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COMMENT

Emerging Scholars Researching Black British Histories (mid-Eighteenth to mid-Nineteenth Centuries)

Kristy Warren[1], Annabelle Gilmore[2] and Montaz Marché[2]

[1]Humanities and Heritage, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK and [2]University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
Corresponding author: Kristy Warren; Email: kwarren@lincoln.ac.uk

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a vast expansion of scholarly interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Black British histories, and increasing calls to support the work of early-career scholars (ECRs) in this field. Yet ECRs continue to face several specific challenges in conducting this crucial research. This section consists of a brief introduction and two case studies based on the research and experiences of Ph.D. students Annabelle Gilmore and Montaz Marché. Gilmore aims to amplify the connections between the lives and labour of enslaved people on plantations in Jamaica and the wealth and art collection of William Thomas Beckford, now held at Charlecote Park, from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Marché seeks to trace the presence of Black women in eighteenth-century London, drawing on archival documents that provide traces of who these women may have been, and confronting the limitations of the traditional archive. Together, these pieces offer a glimpse into how these ECRs are positioning themselves within the historiography as well as considering how they hope to contribute to the field.

Keywords: Black History; enslaved people; Caribbean; country houses; historiography; London; methodology; Warwickshire

Introduction

This section seeks to draw out the historiographical resonances between the research of two Ph.D. students, Annabelle Gilmore and Montaz Marché, and the field's broader body of work. It examines how they see their work fitting within the current shape and contributing to the direction of the field going

forward. As a result, it also useful for considering the present and future state of Black British histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The field of Black British history has grown significantly in the past fifteen years, but the work has a much longer history. It has seen the development of research concerning the African presence conducted with little institutional support, both within and outside of the academy. The early 1980s saw contributions in this vein from Paul Edwards, Peter Fryer, Edward Scobie, Folarin Shyllon and James Walvin.[1] In addressing this long-disregarded area of British history, they provided a wide framework for other researchers to build upon. More recently, the field has expanded to include a range of contributions that have stretched the field's methodology, critical lens, and periods and subjects of focus.[2] For the purposes of this section, key interests included research concerning the urban presence of Black people, particularly Black women in Georgian London, as well as studies which show the connections between the development of British wealth and influence, the Black presence in rural Britain and the labour and death of those based throughout the British empire.[3]

The work of Gilmore and Marché responds to and builds on the historiography. They engage with existing scholarship on the Black British past in Britain and the Caribbean and methodological approaches to the archives. Additionally, they are conducting research using a range of sources, some of which have not been analysed previously, while also reapproaching sources that have in the past been used to reinforce a national narrative that does not include the presence of those of African descent. In this work they see themselves contributing to the field by helping to shape the direction that study will take in the future with particular reference to their periods and geographies of focus. Thus, their engagement with the existing work is shaped by their research interests and education to date.

[1] Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain* (Chicago, 1972); James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society 1555–1945* (1973); Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britain 1555–1833* (Oxford, 1977); Paul Edwards and James Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (1983); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984).

[2] For recent outlines of the development of Black British histories over time as well as some of the key debates in the field see Hakim Adi, *The History of the African and Caribbean Communities in Britain* (2020); Hakim Adi (ed.), *Black British History: New Perspectives* (2019); Caroline Brassey, Meleisa Ono-George, Diana Paton, Kennetta Hammond Perry and Sadiah Qureshi, 'Introduction: Reflections on Black British Histories in History Workshop Journal', *History Workshop Journal* (2021). Virtual Special Issue: Black British Histories; and Gretchen H. Gerzina (ed.), *Britain's Black Past* (Liverpool, 2020). For research concerning approaches to the archives see Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 12 (2008), 1–14; Jeannette A. Bastian, John A. Aarons and Stanley H. Griffin (eds.), *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: An Archives Reader* (Sacramento, CA, 2018); and Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, PA, 2016).

[3] For example, see Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds.), *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon 2013); Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2014); Sheryllynne Haggerty and Susanne Seymour, 'Imperial Careering and Enslavement in the Long Eighteenth Century: The Bentinck Family, 1710–1830s', *Slavery and Abolition*, 39 (2018), 642–62; and Sally-Anne Huxtable, Corinne Fowler, Christo Kefalas and Emma Slocombe, *Colonialism and Historic Slavery Report* (Swindon, 2020).

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Gilmore and Marché's research spans from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Geographically, their work encompasses urban and rural spaces located in the British Isles and Jamaica. The focus is on the connections between spaces and unearthing little-studied narratives in the archives. Both draw on primary sources traditionally used to tell stories that centred on the experiences and accomplishments of wealthy white men. In some cases, the records completely ignore the presence and labour of Black people; in other cases, traces of Black people are evident but have often been either ignored by previous researchers or approached primarily through a wide lens. There are a number of reasons for this, including the nature of the archives and the way the field of history has been impacted by, for instance, a broadening of who is entering the archives, the ability to use databases and other digital tools to ask new questions. Their research, along with that of a range of other scholars, focused on this area of study and asks us to consider how British attitudes regarding race and gender impacted the experiences of specific individuals and small groups of Black people; this led to the erasure of their contributions to the much-celebrated wealth gained from the British empire.

