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Eating Clean: Anti-Chinese Sugar Advertising and the Making of White Racial Purity in the Canadian Pacific

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ABSTRACT
Between 1891 and 1914, western Canada’s largest sugar manufacturer – BC Sugar – constructed a racialized discourse of food cleanliness. This discourse argued that Chinese-made sugars were contaminated while Canadian-made sugars were clean. Through an analysis of this discourse, this article argues that BC Sugar constructed a purity/polluted binary that suggested that white consumers’ racial purity was threatened by Chinese-made sugars. It then links BC Sugar’s clean foods campaign to three broader trends. First, it illustrates that BC Sugar’s construction of pure versus polluted foods supported the effort to establish white supremacy in the Canadian Pacific. Second, it demonstrates that discourses of food purity enabled white settlers to construct bodily purity by the eating of so-called clean foods. Third, it argues that since contemporary discourses of food cleanliness rely on pure versus polluted metaphors, scholars must attend to the motivations driving today’s clean eating movement.

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Introduction
Clean eating – or the idea that it is important to eliminate “toxins” from one’s diet – has recently emerged as a major wellness trend. By cutting out such “pollutants” as dairy, sugar, wheat, and meat, clean eaters attempt to optimize their physical and mental health. So widespread have many people’s quest for pure food become that some experts use the term “orthorexia” to describe extreme forms of this behavior. Coined by “holistic medical practitioner” Steve Bratman in 1997, the growing use of this term demonstrates a sense within the health community that an obsession with clean eating is actually an eating disorder, one that might become as dangerous as such other disorders “anorexia, bulimia [and] over-eating.”¹ According to Cristina Hanganu-Bresch, for example, orthorexia “sufferers are too preoccupied with the exact micronutrient formula that would address physical deficiencies or improve bodily health.”² As such, they endanger their mental health and overall wellbeing.

Clean eating may be new, but it has roots in the pure food movements that swept the United States and British Empire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As early as the 1820s, British chemists were “asserting that adulteration” of the food

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supply was a problem. American scientists, too, pressed for greater attention to foods, worrying about diseases and chemical additives. By the mid-1850s, American commentators were arguing that new processing techniques were stripping foods of their healthful qualities. They were also aggrieved about manufacturers’ tendencies to mix chemical additives into foods. And, several advocates called for inspection and regulation of racialized food workers’ bodies. Such people, they said, were unclean and diseased. As such, they could transmit germs into the food supply, which would in turn infect consumers.

Historical food safety advocacy was indeed complicated. Movements for protection from unsafe foods combined fears about industrialization, race, and disease with desires for greater knowledge about the connection between diet and vitality. This article looks at a specific case study to further illuminate these varied connections. It examines a sustained campaign by western Canada’s largest sugar company, BC Sugar, to convince white Canadians to avoid sugars imported from Hong Kong. Taking place between the years 1891 and 1914, this campaign asked British Columbians to buy BC Sugar’s products exclusively. Doing so would not only support local industry but would safeguard consumers’ health. This was because, said the company, Chinese men worked in the Hong Kong sugar industry. As such, these sugars were laden with “filth.”

In examining the racist components of past food advertising, this article does not suggest that today’s clean eating advocates are racially motivated. In fact, orthorexia may be more of a class-based preoccupation than a racialized one. Hanganu-Bresch notes that the “disorder” both relies upon and creates “costly practices” such as “cleanses, organic juices, [and] gym habits.” Nevertheless, it is important to examine the role of race within the history of clean eating. Within British Columbia, the construction of whiteness was partially achieved by marking some foods as clean and others as polluted. According to BC Sugar, if whites ate only clean foods, they could achieve healthfulness. However, to maintain that health, they had to constantly police the materials, or in other words, the foods, that entered their bodies. Only in this way could they perceive themselves to be whole and pure. This version of health, in turn, supported whites’ claims to racial superiority.

In making this argument, this article builds upon scholarship that examines race-based attempts to control white reproduction. As scholars of so-called miscegenation, or race-mixing, argue, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whites’ fears about race pollution were widespread. Across the British Empire, whites argued that their “race” required protection from contamination. In support of this assumption, religious and social reformers policed white women’s lives, attempting to remove all possibilities of sexual intercourse between white women and racialized men. In the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Saskatchewan, specifically, it became illegal for white women to work for Chinese men. Through these and other measures, whites attempted to shore up the supposed purity of their self-identified racial collectivity.

