

RSVP Peterson Fellowship Report,

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The four months of the Linda H. Peterson Fellowship, which the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals so generously awarded me, have been transformational for my project. It has enabled me to work on the project full-time, which in turn has allowed me to discover new materials, write new content, and perhaps most importantly to develop the shape of the whole book and submit the book proposal to Yale University Press. The sort of ‘deep thinking’ required to properly develop long-form research is only possible with these kinds of grants, and this is such an important contribution which RSVP makes to the enhancement of knowledge and to the scholarly community.

I used the first month of the Fellowship to restructure the order of the book’s chapters into a new chronological framework. The basic shape and contents of each chapter remains the same - including the focus on key visual markers (Hat, etc) - but the chapters now run in the order of Billy Waters’ life from his birth in New York to his death in London. This new framework allows me to maintain a steady narrative ‘thread’ throughout the book, so that the reader can navigate more clearly through the range of cross-disciplinary materials I am using. The second month saw me head to Oxford for a research trip at the Bodleian (with accommodation funded by a small grant from the Paul Mellon Centre). In the third month I gave an invited research talk given at University of Birmingham’s Nineteenth-Century Research Centre, drawing upon new research into early US periodicals, and in the fourth and final month I prepared the book proposal for submission and conducted further primary periodicals research. Finally, I wrote detailed plans for the remaining chapters ready to complete the book in 2022.

The new chronological structure of the chapters means that the chapter order now looks like this:

Prologue: ‘Enter *Billy Waters*, dancing’

Chapter 1. ‘Performance: In Which Waters Begins’

Chapter 2. ‘Wooden Leg: In Which Waters Goes to Sea’

Chapter 3. ‘Fiddle: In Which Waters Appears on Stage’

Chapter 4. ‘Countenance: In Which Waters Sweeps the Streets’

Chapter 5. ‘Hat: In Which Waters Leaves a Legacy’

Epilogue: ‘Who lives, who dies, who tells your story...?’

The reordering was partly inspired by new research into periodicals published in New York state in the first years of the nineteenth-century. Because I knew from investigating the Ship’s muster records (held at the National Archives in Kew) that Waters was born somewhere in New York City of New York State at some point in the late 1770s, I was interested to see what (if anything) New York periodicals had to say about him, or about performers like him. I discovered a rich seam of material regarding the Pinkster festival in New York State, which was clearly a likely

influence on Waters's unique performing style. Chapter 1 then changed from a chapter based around his only surviving oil portrait to a new version called 'Performance' which uses Paul Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic. The chapter explores the Pinkster festival as depicted in periodicals and links this depiction to representations of Waters in the serial *Life in London* (1820-21) to argue that Waters made use of creative influences from around the Atlantic world. This new chapter was submitted to Yale as part of the book proposal.

I also conducted primary research into the representation of sailors in US and UK periodicals, paying especial attention to early African American periodicals. This will be written up in the chapter 'Wooden Leg'. I was interested to see whether the metaphorical link between sailors and slaves – a common rhetorical trope in much writing about 'Jack Tar' in Britain – made its way across the Atlantic. I found that this was certainly the case in abolitionist periodicals. Furthermore, African American periodicals (broadly speaking) seemed to share the contrary attitudes towards sailors in the early nineteenth-century common to much popular print culture: they are represented as simultaneously heroic and misfortunate, noble and comic.

I took the opportunity to visit archives that had been closed or difficult to access during lockdown. At the National Archives I found the entry in the Captain's Log which describes how Waters lost his leg, and I worked out that before his accident Waters was a Quarter Gunner on board a British Navy warship. This was a hugely responsible and respected role, with increased pay to match. Waters was clearly a respected and experienced seaman at this point. At the London Metropolitan Archives I found his burial record and the tax records of the people who were probably his landlords in St. Giles, London. I hunted through the workhouse admissions records to try to find him, but no luck – I need to return to search again.

Primary research in the Bodleian's John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera turned up a rich array of visual materials to support my investigations into the representation of sailors, beggars, street musicians, and people of colour in periodicals. At the London Library I found two fascinating new primary texts: *Streetology* (published in weekly parts in 1837) and *Dens of London Exposed* (initially intended for periodical publication but then issued as a volume in 1835). These usefully set Billy Waters and his supposed role as 'King of the Beggars' in a wider cultural context, and will form an important part of the chapter called 'Fiddle'. I also conducted research into representations of 'Old Corn Meal' in New Orleans periodicals of the 1830s. Old Corn Meal was a Black performer and street 'Character' who, like Waters, was said to have performed as himself on stage in a play called 'Life in New Orleans' (now lost). Old Corn Meal forms an important counterpart to Waters in the 'Fiddle' chapter.

The Fellowship also gave me time to engage with experts in Black studies and Diversity and Inclusion, and to think through the ethics of authorship and my own relationship to the material. This was incredibly important reflection and thinking, which has resulted in a new Author's Note as well as a slight repositioning of the 'voice' and contents of the book. More intangibly, though no less importantly, it has enabled me to reflect on my practice as a scholar (and a teacher) and to confront complex issues surrounding allyship and cultural-critical closeness in productive ways that I will take with me into the classroom as well as into future research projects.

Chapter 1 'Performance' is now re-written, Chapter 4 'Countenance' is restructured, segments of Chapter 2 'Wooden Leg', Chapter 3 'Fiddle', and Chapter 5 'Hat' with a particular focus on periodicals are drafted, and most of the material for the rest of the book assembled. I am not quite sure yet whether the book is making an argument about periodicals, or whether it is using periodicals to make an argument about Black history and popular culture. But time will tell. I

have my next Leverhulme-funded research period in which to complete the drafting and editing of the manuscript. The goal is to submit the final manuscript for publication by the end of March 2023 at the latest. If Yale offers me a contract, which I will find out about this week, publication would be in Spring 2024.

I did hit one problem: in December I contracted Covid-19 (again) as it swept through London, so from December 9th onwards I was unable to work for two weeks (apart from small bits of admin and tinkering). This meant that I did not get as much written on Chapter 2 ‘Wooden Leg’ as I had hoped to do. Nor was I able to leave the house to do some final bits of follow-up archival work at the National Archives and the London Metropolitan Archives. I do not know if it is possible to request a two-week funding extension in these circumstances.

Overall, this has been such an invigorating, creative, and productive period of research leave, made possible by RSVP’s generous support. I look forward to sharing the finished product with you all when the book is published.