Drawing on records located both in the United Kingdom and in Jamaica, Gilmore explores the connections between material culture in England and the lives of those whose labour fuelled the wealth that underpinned the purchases of objects and country houses. In her research, she centres the enslaved labourers who fuelled the wealth that enabled absentee enslaver William Thomas Beckford (1760–1844) to amass a collection of art objects. These objects are held at Charlecote Park, a National Trust property in Warwickshire. Additionally, she considers the presence of Africans within this English West Midlands county. Gilmore aims to show the links between two localities on either side of the Atlantic by exploring their connections to the global trade in trafficked Africans and the collection of objects made possible by the wealth created by enslavement. In order to do this, she engages with existing work on public histories concerning enslavement, the Black presence in Britain and the wealth of enslavers in museum exhibitions and other heritage sites to consider how the narrative is being altered through the intervention of researchers (both in and outside of the academy), curators and a 'curious' public. Gilmore is also learning about the nature of heritage sites through work placement and training that are not traditionally offered within a Ph.D. programme but have been made possible due to the collaborative nature of her project.

Meanwhile, Marché has compiled a database of 500 Black women who lived in London during the mid to late eighteenth century. Using a range of archival material, she aims to unearth the lived experience of such women during this period. This centring of individual everyday Black people in Georgian London has been limited. As Marché shows in her work, most existing research into questions of the impact of race, gender, age and class on everyday lives focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Meanwhile, those histories concerned with the eighteenth century tend to focus on prominent figures within the Abolition movement. By focusing on working-class women in the eighteenth century, Marché is faced with several issues implicit in the records, such as the question of how to approach records such as run-away servant

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advertisements, which describe individuals with the aim of identifying them to recapture them. She thus examines the extent to which these descriptions align with how the women saw themselves and how they were seen by neighbours, family, friends and society more generally. Marché also explores the question of how these women may have masked their identity while on the run to avoid capture. Additionally, she considers what information is missing that would help historians better understand their lived experiences. Ultimately, Marché is asking us to not avoid difficult engagements with the archives and to understand how asking new questions is part of the role of the historian.

This brief intervention will give insight into how new research that includes the eighteenth century can help expand the field of Black British histories and how doing so can help us further interrogate the place of historical research in better understanding the nature of Blackness and Britishness then and now. It will also provide insight into how we can consider Black British histories moving forward. As those of us in this field grapple with these questions in our research and lived experience in the academy, we aim to help build a more equitable future for Black British histories. This is not something researchers can do alone. Reports, such as those conducted by the Royal Historical Society, offer key insights concerning the limitations experienced by those conducting this kind of research – especially those of African descent.[4] The push for more equitable forms of research within the academy is recognised; however, support for Black researchers and further consideration of methods that centre marginalised groups are needed to ensure nuanced, complex and equitable histories.

The enslaved labour behind art objects at Charlecote Park

Annabelle Gilmore

My doctoral project is in collaboration with Charlecote Park in Warwickshire, a National Trust property. It looks at how the narratives of imperialism and slavery are held within the specific art objects displayed at Charlecote that once belonged to William Thomas Beckford (1760–1844), an absentee enslaver whose plantations were in Jamaica. As an absentee enslaver, Beckford did not live in the same country as the plantations where his money was made; instead, he remained in England with some time spent living in Europe. While at first this project would appear to focus on the material aspect of the finely crafted art objects, many of which were made in Asia, and on the lives of the white people who owned the objects, firstly Beckford and then George Hammond Lucy (1789–1845) and his wife Mary Elizabeth Lucy

[4] Hannah Atkinson, Suzanne Bardgett, Adam Budd, Margot Finn, Christopher Kissane, Sadiah Qureshi, Jonathan Saha, John Siblon and Sujit Sivasundaram, *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change* (2018).

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(1803–89), this is not the entirety of the work. Beckford made his wealth from the labour of enslaved Black people in Jamaica. It is their labour that is ultimately represented in the objects now displayed at Charlecote. I seek to bring into the light the unknown Black enslaved people whose efforts provided the fortune that led to the purchase of these art objects now displayed at Charlecote. Furthermore, the project is also linked to the presence of a small number of Black people in the county of Warwickshire and the absentee enslavers in the county. This highlights the connection between the local and the global, that there was no capacity for ignorance among the local Warwickshire population in regard to Blackness in Britain.

It has been very interesting working with a National Trust property that has indirect links to slavery and imperialism. The Trust's 2020 Interim Report highlights that twenty-nine properties 'have links to successful compensation claims for slave-ownership and somewhere in the region of one-third are directly connected to colonial histories'.[5] Sally-Anne Huxtable, Head Curator of the Trust, writes of the twentieth-century view of country houses as the epitome of 'Englishness' and most recently the '*Downton Abbey* effect' which has shifted the focus from the things in the houses, to the events and personal histories of the people who lived in them. She remarks that 'Neither of these views of the country house considers it as a dynamic site, in which global and national histories played out in a local setting.'[6] Huxtable continues that they also omit the origins of wealth that funded the spaces and collection as well as the general transnational influences of collections and properties.