Just as many whites attempted to protect what they called their “race” by preventing supposed contamination via sexual intercourse, so did some in British Columbia attempt to promote white bodily purity through digestion. Underscoring both of these tendencies was the view that white bodies could only remain pure if their actual physical borders remained intact. These ideas, in turn, dovetailed neatly
with anti-immigration rhetoric, which often threatened the disintegration of the white body politic via racial contamination through immigration. As KC Councilor argues with reference to the United States, “Metaphors of the nation as an eating body politic and immigrants the cause of its indigestion were prevalent in immigration debate from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century.”

Whites’ determination to shore up both their nations’ and their bodies’ borders were prominent not only in the US but throughout the British Empire. In the Canadian Pacific specifically, they were intense. Prior to the Fraser Gold Rush of 1858, the area had been largely Indigenous. Even “as late as 1871 observers estimated that the Aboriginal population on the mainland alone was roughly 45,000,” as Adele Perry notes. In contrast, “the ‘settled’ population of both the mainland and the island was only 19,225.” Chinese people comprised a significant portion of these settlers. In 1871, notes Enakshi Dua, “Chinese migrants made up over 40% of the non-indigenous mainland population.” On the eve of the First World War, 19,569 people of Chinese descent lived in British Columbia, where they “formed 5 per cent of the total population,” as Patricia Roy points out. Nevertheless, the federal government was determined to create what Prime Minister John A. Macdonald called a “white man’s country.” Through race-based immigration policies, the Canadian population jumped from 4.8 million in 1891 to 7.9 million in 1914. In British Columbia, the population expanded from 98,173 in 1871 to 392,480 in 1911. Since the Canadian state gave preference to migrants of western European heritage, whites became dominant in both British Columbia and the rest of Canada.

Race, of course, is an invented construct. In turn-of-the-twentieth-century British Columbia, whites situated race within a discursive binary system, one which relied upon tropes of primitivism versus modernity. These tropes, in turn, singled out Indigenous peoples as whites’ pre-modern opposites. People of Asian heritage, too, received attention. Stereotypes of Asian Canadians as corrupt, diseased, and unclean enabled whites to suggest that they themselves were moral and healthy. As Timothy Stanley writes with specific reference to whites’ views of the Chinese, “What it meant to be Canadian was defined in relation to what it meant to be Chinese, and vice versa.”

Many whites of this period also castigated Chinese Canadians because they wanted a “scapegoat” to justify their own bids for dominance. Since the 1860s, Chinese laborers had worked for lower wages than whites; it was in fact due to their forced acceptance of low pay that they were able to work in British Columbia. Thus, Chinese Canadians apparently threatened not only whites’ jobs, but also their livelihoods. In response, white labor leaders railed at Chinese Canadians’ apparent tolerance for poverty. Stated the Canadian Labor Reformer, if Chinese immigration were not curtailed, whites would eventually have to “live on rice, wear the least expensive clothing, give up their families and homes and pig together in dens.” As this passage indicates, white labor leaders viewed European standards of living as symbols of respectability. Thus, when they encountered racialized workers earning lower wages than themselves, they sought not to empower those workers but to marginalize them.

Exploring BC Sugar’s anti-Chinese rhetoric, this article illuminates the ways by which a food manufacturer in a newly established, white settler polity participated in a broader attempt to establish white supremacy. It also reveals how this manufacturer used concepts of race in order to construct notions of value. By suggesting that Chinese
sugars carried racial contamination, BC Sugar was able to argue that its own products – refined by “white labor” – were “pure” and “clean.” In this way, BC Sugar constructed a discourse of food quality that linked race purity to bodily health. This discourse supported BC Sugar’s own attempts to dominate the west coast marketplace; it also buttressed the expanding white settler nation.

**Rise of Western Canadian Sugar**

Sugar has been present in northern Pacific diets since time immemorial. Traditional Haisla, Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en foods include the “cambium,” or “inner bark,” of lodgepole pine trees, which contains significant sugar content. Nonetheless, it was not until Europeans arrived that granulated sugar derived from cane became available. Prior to the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, most refined sugar entered the region through the United States. After 1885, eastern Canadian refineries began shipping sugar to the region. Due to rail fees, however, such products’ costs were high. Recognizing the potential of a refinery on the Pacific coast, Benjamin Tingley (B.T.) Rogers, son of an American sugar baron, established a refinery in Vancouver in 1890. For the next decade and a half, he sourced his raw sugar from Java and Peru. By the early twentieth century, BC Sugar had become a powerhouse, supplying most of western Canada with refined cane. When sugar beets emerged in Alberta, BC Sugar also purchased factories there. However, this industry never thrived. Throughout the twentieth century, approximately 90 percent of all refined sugar in Canada was cane sugar. And, until 2008, BC Sugar remained western Canada’s largest sugar supplier.

