

***David Copperfield, Dickens, and Race: A Critical Bibliography***  
**Dickens Universe 2022**  
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**Introduction:**

This year's Dickens Universe on *David Copperfield* and *Iola Leroy* is remarkable for many reasons. Certainly, the two postponements give the conference an extra charge, since it will be the first time that many of us will be gathering in Santa Cruz since 2019. But given all that has taken place over the three intervening years—especially and most saliently around race and racism in the field of Victorian studies and the world more generally—the conference offers an important moment of rigorous reflection and self-examination. This is especially true as we work to find opportunities for connection and solidarity with Black and African American studies, especially of the nineteenth century, and with Harper studies most specifically throughout the conference week and beyond.

In this context, rather than follow the usual practice of composing a comprehensive list of scholarship published on *David Copperfield* since the last Universe to feature it (2009), what follows is something more akin to a bibliographic essay that marks some possible points of entry for our engagements with the novel and its critical history. The texts listed immediately below are the required texts that we are asking everyone to read in preparation for the week, along with those named in the bibliography on *Iola Leroy*. This list is followed by a narrative description that situates the chosen readings within a broader array of scholarship on *David Copperfield*, Dickens, and the Victorian period, with particular attention to those that engage issues of race and with Black studies. Here again, the goal has not been completeness, but the production of a curated set of additional recommended readings that will hopefully spark critical conversation and intervention.

**Required Readings:**

- Vanessa Dickerson. "On Coming to America: The British Subject and the African American Slave." *Dark Victorians*, University of Illinois Press, 2008, pp. 13-43.
- Elaine Freedgood. "Realism, Fetishism, and Genocide: Negro Head Tobacco in and Around *Great Expectations*." *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 81-110.
- Daniel Hack. "Close Reading *Bleak House* at a Distance." *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature*, Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 23-44.
- Tara Macdonald. "red-headed animal;': Race, Sexuality, and Dickens's Uriah Heep" *Critical Survey*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2005, pp. 48-62.
- Laura Peters. "Racial Difference and 'The Noble Savage.'" *Dickens and Race*, Manchester University Press, 2013, pp. 54-81.

**On Trends, Absences, and Commitments:**

Within the body of scholarship on *David Copperfield* specifically, there has been very little attention paid to issues of race. Indeed, Tara Macdonald's essay included in the required readings is the only sustained reading of the novel that we located that uses race as its central category of

analysis, in focusing on the racialization of Jewishness in the nineteenth century and its imbrication with constructions of sexual deviance. While the 2019 film adaptation featuring a multi-racial cast has produced discussions about the text's implicit whiteness in public-facing writing, this has not yet carried over into academic readings. This general lack informs our decision to shape our critical engagements with *David Copperfield* less around readings of the novel itself and more on other work within Dickens studies that focus on race and transatlantic slavery.

Certainly, the novel's treatment of settler colonial emigration to Australia has been one way that scholars have connected it to imperial structures. Fariha Shaikh's *Nineteenth-Century Settler Emigration in British Literature and Art* and Philip Steer's *Settler Colonialism in Literature* provide two of the most recent cases in point. Even then, scholarship on Dickens and Australia has tended to focus on *Great Expectations* (and understandably so given the location's more pervasive role in the plot), with *David Copperfield* serving as a supplementary example. Importantly too, these analyses are typically less concerned with how racial categories are produced through these processes and representations than they are about the consolidation of British imperial power—with Elaine Freedgood's discussion of *Great Expectations* and Indigenous genocide in *The Ideas in Things* offering an exception to this general rule. In using tobacco to triangulate the racial histories of Britain, Australia and the United States in Dickens's late novel, Freedgood's chapter provides one framework for considering the racial and settler colonial violence that undergirds the moments of emigration in Dickens's earlier text, which is why it has been included in the required readings.

