

Mary Seacole and the Caribbean

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In the last year, we’ve witnessed a proactive turn to anti-racist pedagogy and a call for racial and social justice in scholarly praxis and in higher education. Our work on Mary Seacole emerges from this exciting and timely turn. The four lesson plans we’ve co-developed stand amidst recent calls to redraw the boundaries of our discipline, to expand the range of texts we study, and to reassess defining questions in the field of Victorian studies.

Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* (2006) and Marisa J. Fuentes’ *Dispossessed Lives* (2016) recall the fact of loss of Afro-Caribbean records and the necessity of finding ways of reckoning with scholarly methods that frequently reproduce colonial structures of power. With such concerns in mind, our group sought ways of reframing Mary Seacole’s autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) around questions arising from Seacole’s identity as a global writer, an Afro-Jamaican woman, and a leading medical professional of her day. Focused on the goal of centering Mary Seacole in Victorian Studies, our conversations were attuned to nineteenth-century notions of her race, national identity, gender, and professional expertise as well as slippery intersectional questions raised by a Jamaican

woman writer who claims at the start of her narrative, “I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins.” Early in our collaboration, we wondered, how do we approach a figure who unsettles so many categories of identity? And what does Seacole’s narrative expose about the systems of knowledge and power that have long shaped approaches to nineteenth-century literature?

The lesson plans we developed in response to these questions point to the complexities raised by a medical professional, an autobiographical writer, a military nurse, and a woman who unsettles Victorian constructions of race and nation. Kira Braham’s pathway explores Seacole’s position as a colonial subject of color whose writing challenges identity categories such as “Britishness” or “Englishness” as well as national or transimperial identity. Indu Ohri examines the professionalization of female nurses in mid-nineteenth-century combat zones, such as the Crimean War and the American Civil War. Breanna Simpson explores Seacole’s intervention in Eurocentric medical models and the influence of her Jamaican training as a “doctress.” My own lesson plan on Victorian autobiography situates Seacole alongside nineteenth-century autobiographical texts with an attentiveness to a dearth of Afro-Caribbean voices from this period. My goal in developing this lesson plan was to find a way to make these absences visible in the nineteenth-century Caribbean archive by including contemporary writers’ responses to those silences. Our collaboration presents Seacole not as an emblem of all Caribbean voices, but as a rare, individual voice among many other voices, some of which have been lost to us.

Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom marks an important turning point in the field of Victorian Studies by foregrounding and centering writing from colonial spaces. At the same time, this project underscores rich points of overlap between teaching and scholarship. While our lesson plans were designed to broaden the scope of Victorian courses, they can also be used to

support research by raising new scholarly questions, exploring original paths of inquiry, or by inviting consideration of Victorian studies' relations with global literatures, post-colonial literature, or Caribbean studies. In fact, I hope that our work will not only inspire broader approaches to Victorian literary studies, but will demonstrate the scholarly work of teaching and the pedagogical benefits of scholarly collaboration.