During its early years, BC Sugar did not invest in advertising. It did publish its wholesale prices every week; and, in 1906, it published a few advertisements for two new products. Yet the only other advertisements distributed by BC Sugar before World War I were those that criticized sugars refined in Asia. Appearing when imports of refined sugar arrived in British Columbia via Hong Kong, these campaigns consisted of advertisements warning consumers about the dangers of Chinese men who worked in Asian refineries. The first one appeared in 1891, when the company ran anti-Chinese advertising in the *Vancouver Daily World*, the *Nanaimo Daily News*, and the *Victoria Daily Times*. Next, in 1910, BC Sugar ran anti-Chinese advertising in *The Vancouver Province* and the *Vancouver Daily World*. The last campaign, in 1914, appeared in these papers, as well as in the *Western Call*. Given that all such papers were the dominant ones within their respective regions, it is clear that BC Sugar was adamant that Hong Kong sugars be shut out of the Canadian Pacific.

By distributing such advertisements, not only BC Sugar, but also the newspapers with which it partnered, were complicit in what would be referred to today as hate speech. According to Roy, the white-owned press in British Columbia often printed anti-Asian vitriole, “sometimes us[ing] doggerel verse and cartoons … as attention-grabbing devices to reinforce their arguments.” Moreover, BC Sugar was not alone in linking Chinese bodies to disease. Roy points out that “restaurants often advertised ‘none but white help employed’”; one restaurant in Victoria even suggested that “the stomach of a person of refined tastes must revolt at the mere idea that his dinner has been cooked by a Chinaman.” As this passage suggests, BC Sugar’s campaigns relied upon existing stereotypes.
These stereotypes, in turn, were present throughout the British Empire. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese-made teas poured into the British marketplace. In response, some industry writers began warning consumers about the dangers of Chinese tea, suggesting that it contained more “dirt and sand,” “rice-flour,” and “lead” than actual tea. By the 1880s, white-owned tea companies in South Asia had picked up this rhetoric, calling upon British consumers to drink only tea that was grown and manufactured within the Empire. One 1884 tract called “the Tea Controversy: Indian versus Chinese Teas. Which Are Adulterated? Which Are Better?” argued that the “Tea of Hindustan is now all manufactured by machinery, but in China it is hand-made,” resulting in a “very dirty process.” As such rhetoric indicates, it was the manufacturing workers – and not the field laborers – who were singled out as dangerous.

When BC Sugar launched its own anti-Chinese campaign, it thus had a long tradition upon which to draw. Given his immersion in the British-Canadian business world, as well as his own far-flung travel, including to “Japan, Saigon, Singapore, and Java” in 1894–95, it is possible that Rogers himself was aware of some advertisers’ tendencies to denigrate Chinese workers. It is possible, too, that through his trans-Pacific travels, he became aware of Australia’s white nationalist sugar campaigns. Prior to the twentieth century, the white-owned Australian cane sugar industry relied upon migrant laborers from the South Sea Islands. However, there was an emerging public desire to replace such labor with whites. By the early twentieth century, this campaign had been largely successful. Yet due to the higher wages that whites were able to demand, a new campaign emerged for Australians to purchase only homegrown sugar. In this way, consumers could keep Australia “white.” As the Australian Prime Minister put it, “One of the ways in which we can pay for a White Australia is to support the sugar industry of Queensland.”

BC Sugar’s anti-Chinese campaign was hence situated in a broader international effort to characterize industries that relied upon whites as superior to those that relied upon racialized peoples. Indeed, despite Hong Kong’s membership in the British Empire, BC Sugar portrayed sugars that emanated from East Asia as sub-standard due to Chinese bodies’ presence in the supply chain. Rogers himself knew that the Hong Kong sugars were being sent to Canada by a British firm, Butterfield & Swire, which operated both as an exporter of Chinese goods, and as a sugar manufacturer itself: it owned a refinery in Hong Kong. It is unknown where, precisely, the sugars it sent to Canada were refined. However, such distinctions did not matter to Rogers. He characterized the Hong Kong sugar as “Chinese” throughout his campaign. In this way he manipulated racist sentiment in order to grow his own profits.

