz calls the stimulant “bitter drinks” that came to England through other, linked, colonial encounters with Asia and Africa such as tea, coffee, and chocolate, sweetness in the form of extracted sucrose not only made those substances even more palatable to many; it also made them inexpensively caloric and therefore both filling and nonnutritious. When Mintz writes that “substances like tea, sugar, rum, and tobacco were used by working people in accord with the tempos of working-class life,”¹² he is outlining the biochemical reorganization of the biopolitical body: he is also ultimately proposing the impoverishment of its most precarious citizens and noncitizens.

If race and class are simply other words for capacity, then is it any wonder that within the representational logics of Western racism, both sugar and alcohol (in the shape of rum, sugar’s accomplice) came to be associated with the necropolitical economy of disposable Black labor, and the various waves of narcotics-based carcerality that reentrenched enslaved uncompensated labor within the prison-industrial complex? For what is the war on drugs, as Michelle Alexander and other critics of the contemporary prison-industrial complex have shown us, but a targeted criminality aimed at managing putative and alleged chemical disinhibition in the service of capturing and monetizing forced energetic labor capacity, yet again?¹³ As I show in my current work, this to me is the history of affect and aesthetics writ clearly into the modern production of racial capital: the mutual imbrication (“where ideas of meaning and power touch,” Mintz writes) of race, economics, and the ordering of matter with the intimate experience of what Brian Massumi, drawing from Baruch Spinoza, calls “the capacity for affecting or being affected . . . the passing of a threshold . . . what [a body] can do as it goes along.”¹⁴

Taking up canonical affect studies’ relation to capacity as possibility¹⁵ but leaving behind how the field’s retreat into the neurological seems to at times disallow anything like a politics of race and class, we might ask: what would a new materialist history of capacity look like if it centered on sensation, on the energetic textures of the everyday? What Mintz almost but doesn’t quite tell us is that the answer to that question would most certainly lie in the place one found oneself in the chain of labor, survival, death, and extraction, somewhere

in the hierarchical traces of the afterlives of colonialism, settler colonialism, and chattel slavery.

What I'm trying to get at here is something I would call a new materialist history of race (and an old materialist history of race if one might say that unironically), as one might approach the effects of sugar agriculture and enslaved-labor extraction through the hermeneutic tools offered by the coming together of affect studies with aesthetic analysis in relation to the colonial reordering of matter, bodies, and energy. Although Mintz's primary tool, like Marx's, is a model of economics and labor that is primarily thermodynamic, which is to say, a model of the world that engages the economy of energy, what is ultimately left out in that model is the deeper sense of what it feels like to live on in the world in the wake of this material history: a history of the present, in the past. It may well be true that we live in an era in which new labor regimes have been reorganized around immaterial labor extraction, but it is also true that those forms of extraction lie atop a biopolitical colonial history in which the human experience of work and of the body's own energy availability were always already messed with at the level of affective capacity we have come to call racism.¹⁶

Notes

1. Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Penguin, 1986).
2. Admittedly he is trying to account for these shifts across the three or so centuries from the establishment of the regimes of Caribbean plantation enslaved labor to the rise of the Industrial Revolution and its related labor-forms in England. In so much as there are criticisms to be made of the book, this might be one criticism, from a historian's perspective: too much time covered and too much geography to really enable the kind of archival specificity one would desire in a fully fleshed research project. But, again, that is not really his project, and other scholars have done and continue to do this work.
3. See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
4. It deserves citing but obviously goes without saying that I am borrowing here from the closing line Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" *Invisible Man* [New York: Vintage International Edition, 1995], 582).
5. But the center-periphery model takes place across scales in *Sweetness and Power*. For instance, early on in the book, critiquing Immanuel Wallerstein, Mintz writes: "My own field experiences, I believe, influenced my perceptions of the center-periphery relationship," and then pages later he says, of the tendency across many cultures to center carbohydrates in a meal: "over and over again the centrality of the complex carbohydrates is accompanied by its contrastive periphery. . . . Even in diets where a wider range of food possibilities appears to be available, a general relationship between "center" and "edge" is usually discernible." As Mintz shows, sugar gradually became one of the central fuels of the working-class English table: the realignment of the world system echoes into the realignment of the intimate spaces of gustatory desire.
6. I am borrowing this phrase from Michel Foucault, of course, as a way to continue my long-term interest in the technologies through which eating and sexuality overlap and diverge as foci for biopolitical

- and anatomopolitical intervention. See Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).
7. Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes towards a Deciphering Practice," *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (1992): 245.
 8. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.
 9. Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species for Donna Haraway," *Environmental Humanities* 1.1 (2012): 149. Tsing writes: "The huge scale of cane plantations, and their savage labour discipline, are in part a response to fears of fermentation, which inspire on-site, expensive mills—and the desire to keep them running continuously."
 10. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 174.
 11. Mintz, 147.
 12. Mintz, 174.
 13. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New Press, 2012).
 14. Brian Massumi, Mary Zournazi, "Navigating Movements: An Interview with Brian Massumi," 2003, www.cristinarizzo.it/img/Sagra.pdf.
 15. As Gilles Deleuze writes: "All bodies are causes in relation to each other, and causes for each other—but causes of what? They are causes of certain things of an entirely different nature. These "effects" are not bodies, but, properly speaking, 'incorporeal' entities. They are not physical qualities and properties. . . . They are not things or facts, but events. We can not say that they exist, but rather that they subsist or inhere. . . . They are not substantives or adjectives but verbs" (*Logic of Sense* [Bloomsbury, 2004]).
 16. Here my thinking is indebted to Kyla Schuller's contributions to understanding affect and materiality as co-imblicated in the history of scientific racism as well as in contemporary affect studies. See Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).