



# On Seeing Victorian Jamaica

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REVIEW



## ABSTRACT

The edited collection *Victorian Jamaica* provides readers with an expansive yet fine-grained collection of snapshots of Jamaica during the nineteenth century. Material culture furthermore aptly characterizes the collection itself. Weighing about four pounds and containing over 700 pages with nearly 250 color illustrations, *Victorian Jamaica* offers an essential archive that will provide scholars with new avenues of inquiry as well as additional vantages from which to assess quotidian life during a period marked by the paradoxes of liberalism and emancipation.

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*Victorian Jamaica*, the recent collection edited by Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest, foregrounds material culture to examine a crucial Caribbean location during the period associated with Queen Victoria's reign of the British empire. The editors emphasize the collection's focus on materiality as its intervention, acknowledging the importance of previous studies ranging from [Thomas C. Holt's](#) work on emancipation and [Brian L. Moore and Michele A. Johnson's](#) two co-authored books on Afro-Jamaican culture.<sup>1</sup> Barringer and Modest note that few studies of nineteenth-century Jamaica "have dedicated sustained attention to art and material culture produced under empire and to the ways that material objects reflect, and acted to structure, social relations" ("[Introduction to Object Lessons](#)" 51). Guided by this attention to materiality, *Victorian Jamaica* provides readers with an expansive yet fine-grained collection of snapshots of Jamaica during the nineteenth century. Material culture furthermore aptly characterizes the collection itself. Weighing about four pounds and containing over 700 pages with nearly 250 color illustrations, *Victorian Jamaica* offers an essential archive that will provide scholars with new avenues of inquiry as well as additional vantages from which to assess quotidian life during a period marked by the paradoxes of liberalism and emancipation.

Sensitive to the history of how the Caribbean has been represented in Victorian spaces such as the Great Exhibition of 1851, the collection emphasizes a breadth of artifacts and approaches rather than limit readings of Jamaica to perspectives from natural history or performance studies. To this end, *Victorian Jamaica* begins with a section titled "Object Lessons." Here, experts including [Steeve O. Buckridge](#), [Erica Moiah James](#), and [Krista A. Thompson](#) briefly reflect on the stories contained in material artifacts: a child's cap made from lace-bark, an oil painting of a working-class woman, a photograph of a photographer in Jamaica's Castleton Gardens. No "lesson" exceeds three pages, which allows this opening section to resist the all-knowing posture implicit in colonial collecting. Instead, these "vignettes" speculate as much as they describe ([Barringer and Modest "Introduction"](#) 23). Take, for example, the questions posed by [Anthony Bogues](#) alongside a photograph of an anonymous wedding group, circa 1900: "Is this an image for reading a time, for signifying a moment? A memory for the future, for representing a becoming, a natal moment? What is the bride saying to us today? What does her confident, smiling, black face communicate?" (95). Moments such as these—when readers are asked to both patiently and ethically imagine as they engage with the limits of the archive—seem informed by the groundbreaking methodologies of [Saidiya Hartman](#) and [Tina M. Campt](#).<sup>2</sup>

In addition to asking fresh questions of material culture, the contributions in *Victorian Jamaica* remind us of the variety of visual and material cultures during the nineteenth century. Daguerreotype photography and the age of emancipation overlapped in the 1830s, and *Victorian Jamaica* richly considers this visual practice through essays such as [David Boxer's](#) study of the Duperly family's photography studios in Kingston. Elsewhere, [Anna Arabindan-Kesson's](#) analysis of photographs of South Asian laborers in Jamaica builds upon perhaps the most important work of visuality in the Caribbean, [Krista A. Thompson's 2006](#) study of the relationship between the picturesque and tourism.<sup>3</sup> Arabindan-Kesson links the history of Indian indenture and the technology of photography to highlight the empire's new ventures in exploiting human labor following the end of slavery.

Beyond photography, *Victorian Jamaica* also contains dazzling essays on architecture, fashion, and city planning as well as detailed examinations of topics ranging from statues of Queen Victoria in Jamaica to the erasure of Black labor within the context of exhibitions and world's fairs. After reading contributions such as [Elizabeth Pigou-Dennis's](#) analysis of creole architecture—wherein

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1 See [Holt](#), and [Moore and Johnson](#).

