

Invisible Presence: The Whitening of the Black Community in the Historical Imagination of British Archives*

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RÉSUMÉ Le but de ce texte est de mettre en évidence les méthodes et les ironies de la recherche des histoires noires dans un contexte britannique. Il tente d'exposer les tensions entre la présence des personnes de race noire à Londres, leur présence matérielle dans les archives disponibles pour les chercheurs, et les complexités des histoires britanniques dans lesquelles leur présence est exprimée.

ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to highlight the methods and ironies of researching Black histories in a British context. It is an attempt to expose tensions between the presence of Black people in London, their material presence in the archives available to researchers, and the complexities of British histories that their presence articulates.

The permanent residence of Black people in Britain began with the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the greatest knowledge of the lives of Black people in British history (before 1948 and the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*) is intimately related to this period of forced migration between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although Britain's involvement in this system did not develop to a large scale until around the 1660s, as early as 1554 John Lock sailed back from the West Coast of Africa with a cargo of Black slaves.¹ Of course Black history is not just about slaves, and the works of Black authors and activists who left their stories, such as Olaudah Equiano (c.1745–1797) and Ignatius Sancho (1729–1780) provide us with evidence of this.² Between the elite they represent and those who were the property of oth-

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1 Kenneth Little, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of English Race Relations in English Society* (London, 1972).

2 Paul Edwards, "Black Writers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in David Dabydeen, ed., *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 50–67.

ers lay the experiences of the ordinary folk, the poor and the petty criminal. The Committee for Relief of the Black Poor set up in 1786 to oversee the plan to prevent Blacks from begging in Britain and send them instead to Sierra Leone, has provided evidence of this presence.

In Edwardian London there are more texts written about London and British society by Black authors. A.B.C. Merriman-Labor published his vision of *Britons Through Negro Spectacles* in 1909. Although it was taken to be a comical collection of observations, it does give some insights into the expectations and experiences a Black middle-class male might have had. In the book's preface he justified his light-hearted commentary: "Considering my racial connection, and the flippant character of literature which, at the present time, finds ready circulation among the general public, I am of opinion that the world would be better prepared to hear me if I come in the guise of a jester."³

His claim that there were not many more than one hundred Black people living in London now seems a deliberate underestimate, as proved by the research on Black entertainers in the early part of the century, and the experience of West Africans in Britain, particularly the influence on British social and political life of West African students, and the students' own politics and political organizations.⁴

The nineteenth century has proved to be the most difficult period for researchers to explore, despite the numerous archives that are available to researchers of this period. Census returns, parish records, birth, death, and marriage certificates, prison registers, poor law registers, hospital admission registers, orphanage registers, newspapers, and catalogues, are just a small selection of the numerous forms of archives that are available. Yet evidence of Black people from these sources is often collected from hints in lists, and searches of newspapers and periodicals that sometimes yield small glimpses, but often yield nothing at all.⁵ The aim of this paper is to present some sightings of Black people during this period and to use their presence in the archives to suggest why there have been so few to date.

Challenging the British Historical Imagination

The struggle to highlight the presence of "other voices" in British history has been taken up by a number of people and organizations working in a variety of subjects that touch upon aspects of British history, identity, and memory. In

3 A.B.C Merriman-Labor, *Britons Through Negro Spectacles* (London, 1909).

4 See Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television* (London and New York, 2001); Hakim Adi, *West Africans in Britain 1900-1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism* (London, 1998); Jeffrey Green, *Black Edwardians: Black People in Britain 1901-1914* (London and Portland, 1998); Jeffrey Green, "Some Findings on Britain's Black Working Class, 1900-1914," *Immigrants and Minorities*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1990), pp. 168-77.