In the section dedicated to research, Sophie Chessum, Senior Curator for London and the South East Region, notes that the interpretation at the houses has followed the histories of the families, based on the social standing of elite families and significant events.[7] Conversely, the histories of slavery and imperialism embedded in these country houses were minimised and erased because of the negative associations such histories may cause. As a result, the many global lives that led to the luxuries present in these homes were also ignored. Chessum also suggests that the new millennium brought a shift in how heritage is viewed due to increased academic interest, archive digitisation and visitor curiosity. She states that this change is 'vital to a better understanding of the properties and places in the care of the National Trust'.[8]

Through my collaboration with the Trust, I am working with the property team at Charlecote to investigate these hidden histories. My research looks beyond the borders of Charlecote Park to analyse how the narratives of slavery attached to the art objects from Fonthill Abbey were quieted over time and overpowered by presentations of taste and wealth. The team at Charlecote have provided me with access to items and knowledge that would not have readily been available to me. I have attended workshops only available to

[5] Sally-Anne Huxtable *et al.*, *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (Swindon, 2020), 5.

[6] Huxtable *et al.*, *Colonialism and Historic Slavery Report*, 7.

[7] *Ibid.*, 59.

[8] *Ibid.*

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National Trust staff and volunteers and I have had opportunities to discuss my work with professionals in connection to the Trust. I will soon be working on a placement to gain a better understanding of how such heritage sites work and begin to insert my own research into their knowledge database to help develop new interpretations for the house.

As such, my project, spanning from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, infers that Black British history should also include the Black population that was resident in the anglophone Caribbean under British rule. While this is not a new idea (Paul Gilroy wrote an article thinking about nationalism and Black British history which discusses Caribbean inclusion in 1990), it can often be overlooked in favour for what is more readily defined as Black British history.[9] Hakim Adi notes that 'the history of Africans in Britain cannot be correctly understood without viewing it in the context of Britain's relationship with Europe, Africa and the Americas, especially the exploitive and colonial relationship that began in the sixteenth century'.[10] Christienna Fryar's forthcoming book *Entangled Lands: A Caribbean History of Britain* aims to explore further the relationship between the Caribbean and Britain. Similarly, Imaobong Umoren's forthcoming project *Empire Without End: A New History of Britain and the Caribbean* looks to analyse the impact of 400 years British Caribbean history on today's systemic racism. Furthermore, the IHR's seminar series 'Black British History: Geographies, Concepts, Debates' has acted as a space to discuss new scholarship and evolving perceptions of Black British histories. These works highlight the growing scholarship surrounding the idea of expanding what is Black British history.

In crossing the Atlantic to analyse such histories of the enslaved people working the plantations, my own research brings together the perceived separate spheres of activities of Black enslaved workers in the Caribbean and the collection and display of art in country houses. The plantations under Beckford's ownership were spread across the island of Jamaica; they varied in size but reached 600 acres. So far, I have been able to find the names of over 2,000 people enslaved on Beckford's many plantations. For one of the plantations, Esher, I have been able to identify people from two different lists approximately eight years apart.[11] This has allowed me to develop a continuity for some of these people. This includes Black Bess, a midwife in 1781; she was aged fifty-five and noted as infirm. In 1789 she is named as Old Bess and is no longer a midwife; instead, she has been superannuated, meaning that she is perceived to longer be of use. While the demarcation of useless is a particularly dehumanising act, Bess's skills can still be inferred within the document. By 1789 there is another midwife, Diana. Although it is unclear whether this Diana is Old Diana or Young Diana from the 1781 list, both are listed as working in the field. Diana would have probably learned her skills

[9] Paul Gilroy, 'Nationalism, History and Ethnic Absolutism', *History Workshop*, 30 (1990) http://www.jstor.com/stable/4289014; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

[10] Hakim Adi (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Black British History: New Perspectives* (2019), 10.

[11] National Archive c 107/143; Hull History Centre CDD1/2/7.

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from Bess. Understanding Diana's journey to becoming a midwife is just one example of how the objects at Charlecote Park contain a much richer history. These histories should be included in the displays at Charlecote to connect to a global history through a personal narrative. Undertaking this fine-tuned analysis of the enslaved people creates a strong foundation for destabilising the thought that country houses are spaces exclusively for whiteness.

My research serves as a continuation of the analysis started by institutions such as the National Trust and English Heritage, particularly Corinne Fowler's work on the 'Colonial Countryside' project, and builds on work by scholars like Stephanie Barczewski and Catherine Hall, who argue that imperialism and slavery are woven into the foundations of so many country house estates.[12] In analysing Charlecote Park as a case study for the influence of slavery within country house displays, my research highlights how the history of enslaved people in the Caribbean impacts British history, thus emphasising how Black Caribbean history is, at the same time, Black British history. To use Stuart Hall's work, identity has often been a construction of splitting between what is and what is not Other. Hall describes the Other as histories we have depended upon, but which have not been spoken. In this instance, the identity constructed by country house elites relies on the silent histories of the Caribbean. To view these as two separate histories that do not speak to each other is absurd. As Hall remarks, Black people have been in Britain for centuries; their presence has been there for centuries. He states, 'I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.'[13]

It is a significant issue for many historians studying Black British history prior to the twentieth century, but particularly for those researching the eighteenth century and before, that so often the resources concerning enslaved people which can be found in the archives provide only quantitative information. This includes simply names, ages, sometimes whether they were African or Creole, and occasionally their role on the plantation. Further complicating research is the difficulty in navigating the archives themselves. The major Black British history archives, such as the Black Cultural Archives in London and the Nottingham Black Archive, are heavily focused on the twentieth century. For historians researching earlier periods, it is often necessary to travel great distances to consult and collate dispersed material. Another issue I have faced with archival research concerns the databases themselves. While I applaud every effort of the hard-working archival staff, at times the databases can be very unclear about what the archive actually holds, and some of my discoveries in archives have been found through secondary reading or stumbling across them. Moreover, I was very unlucky during my research trip, because the trove of information held at the Jamaica Archives and Records Department in Jamaica eluded me due to a weather event, closing the archive

[12] Sally-Anne Huxtable *et al.* (2020); Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon, 2013); Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930* (Manchester, 2014); Catherine Hall *et al.*, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2014)

[13] Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary conditions for the representation of identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Basingstoke, 1991), 47–8.