Germ Panic: The 1890s

During the late nineteenth century, Canadian culinary writers began incorporating germ research into their advice. This move paralleled developments in Britain and the United States, where experts took it upon themselves to spread information about germ theory. Whereas previously physicians had conceived of “miasma” – or a polluted, “intangible substance” – as the cause of disease, by the late nineteenth century, many had accepted that it was microorganisms that caused people to become sick.
Despite germ theory’s growing acceptance, there was still confusion as to what germs were. Thus, between 1905 and 1917, Americans waged a war on the housefly, which according to the US government carried “tuberculosis, cholera infantum, gastroenteritis, spinal meningitis, and infantile paralysis.” BC Sugar took advantage of germ confusion in 1891, when it launched its first anti-Chinese campaign. Between September 11, 1891, and October 20, 1891, it ran over a hundred advertisements in the Vancouver Daily World, the Nanaimo Daily News, and the Victoria Daily Times that argued that Hong Kong sugars contained “insects,” “bacteria,” and “impurities.”

That summer, Victoria merchants had imported lower priced sugars from Hong Kong in an explicit attempt to undercut Rogers’ profits. One of these merchants, Robert Rithet, owned a refinery in San Francisco; by importing from Hong Kong he was attempting to weaken Rogers’ business. Recognizing Rithet’s plan, Rogers wrote to his wholesalers, offering discounts to those who “promised to handle only his sugar.” He also increased production of “fancy grades” and “smaller packages”; in this way he set his products apart from the Hong Kong sugars, which were available only in large granules and in bulk.

Rogers also embarked on an ambitious advertising strategy. Drawing upon stereotypes about Chinese people’s supposed tolerance for starvation wages, Rogers argued that “it is known as a matter of fact to almost everyone that European labor cannot compete with coolies.” Using the derogatory term reserved at this time for Asian laborers, he suggested that Chinese sugar was cheaper because its workers were substandard. Indeed, as the second installment said, “Canadian Labor” cannot “compete with Coolie Labor,” which is “rice-fed and under-paid.”

The campaign also played upon the public’s fears of germs. On September 11 and September 14, the company ran an advertisement called “Insects Found in Sugar.” This advertisement was accompanied by an illustration of an “animal” referred to as an “Acarus saccari” (Figure 1). Next, it launched an advertisement called “Chinese Sugars – What It Is We May Be Eating!” This advertisement ran unchanged until October 20. As Figure 2 illustrates, it, too, was accompanied by an illustration – again, of the so-called creature, “Acarus sacchari” (Figure 2).

Both of the advertisements offer similar messages. According to the first, a reporter for the Daily World visited the BC Sugar Refinery. There, President B.T. Rogers gave the reporter a copy of “the Sugar Trade Journal published in New York,” which “is regarded in all matters pertaining to the sugar business as authoritative.” An article in this journal, argued Rogers, proved that “all kinds of unrefined and and raw sugars contain great numbers of disgusting insects which produce a loathsome disease.” The advertisement then quotes the article:

The Acarus sacchari is a formidably organised, exceedingly lively, and decidedly ugly little animal. From its oval-shaped body stretches forth a proboscis terminating in a kind of scissors, with which it seizes upon its food. Its organs of locomotion consist of eight legs, each jointed and furnished at its extremity with a hook. In the sugar its movements from one place to another are necessarily very slow, but when placed on a perfectly clean and dry surface, it moves along with great rapidity.

Such details evoke visions of creeping, scuttling creatures, no doubt meant invoke disgust. In the second advertisement, this same passage is quoted, along with further
of the text: “in unrefined sugar,” it stated, “‘acari’” are “‘sometimes exceedingly great, and in no instance is the article quite free from either the insect or their eggs.”

