

Adding *The Woman of Colour* to BGU's syllabus

Dr Jonathan Godshaw Memel, Lecturer



'Dido Elizabeth Belle and Lady Elizabeth Murray', c. 1778, Earl of Mansfield, Scone Palace, Scotland. A painting by David Martin that has come to be associated with *The Woman of Colour* (1808).

I teach 'Victorians Unbound', a second-year core module on the undergraduate degree in English Literature at BGU. It is diverse in terms of the genres of writing and gender of the writers that we study, but — like most modules of its kind — it does tend to focus on white, British experiences and perspectives. These texts and writers also tend to get bound up with familiar tropes of progress that are often associated with the Victorians. We might say, for instance, that Dickens modelled the form of the novel that we know today, or we might study Brontë for her proto-feminist insight.

Much of that is worthwhile, but for 2021 I wanted to introduce the Victorians differently. I titled my first session 'The Nineteenth Century: An Age of Progress?' and asked students on the module to read *The Woman of Colour* (1808), a novel told from the viewpoint of Olivia Fairfield, a Jamaican emigrant visiting London and Bristol in the years after the abolition of the British slave trade (an 1807 Act of Parliament made it illegal to buy slaves directly from Africa). Fairfield encounters racism throughout her travels around Britain. Her account provides an important perspective on the racial tensions and contradictory attitudes of pre-Victorian society. Crucially, the text throws up vexing questions about the nineteenth century as an age of progress, questions that became even more pressing when we turned to a recent BBC documentary by the Black British historian David Olusoga that I had also asked the students to watch.

In *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* Olusoga addresses another, slightly later, moment in Britain's history of slavery. Once the ownership of slaves was made illegal in 1834, the British government agreed to compensate the nation's slave owners for their loss of human 'property'. The total amount of this compensation is staggering: something like £17 billion in today's money. According to the documentary,

the only comparable transfer of wealth by the British government came in after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Olusoga drew on recent research by UCL's Legacies of British Slave-Ownership project that shows how slave ownership (and therefore the bailout money) spread to every corner of the UK. Slaves were not only owned by super-rich plantation owners actually living in the Caribbean, but also by the moderately well-off middle classes scattered across provincial Britain.

The students on 'Victorians Unbound' were particularly keen to discuss the final stages of the documentary when Olusoga explains how investments in various Victorian innovations were funded by the compensation money. We discussed how some of the Victorian railway lines that we travel along today could well have effectively been funded by wealth drawn from slavery and were therefore tied up with this atrocious history. One of Olusoga's important conclusions in *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* is that 'it is simply not possible to fully explain Britain's rapid industrial expansion in the nineteenth century without acknowledging the part that slave money played'.

By opening the module with this text and documentary my intention was to complicate and trouble some of the conceptions that we hold about the Victorian period. I'm looking forward to reading the posters and essays that this cohort will shortly submit, some of which will hopefully address how race affected Victorian history and culture.

Further Reading and Viewing

Lyndon J. Dominique (ed.), *The Woman of Colour* (first published 1808; Broadview Press, 2007)

Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners, written and presented by David Olusoga, directed by James Van Der Pool (BBC2, 2015). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/b063db18/britains-forgotten-slave-owners>
Legacies of British Slave-Ownership, UCL. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

Jonathan Godshaw Memel, Fariha Shaikh and Joanna E. Taylor, 'Black Lives Matter: Starting Points for the Victorianist', *BAVS Newsletter* 20.1 (Summer), 2-8. https://bavs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/BAVSNewsletter_20.1_Jul2020-2.pdf

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Sheine Peart, Dr Rose Roberto and other members of BGU's Telling It Like It Is Group for the discussions; to Sam Toolan for suggesting the Olusoga documentary; and to various members of the Victorian Studies community for instigating and continuing a reconsideration of race in the field.



This article has been published TILIIs, an interest group at Bishop Grosseteste University engage in discussion, debate, and sharing of useful education resources that address the corrosive effects of inequality in our contemporary society. <https://www.bishopg.ac.uk/student/research/telling-it-like-it-is-teaching-resource-group-tiliis>