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to the public. This experience highlighted the troubles faced when working with a globalised history and the wider accessibility disadvantages faced by others in my situation or even for those who cannot readily travel outside their home country. However, by using what is available to me within this scope, a skeleton framework can be developed for a deeper understanding of the Black lives that, in the case of my work, led to my studying the profiteering and financial wealth of William Beckford. It also starkly contrasts with the wealth of archival evidence that exists for Beckford and the Lucy family at Charlecote. Yet, as historians such as Marisa Fuentes and Simon Newman have shown, from such quantitative data, rich narratives can be inferred from a wider understanding of the world.[14] Thus, the aim for my work is to topple Beckford as the pinnacle of the narrative for the art objects displayed at Charlecote. This would give a distinctively nuanced perspective that accurately connects Black enslaved labour in Jamaica to the artistic display at Charlecote that has otherwise only had a brief mention of Beckford as an enslaver. His presence is necessary to the telling and recognising that his part is significant for the narrative in connecting to the Black enslaved people. The aim is to decentralise William Beckford as art connoisseur of the collection. Instead, shifting the focus to the enslaved people pays tribute to an otherwise forgotten people whose forced labour provided the means for Beckford to purchase the art objects.

Local History

One of the elements that has shaped my work is the drive to look outside London for Black British history and its influence in the long eighteenth century. There has been work of such kind for places like Liverpool, Bristol and Lancaster, which as port cities have strong ties to slavery.[15] While working on aspects of country house history, I became more aware of the interconnected relationship between provincial great houses and the presence of Black people away from coastal areas and London. This has therefore led to the exploration of more provincial and countryside presence of Black British history, particularly in Warwickshire. This presents challenges as archival information is severely limited in comparison to port cities, particularly in comparison to London. My research so far has drawn on some of the elements found in Imtiaz Habib's *Black Lives in the English Archives*, in which a chapter is dedicated to the English provinces.[16] While this work is dedicated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – before the transatlantic slave trade was

[14] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Simon P. Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (2022).

[15] Ray Costello, *Black Liverpool: The Early History of Britain's Oldest Black Community 1730–1918* (Liverpool, 2001); Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (2016); Alan Rice, 'Ghostly Presences, Servants and Runaways: Lancaster's Emerging Black Histories and their Memorialization 1687–1865', in *Britain's Black Past*, ed. Gretchen H. Gerzina (Liverpool, 2020), 179–96.

[16] Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (2020).

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fully underway – it nevertheless is a useful tool in understanding the practical aspect of researching Black history in the British countryside.

However, the very existence of the few Black people living in the British countryside is enough to interrogate the information surrounding their lives, because their experience would differ greatly from those living in places with larger Black communities. This experience is worth exploring within the wider social history framework of countryside living. The evidence so far has placed the Black individuals found in Warwickshire either in country estates of the landed gentry, or within very close proximity to them. Through exploring how they would have experienced life amidst all the systemic societal prejudices of the eighteenth century provides a more detailed look at the wider Black British experience at the time.

This rural approach also strongly connects to the Caribbean, as part of my wider inclusive approach to Black British history. Not only were the Black individuals in the countryside living in country houses, but many members of the white gentry class were also absentee enslavers, connecting rural Britain to Caribbean life for financial gain through forced labour by Black bodies. This is seen with figures like Myrtilla, who was brought to Warwickshire from the Caribbean island of Nevis in the very early eighteenth century, possibly to work as a maid where she could be used, conspicuously objectified, as a show of wealth for the country house owners.[17]

Unfortunately, this method does bring its own challenges to researching Black British history. I recognise that the indirect approach does necessitate studying the white people who either enslaved, or held in service, the few Black individuals resident in Britain's countryside. It also leans on understanding the absentee enslaver in their country seat instead of focusing entirely on the enslaved people on the overseas plantations. However, this is all a necessary context to give voice to a population that would otherwise be dismissed as quantitative information in ledgers, or names in parochial records. While my research builds on the established foundation of whiteness, it is part of an effort to instil a richer and more thorough narrative for Warwickshire's Black British history. Following this approach, my research also emphasises the complexity of country houses as spaces that exist beyond their physical confines, because the contents and sometimes even the house itself embody the narratives of Black British history.

My plans for future projects include further exploration of Warwickshire's Black British history, inclusive of the Caribbean. This would build on my current research and understanding of the individuals who have been identified in the archival records of the Warwickshire County Record Office, and to build upon the names of individuals found, perhaps following the same methodological framework as Fuentes and Newman. This would involve looking into the gentry family of the area, such as the Earls of Warwick at Warwick Castle, who had connections to plantations in Tobago, and investigating Vice-Admiral Lord Hugh Seymour of Ragley Hall, who spent much of his

[17] Warwickshire County Records Office DR0024, 'Parish Records of St Lawrence, Oxhill' and Myrtilla's grave in St Lawrence churchyard.