5 Hans Werner Debrunner, *Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe* (Basel, 1979).

January 1999 the Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA), based in London with a membership that includes academics, archivists, teachers, researchers, activists, and those with a general interest in the subject, held a conference to highlight the necessity for materials to be collected on the histories of Black and Asian people in Britain, and for both future and existing materials to be appropriately indexed.⁶

One of the outcomes of this conference was that BASA asked genealogists, family, and local historians to contact the organization if they came across any mentions of Black peoples in the course of their own research. This initial call, which is still ongoing, resulted in over a thousand “sightings” from parish registers, newspapers, graveyards etc., being sent to BASA. Among them were entries such as that from Winterborne Parish Records from Strickland in Dorset, where the burial, on 25 February 1700, of an unbaptized “negro” slave was recorded. In August 1707 John Quomino, a “negro” servant of Mrs. Woodfine who had been baptized about twelve years before in Stepney, Middlesex, was buried.⁷ The baptism of Danl Whitley, an Ethiopian by birth from the Coast of Guinea, was recorded on 2 November 1782, in Kirkheaton Parish, West Yorkshire. He was buried on 8 December 1878, also at St. Kirkeaton.⁸ On 4 March 1716 Margaret Dale was buried in Gamlingay, Cambridgeshire – she was the wife of St. John, a “negro” and a carpenter.⁹

These contributions from the general public have also revealed new aspects of the Black presence in the nineteenth century. On 18 January 1837 the *Western Times* reported the death of Mr. John Day in St. Sidwells, Devon. A man of colour, he was a shopkeeper and known in the neighbourhood as a waiter at dinner and evening parties.¹⁰ In July 1813 Thomas, the son of Bretton, a native of Africa then resident in Tiverton, Devon, was baptized in the Parish. At Kirk Braddan on the Isle of Man, a stone marks the grave of Samuel Ally, an African and a native of St. Helena, who died on 28 May 1822, aged 18. Born a slave, his gravestone was erected by a grateful master in the memory of a faithful servant who repaid the “boon of liberty with unbounded attachment.”¹¹

6 The CASBAH (Caribbean Studies, Black and Asian History) Project, which built on work by the Black and Asian Studies Association Archives Working Party, considered these issues. Working with the Society of Archivists, BASA conducted surveys on sources for Caribbean, and Black and Asian history in Britain. This project has now become part of The National Archives. For more information see *Record Keeping*, Summer 2005 (*The National Archives*) also available online: <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/services/pdf/summer2005.pdf>>. For further information about BASA or to contribute “sightings” please contact The Secretary, BASA, “Sightings,” c/o Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 28 Russell Square, London, WC1B 5DS, UK or view the BASA Web site at <www.blackandasianstudies.org.uk>.

7 *Black and Asian Studies Association Newsletter*, 30 April 2002, p. 23.

8 *Ibid.*, 25 September 1999, pp. 22–26.

9 *Ibid.*, 27 April 2000, p. 17.

10 *Ibid.*, 31 September 2001, p. 23.

11 *Ibid.*, 27 April 2000, p. 18.

These and the many other entries have prompted a number of questions for researchers of Black history. What was the true nature of the historical geography of the Black presence? Evidence of Black people living within small communities such as Strickland, Royton, and Kirkeaton challenge the popular geographical imagination that Black people who lived in the British past were concentrated in port areas and perhaps a few aristocratic country houses. Black people lived all over the British Isles – what was their experience of rural and urban life? How did they live? Was St. John, not noted as a slave, a freeman, and an independent carpenter? Was Danl Whitley also a freeman, and if so, how did he make his living? These questions are stimulating new directions in the research and theorization of the historical geography of the Black presence in Britain – but these indications are available to researchers because parish clerks noted the colour of the men and women whose lives they were recording.

The central concern of this paper, the absence of colour in British archives, is hinted at in one entry from Tunstall, towards the Suffolk coast, made in September 1761, when the baptism of Hannah Norbrook was recorded. Hannah was the daughter of Henry Norbrok, a “negro” and his wife Hannah. A note at the bottom of the page of this entry reads: “The registering of Henry Norbrook as a Negro may assist some future person in observing how long [a] time the colour wears out by marrying with white men or women Hannah being his first child.”¹²

It is not clear why the parish clerk made this note. Perhaps he was reflecting an interest in debates he might have heard on miscegenation. If so, was an interest in “inter-breeding” the only reason why he bothered to record the colour of Henry’s skin? If so, is it possible that if he had recorded that baptism of a child who had two Black parents he would not have bothered to record the child’s colour? And if this is the case, how are we to know how many other Black people lived in Tunstall during this, or any other time?