Though the term “acarus saccari” is no longer in use, it is probable that the Sugar Trade article is referring to a type of mite called the *aceria sacchari*; this little creature is also commonly referred to as a “sugarcane blister mite.” It lives in sugarcane fields. This type of mite poses little risk to humans. Certainly, it is not a “vile bacteria,” as BC Sugar claimed. It also does not live in refined sugar. As the first advertisement pointed out, the *aceria sacchari* live in “unrefined and raw sugars”; and, as the second one said, they are found in “unrefined sugar.” Hence, despite BC Sugar’s own awareness of the impossibility of sugar mites living in refined sugar, the company went ahead with this campaign.
That BC Sugar’s campaigns had succeeded in some respects became evident in 1892, when the *Vancouver Daily World* suggested that “Japanese and Chinese groceries” had caused a “small-pox scourge” in Victoria. Had “Victorians heeded” BC Sugar’s earlier “warning,” they “would not now be in sack cloth and ashes.” According to the article, “Nearly every newspaper reader in the Province will remember the British Columbia Sugar Refining Company’s advertisement appearing in THE WORLD last September, in which a warning was given against the use of sugar refined in China or Japan by coolie labor.” Nevertheless, it was also clear – at least for the writer of this article – that some people had failed to heed BC Sugar’s advice. As a result, many had suffered: “This sugar has done its deadly work well, and the few dollars extra profit made therein will [now] cost Victoria … thousands of dollars.”

Yet, despite much finger-pointing, the source of the outbreak was never “actually traced to a Chinatown in British Columbia.” That said, BC Sugar’s advertising campaign had wrought its results. Connecting disease to Chinese-refined sugars, the campaign had created a lasting impression that Chinese bodies could infect the white body politic via food.

**Promoting Whiteness: The 1910s**

By the end of the nineteenth century, BC Sugar had cornered the west coast’s sugar market. Due partially to Rogers’ tactics, and partially to rapid settlement, the company had become “a firmly established Vancouver business.” Despite Rogers’ dominance, however, wholesalers continued to import foreign sugars. Most of these emanated from Hong Kong but some also came from Scotland and elsewhere in Europe. Despite such far-flung origins, Rogers continued to focus on Hong Kong in his attacks. His silence on the Scottish and European question underscores his reliance upon race-based arguments to justify his sugar’s superiority.

An especially heinous campaign occurred in July 1910. Triggered by the appearance of more Chinese sugar than usual, this campaign consisted of two advertisements that
ran in *The Vancouver Daily World* and the *Province* several times throughout the month.\(^6^2\) It may also have included a two-foot high by three-foot wide color poster, distributed to local merchants. Today, only one copy of this poster is known to exist. It is currently undated but its similarity to the 1910 advertisements suggests that it dates from this year.\(^6^3\)

Whereas the 1890s anti-Chinese advertisements focused on the supposedly inferior quality of Chinese sugars, the 1910 campaign tried a new tack. Perhaps inspired by the white nationalist sugar campaigns in Australia, these advertisements argued that Canadians should buy BC Sugar exclusively so as to support white development.\(^6^4\) Stated one of the advertisements, Chinese sugars were being “offered for sale at a slightly lower price” than BC Sugar’s “product.” Nevertheless, the “public” should “patriotically and loyally support a large local industry.” Doing so would support “white labor” and the whole “city.” As such statements implied, BC Sugar hoped to invoke a sense of racial pride. By declaring oneself a loyal BC Sugar customer, one would demonstrate one’s loyalty to “white labor.” By contrast, if one purchased Chinese sugar, one became a race traitor: “Each dollar spent in purchasing Chinese Sugar goes abroad to assist Chinamen in Hong Kong.”\(^6^5\)

The poster from this campaign repeated this messaging (Figure 3). Titled “Sugar!! Sugar!!,” it asks viewers whether they will choose “Chinese industry Coolie labor,” or “Home industry White labor”; it then tells viewers to “Use only sugars refined in our own country.” To drive this message home, it offers two illustrations. The first is a Chinese man carrying bulk sugar. Underneath him is a banner that declares, “10 cents per day.” The other illustration is a white man pushing barrels of “B.C. Sugar.” Underneath him are the words, “2 dollars a day.” The message is clear. When

![Figure 3. BC sugar poster. From the Chung collection, University of British Columbia library, https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/chung/chungosgr/items/1.0135146. [Note: the UBC library lists this poster as created in 1890; however, BC sugar’s “white labor” campaign began in 1910.] Used with permission of rare books and special collections, University of British Columbia library.](image-url)
consumers purchase Chinese-made sugar, they threaten white industry, which must compete with companies profiting from low wages.