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naval career in the Caribbean and is noted as enslaving John Sutcliffe Fletcher, a man from Antigua.[18] This would be part of an effort to highlight the hidden connections between Warwickshire, the Caribbean and the Black people living there in the long eighteenth century. The objective for this would be to provide a nuanced approach to how places like Charlecote Park, Ragley Hall and Warwick Castle are viewed by the public today. It would not be a celebration of the diverse history of Warwickshire, due to the nature of the Black presence within its borders, but instead an opportunity to recognise and perhaps memorialise the Black British history of these places. Such a project would most likely require a collaborative effort with local authorities and heritage institutions to achieve this.

Ideas for the project were inspired by public exhibitions like the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery exhibition 'Birmingham: Its People, Its History', which opened in October 2012, and which represented all aspects of life in Birmingham and its involvement with slavery and abolition of that institution. While Birmingham is now a major city with a significant Black population, the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery shows the historic impact of slavery in a place outside London and the major cities often associated with slavery. Katie Donington, who was then part of the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership project team, visited the exhibition in its first few weeks; she highlighted that the aim of the exhibition was to reflect 'how the people of Birmingham and its industries have shaped not only the city but the world as we know it today'.[19] Donington's main interest was how the museum represented Birmingham's involvement in slavery, noting that Historians Advisory Group member Catherine Hall argued for material on slavery to be included. Donington wondered whether 'a display which is still in many ways rooted in a narrative of civic pride [should] allow itself to confront this uncomfortable history?'[20] Donington remarked that the gallery rightfully acknowledged Birmingham's role in slavery as well as in abolition; a key point was the explicit title of 'Birmingham and the Slave Trade'. The guns and metalwork, produced by Birmingham's famed industry, were displayed as objects of trade that 'stand in for the transatlantic human relationships which facilitated Britain's imperial and commercial ambitions'.[21] The presentation of this history to the public, within the central location of Birmingham city centre, allowed for a more direct method of transmitting academic histories to a wider and curious audience.

[18] Vere Langford Oliver, *Caribbeana*, 1 (1910), 24; Barbara Willis-Brown and David Callaghan (eds.), *History Detectives: Black People in the West Midlands 1650–1918* (Birmingham, 2010), 4.

[19] Kate Donington, '"Birmingham: its People, its History": Representing Slavery in a Civic Museum – Part 1', *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery*, 22 (2013). Donington is quoting from a now inaccessible article.
https://lbsatucl.wordpress.com/2013/11/22/birmingham-its-people-its-history-representing-slavery-in-a-civic-museum-part-i/.

[20] Donington, 'Birmingham: its People, its History'.

[21] Kate Donington, '"Birmingham: its People, its History": Representing Slavery in a Civic Museum – Part 2', *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery*, 6 Dec. 2013
https://lbsatucl.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/birmingham-its-people-its-history-representing-slavery-in-a-civic-museum-part-ii/.

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Stuart Burch, at the time a lecturer in museum studies, commented that the exhibition showed a 'far from neutral treatment of history', in regard to the presentation of multicultural history.[22] However, Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott, members of Museum Detox, a network of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic museum workers in the UK, declared the concept of 'neutral history', particularly when pertaining to histories of enslavement and the eradication of cultures, as an enactment of macro and micro aggressions. Such aggressions come in the form of 'the constant demand made to People of Colour to be grateful for the things that their white counterparts are allowed to complain about'.[23] Wajid and Minott developed the temporary exhibition 'The Past is Now: Birmingham and the British Empire', which opened in 2018 at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. This exhibition was co-curated with six external activists, alongside Wajid and Minott as 'insider activists' to enact decolonial practices within a museum space. Minott expressed how decolonial work 'fundamentally challenges white supremacy and the centralising of Eurocentric views on morality, civilisation and knowledge' and referred to enacting political positioning within the museum space, which has often not been seen as the place for museum curators.[24] The decolonial approach to museum curation by Wajid, Minott and the outside activist-curators highlights the changes that have occurred since the opening of 'Its People, Its History' as well as the different approaches and methods that could be adopted when developing exhibitions around Coventry and Warwickshire's Black British history.

Looking outside the British framework, the government of Barbados, a new republic, announced the development of the Barbados Heritage District; the site is 'dedicated to accurately recounting the historic and contemporary impact of slavery on Barbados'.[25] This direct action in dedicating a public institution to researching and displaying the difficult histories of slavery is an important element of what I wish to achieve in my future work: representing the harsh realities of Warwickshire's Black history in a thoughtful and balanced manner, including connecting the people on Beckford's plantations in Jamaica to the Warwickshire countryside. While I do not yet consider myself an active decolonial historian, I hope to learn from the growing methodology and work to transform historical pedagogies in my future projects.[26] In

[22] Stuart Burch, 'Birmingham: Its People, its History, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery', *Museum Association*, 4 Jan. 2013, https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/reviews/2013/01/02012013-birmingham-museum-art-gallery/

[23] Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott, 'Detoxing and Decolonising Museums', in *Museum Activism*, ed. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (2019), 25; see also La Tanya S Autry, 'Changing the Things I Cannot Accept: Museums Are Not Neutral', Artstuffmatters blog, 15 Oct. 2017, https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/changing-the-things-i-cannot-accept-museums-are-not-neutral/.