The census for England and Wales in 1991 was the first time that a person’s “ethnic group” was specifically defined by self-classification.¹³ As a result neither a person’s ethnicity, nor the colour of their skin, was recorded in the census as a matter of course before this date. However, there are references to

¹² Ibid., 26 January 2000, p. 21.

¹³ For a discussion on the implications of this see Roger Ballard, “Negotiating Race and Ethnicity: Exploring the Implications of the 1991 Census,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1997), pp. 3–33. Further discussions include Norbet Peabody, “Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India,” *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2001), pp. 819–50; Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, “Identity on the Borderline: the Colonial Census, New Ethnicities and the Unmaking of Multiculturalism in Ethnic Violence,” *Identity, Culture and Politics*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2002), pp. 25–50; Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics* (Stanford, 2000)

race and colour to be found in the census. For example, in 1881 Thomas Beach and May Ashley, both to be found at 2 Chapel Street, Rickergate, Cumberland, had their occupation listed as "Professional Negro Singer Musician." Down on the Southern coast Henry Smith, who was boarding in Thomas Street, Brighton was working as a "Nigger performer." Frank May, who at 31 was only two years younger than Henry Smith, worked in London as a "Nigger Wig Maker."

That the occupation of people was filled in (rather than a box to be ticked) by the recorders left them with some room to manoeuvre, and so here we have a richer source for accessing the presence and representations of Black people. But what does this data actually tell us? There is no way of knowing, from the census return, whether Henry Smith was a Black performer, or a White performer who "blackened-up" for a living. This is also the case with Mary and Thomas in Cumberland. Was Frank May a Black man who made wigs, or, although it seems less likely, was he a wig maker who specialized in making wigs for blacked-up minstrels? These examples illustrate that racialized labels are often not conclusive evidence of ethnicity even when they do appear. In the case of Frank May, it turns out that both his parents were theatrical costume makers, and on the original copy of the census "Nigger" is crossed out, implying that Frank made other wigs as well as those for entertainers who required "nigger wigs" for their act.

There are some means of guessing (which is never a satisfactory tool of research) a person's ethnicity when using the earlier census returns, such as a person's place of birth or the spelling of a person's surname. For example, on her work on the history of *Asians in Britain*, Rozina Visram discusses the presence of Lascars among those who signed up to be taken to Africa under the arrangements of the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor. She identifies them by picking out their Portuguese sounding names; included are Domingo Anthony, Emanuel Pardo, and Anthony Sylva.¹⁴ With some of the Black men who are discussed in this paper, surnames could have warranted a guess of an origin of African descent. However, the legacy of slavery means that most have names that would not raise particular interest.

Unable to utilize more traditional methods of research, due to the absence of colour in the census returns, birth, death or marriage certificates, hospital admission registers, or prison registers etc., photographs have become an important primary source for my own search for the Black presence in nineteenth-century London. As a result some of my research was focussed within institutions that had collated albums of their residents, such as prisoners and hospital patients. The use of photographic archives as a primary resource is

14 Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London, 2002).

not without its problems.¹⁵ However, they represent important points of departure from traditional views of the British archive.

The photographs used to identify the men and women in this paper were taken from the archives of Pentonville Prison (between 1875 and 1885), and Colney Hatch Asylum (between 1893 and 1901).¹⁶ The prints of the patients and prisoners carried their surnames and initials, and in some circumstances the date they were admitted to the institution, and their admission number. In the case of Colney Hatch, this information made it possible to look for the women's medical records in the hospital's casebooks. These in turn were a source of further information and a tool for tracing an historical geography, even if a somewhat fragmented one, of these women's lives. A similar method was used to recover parts of the men's biographies. Combining what little was discovered about these men and women exposed methodological questions concerning the presence of Black people in Victorian archives.

Inside Pentonville Prison

The men we encounter in this section of the paper were inmates of Pentonville Prison, often referred to as the model prison. Construction began in 1842 in northeast London. The prints of the prisoners carry their surnames; these were then located in the Pentonville Prison registers. Of the sixteen Black men found in the photographic albums, all had corresponding written records. In these registers the men's name, date of reception, the prison where they had previously been held, the date and the prison to which they were then discharged, and general remarks were recorded. Under general remarks the crime the men were charged with, their previous convictions, their religion, and employment were noted. This would have been an opportunity for a person's skin to be noted too. Yet, within these records none of the men had an "ethnic" description or any reference to the colour of their skin. Why this was the case is an interesting question in and of itself. Of equal importance is the realization that if only the written archives had been searched the men would not have been identifiable as "Black"; it is only through using the photographic albums that the colour of their skin can be "seen."