2 [Hartman](#) describes her process of "critical fabulation" (11) when engaging with the archives of slavery, and [Campt](#) highlights "the endlessly generative space of the counterintuitive" (6) when reading Black diaspora identification photography. See [Hartman](#) and [Campt](#).

3 See [Thompson](#).

Pigou-Dennis combines “the methods of textual and visual analysis of documentary sources with the study of existing structures and the archaeological examination of ruins and fragments”—we learn that the Caribbean project of striving “to see the fragments/whole” remains as vital as ever (475).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, *Victorian Jamaica* even ends with a kind of opening to a more radical idea of wholeness rather than a conclusive final word. Faith Smith’s contribution invites readers to consider Jamaican Victorianism, pointing out that “there is so much trafficking back and forth that the tracks leading from one space to another are muddied” and furthermore, that nineteenth-century Jamaica must also be understood within the contexts of its “own multitextured landscape” and the Americas (658, 671). In this way, *Victorian Jamaica* can be situated alongside projects such as archipelagic studies and the recent call for the field of Victorian studies to name and dismantle its racist practices.<sup>5</sup>

If the central strength of *Victorian Jamaica* is its creative “emphasis on a *history from things*,” I want to conclude by revisiting a text that does not seem like a nineteenth-century artifact at first glance: Jamaica Kincaid’s 1991 essay “On Seeing England for the First Time” (52–53, emphasis in original). Kincaid’s essay provides a vivid reflection on the experience of erasure. She describes how education and literature install colonial ideologies—processes now familiar to scholars and students of Caribbean literature in particular and postcolonial studies more broadly. Kincaid furthermore catalogs the discordant material experience of living as a Black subject of empire: the can of “Made in England” cocoa she notices at the breakfast table each morning as a child, the felt hat her father wears daily, and the streets in Antigua named for naval commanders involved in the slave trade such as John Hawkins (32–33, 36). What might be called Kincaid’s poetics of the quotidian enables readers to understand the ubiquity of British imperialism in Antigua.

I am fully aware that Kincaid’s attention to material objects takes place in Antigua, not Jamaica.<sup>6</sup> But Kincaid’s very name demonstrates the complexities of material culture. In a 2013 interview, the author tells the story of “Jamaica Kincaid,” emphasizing it is “my actual name on my passport” rather than a pen name. She furthermore explains, “I wanted something that was from that part of the world that I was from, and I wanted something that was from the other part of the world that I come from, something Scottish—or English—sounding” (Nnamdi). By challenging the assumption that her name is a pseudonym and citing her passport, Kincaid pushes aside the realm of the literary to remind audiences of—to use the words of *Victorian Jamaica*’s editors—“the importance of things in structuring social relations” (“Introduction” 23).

Kincaid’s desire to combine “something” from the Caribbean with “something that was from the other part of the world that I come from” ultimately highlights the materiality of names and plays into the metropole-colony framework asserted in the formulation “Victorian Jamaica.” Yet inspired by contributions in the collection that urge simultaneously reading with and against the grain, I invite us to consider a lesser-known story about the famous author. On *YouTube*—that massive digital platform owned by Google—we can access Kincaid’s interview with broadcaster Kojo Nnamdi and learn of another name she considered: Havana Davenport. This designation would have immediately foregrounded the multiplicities of Caribbean cultures beyond an anglophone framework. As *Victorian Jamaica* illustrates both boldly and intimately, anyone interested in the Caribbean must take imaginative notice—not only of objects such as lithographs and furniture, but also of the possibilities contained in ruins and traces.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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4 “The idea is to try to see the fragments/whole” (Brathwaite 7).

5 See Roberts and Stephens, and Chatterjee et al.

6 Kincaid’s writing was also expanded to the context of Jamaica when she collaborated with filmmaker Stephanie Black to adapt passages from *A Small Place* for the voiceover narration of the 2003 documentary *Life and Debt*.

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