[24] Rachael Minott, 'The Past is Now: Confronting Museums' Complicity in the Imperial Celebration', *Third Text*, 33 (2019), 567.

[25] Barbados Government Information Services, 'Prime Minister Announces Creation of Barbados Heritage District', 3 Dec. 2021, https://gisbarbados.gov.bb/blog/prime-minister-announces-creation-of-barbados-heritage-district/.

[26] See also, Amanda Behm, Christienna Fryar, Emma Hunter, Elisabeth Leake, Su Lin Lewis and Sarah Miller-Davenport, 'Decolonising History: Enquiry and Practice', *History Workshop Journal*, 89 (2020), 169–91.

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following this movement of decolonising histories and spaces where histories are told, and taking inspiration from places like Barbados, I aim for my method of exhibition to take on ideas from outside the academic institution and present the histories from the perspective of those who have been marginalised.

I also wish to consider further how William Thomas Beckford is remembered in connection to his overseas plantations and the people he enslaved. The work on my thesis so far has highlighted that Beckford's connection to slavery is often dismissed in favour of his art collecting. Alongside the work with the National Trust at Charlecote, I would like to work on how the art objects associated with Beckford can be seen from the perspective of a Black audience when considered as part of the legacy of slavery. I would like to work on answering questions of how to develop interpretations of the art objects that would appeal to a Black audience without evoking a traumatic history, while fully acknowledging such realities.

A case of Two Sylvias: contemplating gender and historical practice

Montaz Marché

In my research, I ask: 'what was it like to be a Black woman walking the streets of London in the eighteenth century?'[27] To examine this question, I first excavate and identify the presence of individual Black women in London within a range of historical material across several archives, including parish records, newspaper records, criminal records, family papers, hospital records, wills and more. I collate these recorded instances into a database of over 500 Black women in London between 1700 and 1800. I break down the brief, sporadic recorded instances of Black women often written by third-person commentators according to themes/categories: for example, name, age, physical description, origins and location. I use the database to comprehend patterns and answer quantitative and qualitative questions about the population of Black women.

Next, it was essential to evaluate, as much as possible, the contexts of each woman's life, for example, where they lived and the spaces and individuals with which they would have interacted. I argue that understanding these contexts will aid in extracting Black women's experiences in London, particularly when cross-referenced with other contemporary Black women of similar location and social standing. I also examine how Black women moved within London communities and how navigations, interactions and relationships impacted their lives. This examination of contexts constructs a composite image of Black women's lives in London while beginning to identify how London's micro-spaces engage daily with ideas of race, identity and empire.

[27] This reflection stems from my Ph.D. research

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My research considered the possibility of examining the life histories of Black women through archival recovery. As Ibrahim argues, gender histories 'exclude variant considerations of gendered experience by not considering age'.[28] Within my research, I seek to shift historical perceptions of Black women from 'timeless' one-dimensional concepts to 'economic thinkers' and rational, evolving women positioned within geographies, infusing our thinking of the microhistories of London's spaces with themes of race, gender and class.[29] For some women in my research, it was possible to see archival traces of their lives across time. Yet, for many, it was not. Below, I present the cases of two Black women, Sylvia and Silvia, who challenged me to think creatively about examining women's lives to expand traditional social history methodologies. I consider if and how I could utilise historical imagination to examine the life histories of the women I could not directly trace through the archives.

On 11 November 1763, Sylvia, a 'Negro Woman' 'of the Island of Jamaica' ran away from her master, Samuel Gregory, a silk weaver from a notable family in Bishopsgate.[30] The advertisement format implies Sylvia's position in service. Despite the economic language of 'property' used in the advertisement, it is difficult to confirm if Sylvia was an enslaved woman. However, the record does state that Sylvia was of 'middle stature', 'about 25 years old' and spoke 'tolerable good English'. She also ran with her possessions, some clothing and linen. Although the details are few, the source places Sylvia, as a runaway servant to a silk weaver, in the Bishopsgate area on and before 11 November. Additionally, the advertisement was published on 23 November. Therefore, Sylvia had been missing for twelve days, meaning she probably fled through Bishopsgate, and engaged with its people and trade while escaping.

Silvia Woodcock, the wife of William Woodcock, was a 'mulatto' woman who had previously been a servant to Mr Lane but married out of his house and wed her husband in Cheshunt in January 1779.[31] The couple lived in Enfield for five years and were separated for two years when William left for London to be a servant. In October 1788, William lured Silvia to London to 'find her new lodgings in Holborn'. Arriving in Chelsea in the early morning of 27 October, William attacked Silvia with a wooden stick and delivered blows to the head 'of the length of three-quarters of an inch and the depth

[28] Habiba Ibrahim, *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life* (New York, 2021), 203.

[29] Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC, 2021), 3.

[30] *Public Advertiser*, 23 Nov. 1763.