Two of the men identified in the archives, Francis Branco and Joseph Denny, also had reports of their trials in *The Times*. Francis Branco was convicted of stealing from his landlady, Mrs. Innes, in May 1880. On the night of 26 April 1880, Innes had been given £54 to take care of on behalf of Alfred Mober, a horse-dealer who lived in Shepherd's Bush, west London. Innes

15 For a discussion of some of these issues see Caroline Bressey, "Looking for Blackness: A Researcher's Paradox," *Ethics, Place and Environment*, vol. 6, no. 3 (October 2003), pp. 215–26.

16 London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), H12/CH/B/18/1-4.

wrapped the money in a handkerchief which she hid under her bed. When she returned from the theatre that evening with Mr. and Mrs. Mober, they discovered that the money and Branco were missing. He was apprehended the next day, and when he heard he was to be charged with the theft, he apparently retorted “why, they lock a man up for nothing nowadays.”¹⁷ This theft from his landlady was not his first offence. He had been imprisoned for six months in July 1877, and then in October that same year he had spent three months in jail with hard labour. In July 1879, he had been sentenced for a year in prison with hard labour for another theft. His sentence in May 1880 saw him facing up to five years’ penal servitude, followed by three years’ probation. But throughout the retelling of this petty criminal’s biography there is no reference to the colour of his skin.

However, in the write up of the case of Joseph Denny, who was sentenced for stealing less than a year later, there is a reference to his colour. In February 1881, *The Times* reported that, “Joseph Denny, a black man, who had pleaded ‘Guilty’ to a charge of larceny, was brought up for sentence.”¹⁸ Denny was sentenced to eight years’ penal servitude, and it would be his second time in prison. Perhaps Denny’s colour was referred to because he was seen as more of a threat than Branco. Although Denny had been behind bars fewer times than Branco, he had had to serve the full seven years of his previous sentence because his conduct had been so bad. The details of the theft are not given, but when he heard his sentence he reportedly cried out “Why don’t you send me to the gallows right away? I shall be sure to do something. I shall commit murder before I have done.”¹⁹ Although there are debates to be had as to why one man and not the other is described in one way or another, the point to reiterate is that without the photographs it would have been impossible to identify Branco as a Black man.

Moreover and paradoxically, these discrepancies between the visual and the textual pry open an opportunity to investigate the racialization of people in the nineteenth century. For example, in the case of the male prisoners, although colour was not a form of categorization, did it nevertheless affect the way they were treated by the criminal justice system?

James Johannes, alias Jonathan Williams, arrived at Pentonville on 22 November 1876. He was listed as a sailor with four previous convictions. This time he had been charged with larceny and sentenced to seven years, which he was to serve in Brixton Prison, followed by five years’ police supervision. One of his fellow inmates, admitted on the same day, was also charged with larceny. John Davies had only two previous convictions, but he received exactly the same sentence as Johannes. Francis Branco was one of five men

¹⁷ *The Times*, 5 May 1880, p. 4.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 5 February 1881, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

transferred to Pentonville in May 1880. Four of them were convicted of larceny. One of them, William Osborn, also had four previous convictions; his sentence was for six years with five years' police supervision, compared to Branco's five-year sentence with three years' supervision.

This brief comparison with the other men who appear in the prison registers reveals no obvious themes of bias against the Black defendants. However, this is a limited sample with a limited perspective (although these are similar findings to preliminary work undertaken by Kathy Chater's investigations of the Black presence in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries).²⁰ It tells us little about the lived experience for the men within prison walls and its one thousand cells, nor does it shed much light on whether racial prejudice played a part in the pursuit and charging of Black men by the police.

