

“BIPOC Voices in the Victorian Periodical Press”

Recommendations for Adam Matthew Digital (2022)

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Overview

Over the last year (2021-2022), scholars and students from [One More Voice](#) (OMV) and [COVE](#) have worked in collaboration with [Special Collections, SOAS Library](#) and [Adam Matthew Digital](#) (AMD) to identify, document, encode, publish, and critically study a series of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) voices from the Victorian Periodical Press.

This initiative takes the title “[BIPOC Voices in the Victorian Periodical Press](#)” (henceforth, “BIPOC Voices”).

The work has evolved through two branches of endeavor, one funded by the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#) (UNL) and centered on the physical print holdings of the SOAS, the other funded by the [Research Society for Victorian Periodicals](#) (RSVP) and centered on the digital holdings of AMD.

The UNL/SOAS branch started first and so enabled the present authors to pioneer and refine the archival methods then applied to studying the AMD digital materials.

The present document extends this work by, first, setting out a series of observations about (and implications for working with) BIPOC voices in the Victorian periodical press, and, second, using these to offer a set of recommendations to Adam Matthew Digital for identifying and publishing such voices.

These recommendations represent an aspirational way of engaging with the voices, so the present authors also recognize that AMD may not be in a position to realize the recommendations in full.

Observations and Their Implications

Work for the UNL/SOAS branch of “BIPOC Voices” revealed the complexity involved in searching for BIPOC voices in the periodical press and resulted in the following observations, each with one or more relevant implications:

1) **Observation(s):** Identifying and engaging with BIPOC voices in the Victorian periodical press requires ongoing manual assessment. A scholar or other appropriately trained individual must review the individual pages of each periodical issue and critically assess the material found in order to determine whether there are any pieces of relevance.

Implication(s): The method needed for identifying and engaging with BIPOC voices remains the same, whether the materials exist in print or digitized form. The fact that AMD materials exist in digital form does not facilitate the recovery work in any way, other than obviating the need to consult print materials in person. As a result, the digital tools that a given publisher like AMD provides for viewing periodical pages play a crucial role in the work of identifying BIPOC voices because a clunky or slow-operating interface will impede critical investigation considerably and, in cases where access to both print and digital versions of texts exists, make it preferable to work with the print materials.

2) **Observation(s):** Victorian periodicals do not consistently attribute the work to BIPOC creators. Sometimes the periodicals carry the equivalent of a byline and thus identify the names of the creators. Sometimes a relevant piece begins with a short segment (often anonymously authored) which identifies the given BIPOC creator by name. Sometimes a piece identifies the BIPOC creator only by racial or ethnic characteristics rather than a specific name. Sometimes only the title of a piece indicates the role of a BIPOC creator in writing it.

Implication(s): The variety among and within these periodical attribution strategies suggests that programmers will not be able to automate a process for identifying relevant BIPOC creators. Rather, scholars and others with appropriate training must make each such attribution manually, after review, reflection, and consideration of the piece within the context of the given periodical.

3) **Observation(s):** In a large number of cases, Victorian periodicals refer to a given BIPOC creator once, but context makes it clear that the periodical will not publish further pieces by the given creator.

Implication(s): The singularity of such references indicates little value in using digital keyword searching for identifying relevant BIPOC creators.

4) **Observation(s):** Identifying relevant BIPOC creators and their pieces plus understanding the layers of mediation involved in publishing such pieces in Victorian periodicals requires analysis by critically informed readers.

Implication(s): The work of documenting and otherwise engaging with BIPOC creators in the Victorian periodical press prevents the assignment of such work to individuals without relevant training and/or expertise. Ideally, established and informed scholars will lead the work of identifying relevant voices, but graduate students and others can also develop the relevant skills under appropriate guidance. In short, studying the voices requires exceptional care and preparation, as otherwise scholars and others risk overlooking or otherwise underestimating the layers of mediation involved and so themselves mediating these voices for completely different but potentially still suspect uses.