[31] Other historians briefly reference Silvia Woodcock and the attack. Kathleen Chater references Silvia as a Black woman, recalling the events of the murder and trial in her research on Black lives in Old Bailey records. Additionally, Lyndon J Dominque references Silvia, as a representation of Black women in eighteenth-century Britain, in his introduction to *A Woman of Colour: A Tale*, 'Silvia Woodcock, whose murder led to the execution of her husband William in 1789'. See Kathleen Chater, *Untold Stories: Black People in England and Wales during the period of the British Slave Trade 1660–1807* (Manchester, 2011), 123. Lyndon Dominque (ed.), *The Woman of Colour: A Tale* (Plymouth, 2008 [1808]), 17.

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of three-quarters of an inch'.[32] Silvia was found in the street and taken to St Luke's Chelsea workhouse.[33] A surgeon attended to her, but she died of her wounds on 31 October. Before her death, Silvia testified of her husband's attack. Prosecutors used this witness statement to convict her husband, who was executed for his crime in January 1789.[34]

When investigating the contexts of Sylvia/Silvia's lives, circumstantial evidence arose that posited exciting links between the two women. Firstly, there is a commonality in personal details. Superficially, their names are the same, despite the variations.[35] They would have been the same age. In 1763, Sylvia was about twenty-five years old and in 1788, Silvia was about fifty. As there were twenty-five years between the two records, the two women were probably of similar or the same age. Sylvia and Silvia were also highlighted as migrant women, although from different places. Sylvia's runaway advertisement stated that she was 'from the island of Jamaica'. A newspaper record highlighted that Silvia had served a family in the East Indies for ten years.[36]

Additionally, Silvia's master Mr Lane is a linchpin in confirming Silvia's story and connecting Silvia to London. Silvia Woodcock maintained a relationship with her ex-employer, Mr Lane; she would visit him in Hampton Court after he moved there.[37] Hampton Court tax records identify the only 'Mr Lane' in the area after Silvia's marriage as Mr John Lane, a tenant of Mrs Coggs House in Hampton Court.[38] He recently moved to the area in 1788, corroborating Susanna Brace's testimony that Silvia's last master had recently moved to Hampton Court. This Mr John Lane was made the secretary to the Commissioner of Public Accounts in August 1788.[39] Before this, he was a

[32] Trial of William Woodcock, Jan. 1789, Old Bailey Proceedings Online, reference: t17890114-1. Accessed 6 Mar 2022. https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t17890114-1-defend45&div=t17890114-1#highlight.

[33] St Luke's Workhouse Registers: Workhouse Admissions and Discharges Registers 28 –31 Oct. 1788, *London Lives 1690–1800: Crime, Poverty and Social Policy,* Reference No. sldswhr_30_3003 (accessed 6 March 2022). https://www.londonlives.org/browse.jsp?id=persNamesldswhr_30_3003&div=sldswhr_30_3003#highlight.

[34] 'Information of Sylvia Woodcock taken before one Edw. Read Esqr...' Old Bailey Sessions: Sessions Papers - Justices' Working Documents, *London Lives* ..., reference no. LMOBPS450340479 (accessed 6 March 2022). https://www.londonlives.org/browse.jsp?id=LMOBPS45034_n2037-1&div=LMOBPS45034PS450340479#highlight; a copy of this statement is transcribed in William Woodcock's trial transcript.

[35] Silvia Woodcock is also called Sylvia in the original witness statement scribed by Edward Read, a magistrate. Silvia signed the statement with an X. Old Bailey Sessions Papers – Justices' Working Documents, 1788, *London Lives,* reference no. LMOBPS450340479 (accessed 18 May 2019). https://www.londonlives.org/browse.jsp?id=LMOBPS45034_n2037-1&div=LMOBPS45034PS450340479#highlight.

[36] 'News', *World,* 6 Nov. 1788.

[37] According to Brace's testimony, Silvia's husband used her visits to her old master to explain her absence when returning to Enfield the day after the attack. The implication is that her visits were known to friends and William.

[38] Enfield Land Tax Records, 1767–75, *London Metropolitan Archives*, reference no: CLC/525/MS05285.

[39] *London Gazette*, 5 Aug. 1788.

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solicitor in Middlesex and became a commissioning magistrate for the Middlesex Sessions House. We can plausibly connect Mr John Lane as Silvia's master as he had a home in Ponders End, Enfield, in the 1760s and then in Cheshunt, Hertford, in the 1770s. This record corroborates the details stated in the Old Bailey trial.

Interestingly, John Lane also rented a home in Bloomsbury and worked in Hick's Hall in Clerkenwell at the Middlesex Quarter Sessions until 1780. Clerkenwell is just over a mile from Samuel Gregory's household in Bishopsgate. Therefore, Sylvia could have obtained work with Mr Lane. Firstly, we do not know when Silvia's service with Mr Lane began, but it was enough time to build a meaningful relationship. Secondly, evidence of runaway Black women servants in my database proves that Black women could run away from their posts and remain concealed within London. For example, in 1748, Christmas Bennett absented her master's house in Queens Square, Holborn and was 'suppos'd to be conceal'd somewhere about Whitechapel'.[40] Similarly, Jane Mower, who ran away from her master in Lincoln's Inn Field, was found in an inn in St Giles in the Field with her lover, John Kelly.[41] This concealment in urban spaces was possible because of London's local communities' socio-political and cultural fragmentation.[42] Thus, London's fluctuating local spaces concealed Black women's flights rather than distance. Sylvia could have run from Bishopsgate to Clerkenwell or Bloomsbury and found new employment. Finally, in the same tax record that records Sylvia's master, Samuel Gregory's residence at Cherubim Court in 1763 (Sylvia's likely residence), there are records of a William Woodcock paying rent to a property on Bottle Alley, a few streets over, since 1761.[43]