Inside the Asylum

Finding the voices of the insane is difficult; locating and recreating a biographical presence of Black women in these institutions is even harder. This highlights one of the differences that existed in the catalogued and lived experiences of race in Britain compared to its colonies. In 1891 and 1894, two new asylums were established in South Africa, and both had exclusionary admittance practices based on colour.²¹ This was also the case in nineteenth-century India, where European and India patients were generally confined in separate institutions and in the few instances when they were confined together, segregation provided the Europeans with better living conditions.²² British asylums practised an exclusionary admittance procedure, but one that was based on economics rather than colour (although, of course, the two were closely tied).

The Case of Caroline Maisley

Caroline Eliza Maisley was admitted to Colney Hatch on 1 November 1898. She was 27 years old, and married to a dock labourer. Her previous address was given as the Stepney Union Workhouse. Her disorder was classed as "Mania" and her attack, which was officially the first one she had experienced, had lasted a week. As a result she had initially been admitted to the infirmary at Stepney Workhouse on 18 October 1898. She had been detained in the workhouse with a fourteen-day order, but on this order no medical rea-

20 Kathy Chater, "Black People in Old Bailey Trials, 1722-1812," presentation at the Seminar of Metropolitan History, Institute of History, Senate House, London, November 2003.

21 Sally Swartz, "Lost Lives: Gender, History and Mental Illness in the Cape, 1891-1910," *Feminism and Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1999), pp. 152-58.

22 Richard Keller, "Madness and Colonization: Psychiatry in the British and French Empires, 1800-1962," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2001), pp. 295-326.

sons were given for her detention.²³ On the fourteenth day she was transferred to Colney Hatch Asylum, thirteen days before her sister Mary Matthews.

Although case papers are recorded in the register by admission date, there are no papers for Caroline, so her registration form contains all the details we have about her stay in hospital. We do not know which symptoms Caroline suffered from, or how she was treated for them, or how she felt about that treatment. What the records do tell us is that Caroline “recovered,” and left the hospital on 1 September 1899.²⁴

The Case of Mary Matthews

Mary Ann Cecilia Matthews was admitted to Colney Hatch Asylum on 14 November 1898. She was then a pauper in receipt of Relief and the expenses she incurred were chargeable to Poplar Union. Mary, 32 years of age, and of “no occupation,” was married to James Alexander Matthews.²⁵ Their address is given as 36 Broomfield Street, Bromley-by-Bow. However, Mary’s order states that at the time of her illness she was living at the Poplar Union Workhouse, although this was because she had been admitted to the workhouse infirmary, not that her family had fallen on hard times.²⁶

Dr. John Lamont examined Mary on 12 November at the Poplar Union Workhouse. Lamont’s examination led him to the conclusion that Mary was “a person of unsound mind,” and this required that she be “taken in charge of and detained under care and treatment.” He formed his conclusions by observing Mary in the infirmary, although it is not clear from his evidence how long she had been a patient there, for he reports that he had frequently seen Mary walk around the ward aimlessly when, to Lamont, she appeared “lost in her mind.”²⁷ He also reported that Mary experienced sensations that led her to believe she was falling through the ground, and that she appeared to be in low spirits. As part of his examination Lamont asked Mary if she heard voices. Mary replied that she did not hear “anything in particular now,” implying that she had done before, but then she “gave evasive answers to all questions.”²⁸

As with her sister, there are no case records of Mary’s stay in the asylum. Consequently it is not clear how long her attack lasted once she was in hospital, although she remained in the asylum for almost a year. She eventually “recovered” and was discharged from the hospital on 29 October 1899.²⁹ Thus

23 LMA, ST/M/BG/L/115/3.

24 LMA, H12/CH/B/01/13.

25 LMA, PO/BG/162/10.

26 LMA, PO/BG/162/10; LMA PO/BG/154/04.

27 LMA, PO/BG/154/04.

28 LMA, PO/BG/154/04.

29 LMA, H12/CH/B/01/13.

it would seem that Mary returned to her home in Bromley, or at least into her husband's care.

In the records that survive for the sisters, there are no references to the colour of their skin at all. If only the written records had been examined there would have been no way, or reason, to identify them as Black women. Following on from that, there is no indication in any of the women's available records that their colour was thought to influence the state of their madness.