BC Sugar’s last major campaign against Hong Kong sugar appeared in 1914. That spring and summer, the company distributed information about the supposed dangers of foods made by Chinese people. This campaign included three repeating advertisements that ran simultaneously in *The Province* and the *Vancouver Daily World* on May 27, 28, and 29.66 It also included a series of advertisements that ran in the *Western Call*, the *Province*, and the *Vancouver Sun* between July 4, 1914 and August 14, 1914.57 As with earlier campaigns, these advertisements constituted BC Sugar’s response to competition from Hong Kong sugars. Stated one of the May advertisements, “there are practically only two kinds of sugar in Vancouver – British Columbia refined sugar and Chinese sugar.”68 These advertisements also echoed many of the themes of earlier campaigns, including the idea that Chinese people were unclean. According to the second, the “Oriental factory in Hong Kong” employs “the lowest type of Chinese” who “know nothing of soap and water, baths or clean clothes – and very little of any other kind of clothes.”69

These 1914 advertisements gave voice to BC Sugar’s ongoing assumption that the Vancouver public was receptive to suggestions that foodstuffs could be tainted by Chinese bodies. They also revealed BC Sugar’s view that hints of food contamination within competitors’ products was an effective advertising strategy. Such notions were not wrong. During this same period, middle class women’s groups were devoting sustained attention to what the National Council of Women of Canada called “pure food.” In its national magazine, this largest of Canadian women’s organizations – which included several British Columbia chapters – ran a monthly column on this subject, calling for government controls to ensure that all foods were safe and nutritious. The Council was on lookout for “exploitation” by manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers, all of whom stood to gain by tampering with the food supply. Manufacturers, for example, could add “color and flavor” to make “non-nutritious food look more “attractive.”70 The Council also kept tabs on what food purity activists elsewhere were doing. In Kansas, noted the Council, women were working with the state for mandatory “Physical examination for clerks working in grocery stores, meat markets and other shops, and all employees in hotels and restaurants,” so that “the danger of contracting disease” could be lessened.71 As these statements attest, Canadian consumers were well aware of the supposed dangers lurking within food. By calling for “pure food,” they were in effect arguing that food be kept free of chemical additives, inedible adulterants, dirt, and disease.

If hints of food contamination would have resonated, so would have arguments for civic consumerism. The 1914 series again asked “the public” to “demand sugar manufactured in British Columbia.” In this way, they would demonstrate “true patriotism.”72 Such arguments would have been familiar to many. Not only had they been made – by BC Sugar – four years earlier, so did they echo broader appeals for civic buying. Since 1911, the Canadian Manufacturers’ Association had been promoting patriotic purchasing, with exhortations to buy “Made in Canada” goods.73 By calling for Vancouverites to support local industries, BC Sugar was adapting broader citizenship arguments. Four of the advertisements in this series argued that Vancouver’s
“payroll” depended upon local patronage. Similarly, “Every consumer in Vancouver, having the interests of the city at heart, will ... insist upon ... B.C. Sugar.”

Even if the 1914 campaign conveyed older messages, it also introduced new themes. In July, the *Western Call*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Vancouver Province* each carried an identical advertisement. Titled “A Public Menace,” it argued that British Columbians had to protect their marketplace with the same vigor that they protected their borders. Referring to the “Komagata Maru incident,” in which white British Columbians had convinced the Canadian government to refuse entry to approximately 376 Punjabi migrants aboard a ship named the Komagata Maru, it suggested that the success of British Columbia rested on the exclusion of both Asian immigrants and Asian products. According to BC Sugar, the Komagata Maru migrants represented the “advance guard of countless hordes to follow.” Such a prospect would mean that whites in British Columbia would become outnumbered, and thus rendered powerless. Asian products represented similar threats. “The British Columbia Sugar Refining Company,” it said, “employs over 300 white workmen,” who “live in and form part of our own community.” When people bought Hong Kong sugars, they imperiled these men’s livelihoods; they also gave money – and thus power – to the Chinese.

Other advertisements also carried this theme. On May 28, 1914, both the *Vancouver Daily World* and *The Province* printed a full-page advertisement whose title asked consumers which they preferred: “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” This advertisement was accompanied by an illustration that illustrated BC Sugar’s messages. Featuring a white man wearing a colonial-era British governor’s uniform, it depicted, on the left, several bare-footed Chinese men carrying sacks of “Chinese sugar,” and, on the right, a modern looking refinery producing packages of BC “Pure Cane Sugar” (Figure 4). The meaning of this illustration is clear. In BC Sugar’s view, both Hong Kong sugars and Chinese bodies were threats. Chinese bodies, which were half-dressed and thus morally suspect, came in unrelenting crowds to white shores, bringing with them cheaper – but also probably contaminated – products. It was the responsibility of powerful white men to protect the consuming public. By holding back the supposed invasion, they could safeguard both white industry and white bodies.