The same is true of the selections from Laura Peters's *Dickens and Race*, Vanessa Dickerson's *Dark Victorians*, and Daniel Hack's *Reaping Something New*, each of which offer examples of centering race in their discussions of works by Dickens that preceded and followed his writing *David Copperfield*. For Peters, the late-1840s and 1850s functioned as an important watershed moment in Dickens's racial thinking, and we have included her chapter on his virulently racist essay "The Noble Savage" from 1853 as an example. This selection is placed alongside Dickerson's readings of *American Notes*, which places that work in a wider context of British writings on slavery in the United States. Together, our hope is that they provide a way for us to understand Dickens's simultaneous support of abolition and his anti-Black statements and sentiments. Additionally, by setting these two chapters next to Hack's, which focus on African American responses to *Bleak House* and its circulation within the early Black press, we can gain additional perspectives on Dickens that center the perspectives of Black audiences and readers.

These three texts are, of course, not the only works that integrate substantial discussions of Dickens into their analyses of race, Blackness, and slavery in the nineteenth century. Julia Sun-Joo Lee's *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* examines both Dickens's responses to Frederick Douglass and his uses of the "fugitive plot" in *Great Expectations*. Additionally, Meredith McGill's *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* and Amanda Claybaugh's *The Novel of Purpose* position Dickens as an important figure on both sides of the Atlantic, and Emily Madsen and Rachel Teukolsky each offer readings in Phiz's illustrations of *Bleak House* in relation to slavery and racial violence. Importantly here too, this work has been part of various efforts to bring Victorian and Black studies into a fuller conversation over the last twenty five years. For book length studies, this includes Dickerson, Hack, and Lee, mentioned above, as well as Jennifer Devere Brody's foundational *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and*

*Victorian Culture* from 1998. Kimberly Snyder Manganelli's *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race* and Tricia Looten's *The Political Poetess* join Devere Brody's book as more recent monographs that discuss gender and the legacies of transatlantic slavery in Victorian literature. Finally, the historically-focused work of Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina and Caroline Bressey have made vital contributions toward a fuller recognition and understanding of the presence and contributions of Black people in Britain throughout the long nineteenth century.

In thinking about this work in relation to *David Copperfield*, we hope that our collective thinking about the novel in these critical contexts prompts a productive reconsideration of scholarship on the novel that does not discuss race but that focus on terms that are deeply and fundamentally imbricated with racial structures and histories. What would it mean, for instance, to rethink D.A. Miller's now-classic reading of *David Copperfield* in *The Novel and the Police* though a racial lens—a lens that seems glaringly absent from the vantage point of 2022, amidst ongoing debates about policing and anti-Black, racial violence. To take a more recent example, how might James Buzard's critique of temporal progressivism in "David Copperfield and the Thresholds of Modernity" be expanded to reveal how whiteness might undergird earlier critical assertions of the novel's generic normativity? Similarly, in light of the pairing with *Iola Leroy*, how might an attention to race reshape the accounts of gender, marriage, and sexual violence in *David Copperfield* undertaken by Hillary Schor in *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* and Maia McAleavey in *The Bigamy Plot*? Or those of autobiography and childhood trauma in Cathy Caruth's "Language in Flight: Memorial, Narrative, and History in *David Copperfield*"?

As we approach these questions, it is just as important that we think carefully about our methods, motivations, and goals in undertaking this work during this Dickens Universe and beyond. While the field of Victorian studies has been engaged in robust conversations about the work of "undisciplining" for the last two years, following the call of Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Christoff, and Amy Wong who themselves follow the call of Christina Sharpe, we must also acknowledge our responsibilities to the decades of scholarship that precedes it within nineteenth-century African American studies. To this end, the critical responses in reviews to some of the work listed above are instructive—with the forum in *Victorian Studies* on Hack's book and his response forming a particularly extensive case in point. Within Ivy Wilson's review especially, the challenges and potential pitfalls of taking up discussions of race from within Victorian studies come into sharp relief, as the essay outlines the ongoing commitment to reading and listening to Black scholars and authors and to thinking about audiences beyond Victorian studies that this work necessitates. In this way, this bibliography (and the conversations during the Universe week that we hope it inspires) mark yet another invitation to grapple with the structural whiteness that has shaped scholarship on *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens, and the Victorian period more generally.

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