From this evidence, it was tempting to make a case that these two women could be the same woman and that I could construct the narrative of a labouring Black woman in 'service' over twenty-five years. However, this evidence is circumstantial. Silvia/Sylvia were migrants from different places. I contest that the William Woodcock I found was the right one, as newspaper reports indicated that William Woodcock was about '24 years of age' when the arrest warrant was issued after the attack.[44] The issues with constructing this narrative or uncovering details on Sylvia's life highlight the challenges of recovering the histories of ordinary working people, women and minority communities in the

[40] *Daily Advertiser*, 29 Feb. 1748, *Runaway Slaves in Britain Database,* reference no: r0565, Accessed 7 Jun. 2021. https://www.runaways.gla.ac.uk/database/display/?rid=565.

[41] Advertisements and Notices, *London Gazette*, 11–15 Oct. 1715. Jane Mower and Thomas Kelly were later indicted for theft at a trial in the Old Bailey, where Jane was found guilty. However, being with child, her sentence was respited. Old Bailey Proceedings: Accounts of Criminal Trials, 7 Dec. 1715, reference no. t17151207-40 (accessed 24 October 2021). https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t17151207-40-defend205&div=t17151207-40#highlight.

[42] Peter Clark, 'The Multi Centred Metropolis: The Social and Cultural Landscapes of London: 1600- 1840', in *Two Capitals: London and Dublin 1500–1840*, ed. Peter Clark and Raymond Gillespie (Oxford, 2001), 239.

[43] Bishopsgate Tax Records, 1763, London Land Tax Records, *London Metropolitan Archives*, reference no: CLC/525/MS11316/312.

[44] Advertisements and Notices, *World*, 6 Nov. 1788.

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archives. Nevertheless, this circumstantial link between Sylvia and Silvia was the closest I had come to uncovering such a detailed and lengthy lifespan of a labouring Black woman. Therefore, I wondered if there was a way to combine the evidence of the two Sylvias and think about/examine Black life histories and experiences. As Lewis Gaddis writes, in the absence of conductible experiments, 'historians must use logic and imagination' to overcome difficulties of historical recovery, conducting 'their own equivalent of thought experiments'.[45] I employ historical imagination to breach the lines of theory and evidence.

Following the lead of Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation, which combines historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative, in this case of two Sylvias, I engage historical imagination to their lives as one labouring Black woman in service.[46] My research thus far presented me with two women of similar backgrounds (as migrants), working backgrounds (as once in service) and statuses (labouring people) in London, whose paths overlap by way of circumstantial evidence. I use Sylvia/Silvia's similar contexts and circumstantial evidence to imagine the bridge between the two women's lives. I merge their similar contexts and repurpose the circumstantial links to imagine the two Sylvias' lives as one and create a representative lifespan of a labouring Black woman. Speculation is inevitable, with many questions about Black women's lives. In this format, I forefront a more precise speculation based upon evidence of lived experiences.

As the earliest, Sylvia could represent the present, highlighting a recent experience in service. Contextualising Sylvia's experience using historical inference illuminates important themes, for example, the experience of working under a silk weaver within a middle-class household, her daily functions within that role or the possibility of her enslavement when comparing her life with similar runaway cases and the paradigms of service in the industrial East End of London. Through Silvia, on the other hand, I observe Black women's marriages from service, their marriage experiences, marital breakdown and the integration of migrant women into various London communities as a bare minimum. However, as Sylvia's prospective future, Silvia raises important questions. For example, little is known about Silvia's history. Her marriage record does not list her parish, unlike her husband. Furthermore, when asked if she knew what country Silvia came from in the trial, Brace, Silvia's friend of seven years, said, 'I cannot rightly say the part she came from'.[47] Only after Silvia's death do details emerge of her history from the East Indies and in newspaper reports specifically (although I have found no details to corroborate this). From this, one can speculate a conscious or unconscious silence around Silvia's history within the local space. How intentional was this silence if one were to consider Silvia's past as a runaway? Using this exercise, I can explore likely future prospects, the motivations and results of a subject's actions using imagination and the evidence of two women's lives as a representation of past, present or future.

[45] John Lewis Gaddis quoted in David J Staley, *Historical Imagination* (2021), 5.
[46] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe,* 12 (2008), 1-14.
[47] Trial of William Woodcock, *Old Bailey Proceedings*.

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I do not present this exercise as the history of an individual, nor do I state that this is Silvia's or Sylvia's history. This exercise combines two individual histories and utilises them as an analytical tool to conceive ideas of experiences over time. Still, there are drawbacks to this exercise, the most significant being its position as a mental exercise rather than an excavation of actual historical narratives. However, this exercise has been helpful for me, adjacent to the historical narratives I have uncovered, to consider Black women's lives beyond a single event, to imagine diverse Black women's histories and articulate Black women's lives as whole lives lived. Here, I take advantage of the wealth of information my research has afforded and the historian's capacity to perceive remnants of the past and fill in that which is absent.[48]

[48] Staley, *Historical Imagination.*

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