Black Histories in the Archives

The examples above provide us with a fleeting glimpse of the lives of some of the Black men and women who lived in Victorian London. Yet even these brief encounters illustrate the need for various media and archives to be consulted when attempting to establish the presence of Black people in Britain during this period. In this instance text was combined with photographs to enable the image of a Black person to develop. Yet these images came to light because these men and women were at some point removed from society at large and placed within institutions that recorded their presence. Formulating biographies of the ordinary Black Victorian man and woman requires different methods, although the presence of the Devon waiter, John Day, indicates they are there to be found. And what of the Black middle-class?

The Case of Henrietta Cormack

Henrietta Cormack, a woman of a "dark swarthy complexion," became a patient at Holloway Sanatorium, at Virginia Water, Egham, in February 1891. Unlike Colney Hatch Asylum, Holloway Sanatorium was a private institution, built on St. Anne's Heath, Virginia Water in Surrey. Henrietta was then a thirty-two year old, married, Roman Catholic woman.³⁰ In the admission records her previous address is given as 93 Cromwell Road, Kensington. When the census was taken in April 1891 John Claude Cormack, aged forty and a registered GP born in Dublin, was staying with his business partner Robert Mois, also a GP, born in Edinburgh.³¹ Robert Mois, his wife, and their two children lived at 93 Cromwell Road, Kensington. They all enjoyed the benefit of Mois' two servants, both in their late twenties and both born in Scotland. Henrietta is not listed because she was at Holloway, though in the census records for the asylum only her initials identify her; the entry confirms her age and marital status. She is listed as being a lunatic, and having no profession, her place of birth was recorded as Devizes.³²

30 Wellcome Institute Archives (hereafter WI), WMS 5158, Case Book no. 4.

31 Family Record Office, 1891 RG12/150, p. 34.

32 Family Record Office, RG12/1010, p. 17, folio 163.

The attack that took her to Holloway was not her first. She had been treated for an initial attack about two years before when, between 19 December 1889 and 18 April 1890, she had been treated by Dr. Wood at The Priory, a private institution in Roehampton. The attack that resulted in Henrietta's admittance to Holloway had begun about five months earlier, thought to be a relapse from her previous attack, one that was considered "hereditary" rather than "epileptic."³³ In her family history it is noted that her half-sister and niece were also "insane," but no further details are given about them. There is nothing to indicate that Henrietta received treatment during the initial five months. She had been suicidal and become dangerous, throwing missiles and attempting to strangle those around her, and these are perhaps the reasons her family took her to be treated at Holloway.

In her medical notes Henrietta was described as a woman of dark swarthy complexion. It is among these notes that one doctor considered her ethnicity, adding "Creole" to her physical description, as well as noting her jet-black hair, dark eyes, thick lips, pale dusky complexion, and vacant expression. The examination also included comments on Henrietta's occasional refusal to eat any food, although it was noted that she appeared fairly well nourished and suffered from no signs of physical disease. She would only give yes and no responses when questioned, and otherwise she remained silent, unoccupied, and she also refused to eat. There are no further notes until 25 August. On that day she was discharged, "released at the request of her husband."³⁴

However, it is not clear that Henrietta was a Black woman. The comment in her medical notes which described her as a Creole woman was preceded by a question mark. The doctor who took the details of her physical appearance engaged with the superficial nature of racial classification. What denoted a Black woman, or a Creole woman? Was it the colour of her skin, the texture of her complexion, or "thick lips"? After the detail of Henrietta's eyes, the examiner, at a later time, perhaps after some consideration, added "thick lips" to her list of physical features. In the late nineteenth century these were a sign of Black ancestry. Did the doctor add this because it gave weight to his belief that Henrietta might have been a Creole?

There is a photograph of Henrietta within her case notes, taken in the spring of 1891. It is a very faded, sepia image. The picture shows a woman lying in bed with the covers up to her chin. Her hands are above the covers. She has thick eyebrows. But the image is so discoloured that is impossible to gauge the "original" colour of the woman's skin, or any "defining" features of her physicality. Was she a "Creole," and if so, what did this actually mean in terms of her ethnic heritage?

³³ WI, WMS 5158, Case Book 4.

³⁴ Ibid.

Creole, n., a. [According to some 18thc. writers originally applied by S. American Blacks to their own children born in America as distinguished from Blacks freshly imported from Africa.]