In addition to referencing nativist views about the body politic, so did the 1914 campaign play upon the benefits of mechanized food processing. In this way, BC Sugar resembled many American food companies who were also making such claims. In May, BC Sugar touted the fact that “From the raw sugar to the carton or sack,” its goods were “never touched by human hands.” A July advertisement noted that the BC refinery had an atmosphere in which “sunshine and fresh air predominate.” To further prove its sugars’ value, it made explicit reference to Hong Kong sugars. Skirting the fact that refined sugars the world over were boiled and filtered, the company asked customers to “imagine a horde of unwashed coolies in the steaming heat of an Oriental sugar refinery preparing the sugar you use on your table.”

Yet it was not only BC Sugar’s machinery that made its products trustworthy. It was also the fact that they were produced by whites. Making explicit contrasts between Chinese sugars and BC sugars, both the May and the July advertisements associated BC Sugar’s workers’ whiteness with superiority. According to the first, BC
Sugar is “clean, refined by clean methods, by clean white men and put up in clean packages which keep it clean.” The second similarly said that BC Sugar’s machinery was “operated by cleanly, well paid, white workingmen.” And, according to a further missive, BC Sugar’s goods were “pure, clean ... refined by the most sanitary, modern method by cleanly white labor.” A final advertisement told customers to make sure they were purchasing sugar that was “refined in British Columbia by clean white workmen, who live a sanitary, healthy life in clean and proper surroundings.”

Certainly, BC Sugar could have argued that its sugars were clean and trustworthy because they were produced by whites without also including references to supposedly polluted Chinese sugars within its campaigns. That being said, it was the inclusion of anti-Chinese imagery that helped BC Sugar define its products as desirable. In ways similar to how white British Columbians constructed whiteness, itself, during this time, BC Sugar drew upon negative associations with Chinese identity to create positive associations with white identity. Including representations of dirty, diseased, ignorant, and immoral Chinese peoples in its advertising, BC Sugar defined its products and workers as clean, intelligent, and healthy. In this way, it suggested that its refinery produced “clean” foods for a “clean” race.
Conclusion: Eating Clean

This article has highlighted the presence of racial discourse in food safety messaging. Demonstrating that western Canada’s largest sugar company played upon stereotypes of Chinese people as dirty, diseased, and immoral, it reveals that a major food manufacturer within this white settler polity constructed a racialized discourse of food cleanliness. More than this, it also shows that this manufacturer deployed concepts of whiteness to create ideas about food healthfulness. BC Sugar made explicit links between the whiteness of its workforce and the value of its products. Since white workers were pure, argued BC Sugar, so were its sugars. Had BC Sugar not constructed a racialized Other, it is difficult to say how the company would have been able to justify its sugar’s supposed higher quality.

BC Sugar’s anti-Chinese campaigns also reveal the role of race in some British Columbians’ calls to “buy local.” Historians of both the United States and Canada have demonstrated that during tough economic times, consumer advocates have asked that people shop strategically. Buying local products, the argument goes, helps boost local industries. By revealing that civic consumerism existed within BC Sugar’s advertising between the years 1891 and 1914, this article demonstrates that on Canada’s west coast, not only consumer advocates, but also food manufacturers, participated in political consumer campaigns. It also reveals that strong anti-Asian sentiment helped propel those campaigns forward.

Finally, by alerting us to the presence of race binaries within BC Sugar’s advertising, this article raises questions about the historical origins of the contemporary clean eating movement. Emerging at the turn of the twenty-first century, but building on a long history of health food activism, this movement seeks to eliminate not only processed foods but also any other foods deemed toxic. Such foods have included but are not limited to wheat, meat, dairy, and anything genetically modified, as well as anything touched by pesticides, herbicides, or steroids. By drinking juiced vegetables, as well as by consuming such so-called superfoods as organic “açaí berries, coconut oil, [and] cashew butter,” advocates of clean eating suggest that it is possible to reduce the amount of toxins in one’s body. Many also seek additional aims, including weight loss, muscle gain, and environmental sustainability.

