

Statement of Intended Research

Title: Representing Slavery in the Popular Imagination: Eighteenth Century Britain as a Colonial Periphery

Proposed Supervisor: 

How was Atlantic slavery understood and imagined by ordinary Britons in the eighteenth century? Research into this question will point to how slavery connected the population of Britain to the lives of those enslaved in its Atlantic colonies. In a period of imperial exchange, British culture was shaped by the experiences of empire, of slavery and of enslaved peoples. This study will focus on popular material culture, the stuff of everyday life, rather than on traditional sources such as paintings and political speeches. It will attempt to grasp how contemporary Britons interacted with the realities of slavery.

My undergraduate dissertation covers Africans in eighteenth century Britain, focusing on runaway advertisements. In a Masters dissertation, I will explore the cultural context behind Britain's diversifying population. To do so, I will examine how far conceptions of slavery pervaded contemporary culture and what those conceptions were. With a focus on material culture, on objects and images rather than just written sources, the dissertation will access experiences of the general population in the context of eighteenth century consumerism. David Dabydeen's publication on images of black people in the artwork of William Hogarth demonstrates how non-written sources can contribute to historical study.¹ However, Dabydeen's narrow focus on 'high' cultural forms prevents a fuller understanding of how the majority of people conceived of Atlantic slavery.

¹ David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Kingston-upon-Thames, 1985).

Having acknowledged the *presence* of Africans in Britain, I will explore their *representation* in British culture during this period. As Catherine Molineux has noted, the black presence in Britain had a wider cultural impact than a head count of the domestic black population would suggest.² Molineux extends the bounds of research, focusing on representations of black bodies in tobacco papers.³ Roxann Wheeler explores the inclusion of West Indian pidgin and ‘negro songs’ in London’s performance and print culture.⁴ Similarly, my project will analyse specific forms of popular culture from which to examine imperial connections. Where Molineux and others have focused on urban centres, I will to gather research from a range of provincial settings. Intended sources will include popular forms of literature, street theatre and imagery, as evidenced in advertisements for goods produced through slave labour. The latter might extend to coffee, sugar or textile consumption and will reveal the extent to which colonial connections pervaded street-level economic exchanges.

Previous historical scholarship, including that of James Walvin, has perceived black British history as a sub-topic of white British history.⁵ Research has been limited by a paucity of written evidence. Focus has been on patterns of demography, prominent free blacks and the issue of legal status for Africans living in Britain, as explained by John Cairns.⁶ These studies remain detached from social experience. Gretchen Gerzina, Norma Myers, Kathleen Chater and David Olusoga have uncovered more concrete details about the lives of black people living in Britain.⁷ My own study will extend the domestic narrative to connect life in Britain with the

² Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), p. 7.

³ Catherine Molineux, ‘Pleasures of the Smoke: “Black Virginians” in Georgian London’s Tobacco Shops’ *William and Mary Quarterly* (April 2007), pp. 327-376.

⁴ Roxann Wheeler, ‘Sounding Black-ish: West Indian Pidgin in London Performance and Print’ 51:1 (2017), pp. 63-87.

⁵ James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London, 1973).

⁶ John W. Cairns, ‘Slavery without a Code Noir: Scotland 1700-1778’ in Larkin, Felix M. and Dawson, N. M. (eds), *Lawyers, the Law and History* (Dublin, 2013), p. 178.

⁷ Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995); Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780-1830* (London, 1996); Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807* (Manchester, 2009); David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London, 2016).

realities of enslaved labour. It will necessarily explore how racial discourse shaped and reflected cultural representations of Africans. It will contend with racial myths and stereotypes which, as Molineux has noted, were often based on fantasy and made slavery easier to accept.⁸

Researching historical awareness of slavery will be important to help counteract what Tom Devine has termed, in regard to Scotland, a ‘national amnesia’.⁹ Attempts are being made to re-position historical connections to slavery in public consciousness. The universities of Cambridge, Bristol and Glasgow have all begun investigations into historic connections to slavery and have brought to light the challenge of handling sensitive objects. Recently a Nigerian bronze cockerel was returned to Benin by Jesus College, Cambridge which had acquired the object after it was looted in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁰ This comes as Cambridge launches a formal inquiry into its slavery links. Recent controversies prompt questions about how to come to terms with Britain’s colonial legacy, given the uncomfortable versions of history that such objects and monuments tell. As Professor Toope rightly points out, “We cannot change the past, but nor should we seek to hide from it”.¹¹

My proposed focus on neglected material sources will allow me to widen the scope of British history by connecting popular conceptions of slavery with the imperial experience. My project will build on a growing field of research into Britain’s colonial past and the diversity of its historic population. Grounding my analysis of popular culture will be the central argument that the ordinary population of eighteenth-century Britons were aware of slavery. The extent of this

⁸ Molineux, ‘Pleasures’, pp. 360, 375.

⁹ T. M. Devine (ed.), *Rediscovering Scotland’s Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection* (Edinburgh, 2015), p. 27.

¹⁰ Rosemary Bennett, ‘Looted Bronze Cockerel Will Be Returned Home to Nigeria’, *The Times*, London, 28 Nov 2019, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/jesus-college-cambridges-looted-bronze-cockerel-will-be-returned-home-to-nigeria-qm2c237wd?shareToken=31577102c078ac3f38adbe97ff91fe2c>> [accessed 22/12/19].

¹¹ ‘Cambridge Launches Inquiry into Historical Links to Slavery’, *University of Cambridge*, 30 April 2019, <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/cambridge-university-launches-inquiry-into-historical-links-to-slavery>> [accessed 30/12/12].

awareness has been neglected in previous study. On this basis, my analysis will seek to answer questions about how awareness was generated through patterns of cultural consumption.