A. *n.* In the West Indies and other parts of America, Mauritius, etc.:

orig. A person born and naturalized in the country, but of European (usually Spanish or French) or of African Negro race: the name having no connotation of colour, and in its reference to origin being distinguished on the one hand from born in Europe (or Africa), and on the other hand from aboriginal.

a. But now, usually, = *creole white*, a descendant of European settlers, born and naturalized in those colonies or regions, and more or less modified in type by the climate and surroundings.

b. Now less usually = *creole negro*: A Black person born in the West Indies or America, as distinguished from one freshly imported from Africa.

1863 Bates Nat. Amazon i. (1864) 19 The term "Creole" is confined to negroes born in the country.

B. attrib. or adj.

1. a. Of persons: Born and naturalized in the West Indies, etc., but of European (or Black) descent; see A

1862 J. M. Ludlow Hist. U.S. 316 note, There are creole whites, creole negroes, creole horses, &c.; and creole whites are, of all persons, the most anxious to be deemed of pure white blood.³⁵

Our understanding of the term "Creole" is a complex one. The definitions above highlight some of the plays with race and identity that occurred in the metropolises and colonies of European empires. During the nineteenth century definitions of "Creole" describing people of both Black and White descent were circulating. It is impossible to know to which definition Henrietta's doctor was referring. In nineteenth-century English literature the Creole appeared along with mulattos, quadroons and octoroons, as a woman who could be described as being neither Black nor White, yet also as both Black and White.³⁶

Henrietta may have been a Black-Creole woman. If she was, her experiences as a middle-class woman in the late Victorian Black Atlantic world could provide us with interesting insights (but if she was a White-Creole woman, does this mean that her experiences are no longer worthy of our interest?). What she definitely shows us is how easily identities slip across supposedly fixed physical boundaries, and that photography and our understandings of what we "see" will not always help us to negotiate our way through these slippages.

³⁵ Adapted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

³⁶ Jennifer DeVere Broody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham and London, 1998).

Considering the Victorian Vision of Race at Home

The reason colour was not included in official national records such as the census, asylum, or prison registers is most likely because there was no space allocated for it. But that begs another question. Why was there no box for it? Was it because there were so few Black people that it was not considered a category that was needed? Or was it because seeing a person of colour was no longer unusual and it was not thought necessary to record it? Why was the classification of the male prisoners' colour not added to their official records? In a society where the physical features of a person were sometimes thought and represented in art and literature to reflect (even determine) a person's personality, why was race not included in the list of things that were recorded about prisoners? Was the photograph considered enough of an identifier? Although unlikely in the light of debates around the Victorian fascination with theories of race and the practical administration of those ideas in Empire, was it because the colour of a person's skin was not thought to be important from the perspective of "The State"?

In 1868, a report on the experiences of a number of mixed-race girls was read to the Anthropological Society of London by Mr. Groom Napier, the local secretary for Bristol. One of the women he discussed had been educated in England and then became a governess. With a talent for music she was an organist of a parish church. However she had found life difficult for, while looking for work, those "inferior to her in everything but colour have been preferred to her and this in a country where, in the eye of the law, all shades are equally blended."³⁷

In 1894, the Black American journalist Ida B. Wells visited Britain for the second time to gain support for her anti-lynching campaign. She felt she was given a degree of attention by the press that exceeded all her expectations and according to many of the papers that considered Wells' cause, Black Americans were to be treated with the respect that being citizens of a "civilized" country allotted them. Vron Ware has pointed out that Wells' view of racial prejudice in England must be seen in the context of her horrific experiences in the American South, but Ware has also questioned why Wells did not face more opposition than she did, especially when segregation in the South was very similar to social constructions in the Empire.³⁸

One of the reasons is because she stayed with Catherine Impey. Then working as a journalist for the *New York Age*, Wells came to Britain at the invitation of Impey to gain the support of the British public for her anti-lynching campaign which she had undertaken following the murder of the husband of a close friend. Following her arrival in Britain, she stayed in Somerset with

³⁷ *Anthropological Review*, vol. 6 (1868), Appendix.

³⁸ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London, 1992).