5) **Observation(s):** The work of BIPOC creators in Victorian periodicals, due to its highly mediated nature (particularly by British missionaries), necessitates exceptional caution when foregrounding these pieces online. The wording of relevant pieces often suggests that missionary periodical editors and others reduced or otherwise curtailed the textual control of BIPOC creators considerably. Relevant pieces thus often advance ideas that diminish the BIPOC individuals who

are speaking and their cultures. They clearly reflect British imperial and colonial ideologies of the time rather than actual perspectives of the BIPOC creators.

Implication(s): General readers, scholars, and students, especially those not conversant in engaging with BIPOC voices in the Victorian periodical press, will lack the critical tools for understanding the complex ways by which these texts convey meaning. As a result, these circumstances create a real danger that such readers will read the BIPOC texts at face value, without recognizing that the racist and otherwise ideologically suspect elements of such texts do not necessarily represent the real views of the BIPOC creators. As a result, readers can conservatively best understand the periodical pieces not as necessarily reflecting the views of BIPOC creators – if the creators had any role at all in establishing the final, published texts – but rather as representing instances in which the BIPOC creators *are being represented by others*, especially British missionaries and periodical editors directly involved in the process of editing and publishing these texts. Moreover, such intervention often occurs silently, without notice to the reader or any obvious markers in the text.

Recommendations

Based on the year-long work of studying BIPOC voices in the Victorian periodical press and the above observations/implications, the present authors offer the following recommendations. The authors direct the recommendations to AMD, but the recommendations also apply to engaging with the work of BIPOC authors in the Victorian periodical press more generally.

1. **Recommendation:** AMD should develop and extensively user test its periodical reader interface. The interface should be configured to take up the full width and height of the screen, ideally via a lightbox overlay like Amazon provides for looking inside books. The interface should also enable the easy and rapid flipping of pages, provide foundational features such as zooming and page rotation, and allow for both single-page and full-page document downloads. Pages should also be preloaded in some fashion so that there is minimal lag when turning through the pages of an item or when jumping back and forth between item pages. As a model, we suggest the Internet Archive book reader, though the example of the manuscript reader on *Livingstone Online* also provides a useful example.

2. **Recommendation:** The work of the present authors suggests that there exists no one-size-fits-all method for identifying and understanding the work of BIPOC authors in the Victorian periodical press. AMD should, therefore, work carefully and slowly, with small subsets of its digital periodical holdings, to identify, build, and/or otherwise publish a collection of texts by BIPOC creators. A small-scale approach promises to yield the best results due to the care and critical reflection needed to engage with these texts. Although working at this scale may appear to run counter to AMD's general practices, the present authors believe that such work can become a model for other digital publishers and, ultimately, would contribute to AMD's prestige as a digital publisher by demonstrating AMD's willingness to engage with these materials in a culturally and historically sensitive manner.

3. **Recommendation:** AMD should engage in a staged process when taking up the work of BIPOC creators in periodicals. Such a staged process would, ideally, include both critical and cultural experts. The first stage might rely on scholars trained and/or conversant in the kind of critical work taken up by the two branches of our project or other such initiatives. The second stage would bring in experts who could speak to the cultural contexts of the given pieces, ideally being members of those culture and/or relevant ethnic groups themselves. Optimally, the given scholars could speak both to the critical and cultural contexts, but the present authors realize that finding such scholars might not always be possible. Given the global origins of BIPOC creators in the Victorian periodical press, however, the second stage also offers AMD a real opportunity to extend its global reach by involving scholars in its work that are based beyond the US, Britain, and Europe.

4. **Recommendation:** All experts involved in this process of engaging with BIPOC texts should be paid for their labor appropriately. It would be ideal for AMD to document the level of profits generated by the BIPOC texts identified and remediated, then, using those numbers, outline and justify the basis on which the scholars doing the work of identification and remediation are paid.