Certainly, more research on the history of clean eating is required. That said, there are some parallels between the clean eating movement of today and the food safety campaigns of the past. As the case of BC Sugar demonstrates, each are premised on the notion that certain manufactured foods are rife with contaminants. As well, each of the movements demonstrate a hypervigilance toward protecting bodily boundaries. By avoiding certain foods, advocates in each of these movements have suggested that it is possible to construct an intact body, one that is wholly pure. Further, each of these movements has a certain association with whiteness. Whereas BC Sugar’s white imperative is obvious, the role of whiteness in today’s clean food advocacy is more diffuse. Nevertheless, and as Rachel Slocum argues, “White, wealthier bodies tend to be the ones in Whole Foods, at co-ops,” and “those making certain purchases” at farmers’ markets. These people, more than others, are invested in “the sort of healthier, thinner body” that a “non-processed, whole grain, small-scale or organic” diet “could produce.” Consciously, of course, these consumers may not be interested in race issues at all.
Yet their physical dominance of the clean food movement, together with their own investments in “personal health,” do suggest links between past food safety discourses and contemporary clean eating ones.90

Before any further comparisons can be drawn, more examination of the links between contemporary and past clean eating movements are imperative.91 For now, what we can conclude is that on Canada’s west coast during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a powerful race-based discourse of food cleanliness was in play. Articulated by BC Sugar, this discourse defined white-produced foods as pure, and Chinese-produced foods as polluted. By manipulating such ideas, BC Sugar constructed a definition of value that relied upon the idea of racial contamination. And, by deploying these notions, BC Sugar consolidated not only its own power, but also that of other white settlers in the region.

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Notes

2. Ibid.
7. Dua, “Exclusion through Inclusion”; and Freeman, “Attitudes Toward ‘Miscegenation’”.
19. Ibid., 50.
20. Davies, “Night Soil,” 3; and Mawani, “Island of the Unclean”.
22. As quoted in Goutor, “Constructing the ’Great Menace,’” 569.
23. “Sugar!! Sugar!!”.
27. Ibid., 23, 25.
29. Lantic Sugar, “Our Story.”
31. See “Sugar Quotations,” 2; and “Delicious All Cane Table Sugars,” 15.
32. Select advertisements from these campaigns were discovered in CVA, BC Sugar fonds, particularly in AM1592-1-S12-F9. A subsequent study of these newspapers turned up the full campaigns.
34. Ibid., 32.
35. As quoted in Rapaport, *Thirst for Empire*, 144.
36. As quoted in Ibid., 182.
39. As quoted in Ibid., 455.
42. As quoted in Ibid., 299.
44. Levenstein, *Fear of Food*, 11.
45. For example, “Insects Found in Sugar,” 6.
47. Ibid., 29.
48. Ibid.
52. See, for example, “Chinese Sugars,” *Nanaimo Daily News*, 2.
53. Ibid.
54. Wanasinghe et al., “First Record of *Aceria sacchari* Wongon,” 266.
55. Ibid.
58. “Small-Pox Scourge,” 4; and also see Roy, *White Man’s Province*, 33.
60. Schreiner, *The Refiners*, 35.
62. See, for example, “Where Do Your Interests Lie?” 28; and “Chinese Sugar,” 15.
63. “Sugar!! Sugar!!”.
66. For example, “White Labor British Columbia Refined Sugar,” 5; “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” 4; and “Why Chinese Sugar?” 16.
68. “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” 4.
69. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
73. Siegel and Hull, “Made in Canada!”.
74. “White Labor”; “Coolie or Clean”; “Don’t Let”; and “Public Menace.”
77. “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” 4.
78. See, especially, Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread*, 17–50. Note also that middle-class Canadian women’s groups, because of food safety concerns, were pushing for more manufacturers to package their goods; see Blakely, “Branded Goods.”
79. “White Labor British Columbia Refined Sugar,” 5; and see also “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” 4.
81. “White Labor British Columbia Refined Sugar,” 5; and see also “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” 4.
83. Ibid.
84. “Coolie or Clean Sugar?” 4.
88. McCartney, “Clean Eating.”
89. Spencer, “‘Eating Clean’.”
90. Slocum, “Whiteness.”
91. Of particular salience is Berthold’s study of the contemporary American obsession with hygiene, which she links to older fears among whites about racial contamination: Berthold, “Tidy Whiteness.” Also key is Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

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