Catherine Impey and her sister where her “experience more than ever convinces me” that “... In spite of the fancies of youth, There’s nothing so kingly as kindness, There’s nothing so royal as truth.” Impey was an anti-racist campaigner and the editor of Britain’s first anti-racist magazine, *Anti-Caste*. Impey believed that prejudice was not natural to the human mind, but portrayed it is a disease; remove the cause, and the effects would cease – in other words, to eradicate racial prejudice, one first had to eradicate race.

Catherine Impey, it seems to us now, was a woman ahead of her time. Her journal illustrates that there were debates about the nature and understanding of race as a social construction at the end of the century. But, interestingly, *Anti-Caste* rarely touched on issues of racial prejudice occurring in the UK; its focus was on the subjects of Empire who lived outside Britain, although they were connected – in Impey’s mind at least.

[W]e English are, as it were, but an inner cluster of the big crowd of British subjects, the masses of whom live in lands other than ours, and have been brought under British rule sometimes voluntarily but more often, we fear, by force and fraud, and for ends not purely disinterested. Now they, like us, press around the same British Government with its might and cumbrous machinery of State, looking to it, as we look to it – though almost despairingly at times – for power to carry out necessary reforms, for the redress of public grievances. One is led to wonder how long the slender fabric of the empire shall hold together? Especially does this thought press when the bitter cry of suffering and oppression reaches us from some outer part of the great crowd.³⁹

Perhaps there was a spatial geography at work in the Victorian imagination of race. A geography that saw Black people in Britain as Black but considered them to be different to Black people in Africa, and other parts of the empire. One that meant that they should not be catalogued by the colour of their skin.

The rights that the British press believed Wells and those she represented were entitled to were not called upon to be extended to Black people in Africa. Following the first Pan-African Conference, held in London in July 1900, the Aborigines Protection Society recorded their support for the event, along with,

all supporters of natives’ interests, and there is great promise in this inaugural conference, in which about two dozen men and women of remarkable intelligence and education took part. They are champions of the already civilised Africans chiefly to be found in America and the West Indies, however, rather than the uncivilized and oppressed millions in Africa itself.⁴⁰

So, perhaps Black Britons were thought of in the same light, and were to be

39 *Anti-Caste*, vol. ii, no. 12 (December 1889), p. 2.

40 *Transactions of the Aborigines Protection Society*, 1896–1900, p. 560.

treated equally, as citizens of the civilized country to which they belonged – for belonging made them different, although at an individual level this may have been played out in a more complex reality. Nor does this shed much light on the degree to which “Black people from over there” might be treated while “over here.”

Victorian Britain was a racialized society, and I do not intend to claim that for some – if not many – individuals, facing racial discrimination was not commonplace. However, the absence of “colour” and “ethnicity” from official state records may require us to rethink the racialization and experiences of racism in Victorian society *vis-à-vis* their construction in the Empire. Obviously not all (White) Victorians were racist, but why did some consider race and colour an important part of a person’s identity and others not? Is it possible for these inconsistencies to provide us with tools to enhance our understanding of individuals’ relationship to “race”?

Furthermore, many of those researching Black history do so to enhance our understanding of racism in Victorian society, and consider how it has contributed to racism today, both in the collection and archiving of this history, and the process of its re-telling in the public sphere. It is ironic that those who focus their attentions on the archives left by the Victorians are hampered in their efforts by the very absence of colour – an indication of the ideas of race and racism they are simultaneously trying to expose and discredit. This is a paradox that is difficult for researchers to ignore or work around. For those researching the “Asian” presence, the process I have outlined here is methodologically weak – it is harder to identify “Asian” features in sepia images (which again highlights the problematic nature of the method) – and other ways need to be found in order to permeate the archives, as many of the issues highlighted above will surely apply to members of all communities “of colour.”

For the research on British history more generally, such findings are a strong challenge to the assumption that all those in our historical records without a given ethnicity were White. There is no way to tell how many Black men and women walked the streets of our cities, towns, and villages, and slip past our eyes and through our fingers because we cannot see them in the written records of the archives. Perhaps there will never be a way of knowing how many Black people lived in London or in Britain during the Victorian period. What we can no longer assume is that everyone in the archives who is not allocated another colour is White. The imagined Whiteness of our national archives is one of the most blatant examples of the Whitening of Britishness. It should no longer be accepted in such a simplistic form.

