# "No doubt you think this will be one of those slave histories": Review of Sara Collins's *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019)

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**Sara Collins, *The Confessions of Frannie Langton***
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We are in the midst of a resounding call to put the Victorians on trial. Under the auspices of "*(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision*" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), the neo-Victorian critical field has recently asked to what extent cultural memory work on the period involves genuine global alternatives (Primorac and Pietrzek-Franger 2015: 7). Can revitalisations of the nineteenth century begin on distant shores and in *proximal* years to Victoria's reign? How can a novel test these hazardous waters?

This autumn, in the wake of a nationwide reflection on British history, the first of six short films directed by Steve McQueen was released. The first, *Mangrove* (2020), depicts a trial held in 1971 at the Old Bailey of nine Caribbean protestors arrested for police assault. The performances of Darcus Howe (Malachi Kirby) and Altheia Jones-LeCointe (Letitia Wright) flew in the face of typical modes of representing Black British figures in culture. They were at once severely passionate and eloquent in the courtroom, even whilst they were shown as deeply flawed in private. The Windrush scandal that has unfolded over the last two years has heightened the need to speak to, and about, people of Caribbean descent in Great Britain. In this moment, stories about displacement and belonging, particularly for Black British communities, carry a particular and heightened urgency.

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This urgency is evident in Sara Collins's debut novel *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019), which, so befitting of the historical moment of its publication, went on to win the Costa First Novel Award in the same year. Collins's novel itself is also centred on an Old Bailey trial and an accused Caribbean émigré. This is a novel of historical fiction about an enslaved woman, the eponymous Frannie, and the tribulations she has to endure in a narrative that uproots her from her West Indies home to London in 1825, a dozen years before the commencement of Queen Victoria's reign. The protagonist's life begins in Jamaica on the plantation of John Langton – paradoxically named 'Paradise'. Langton's ambitions reach far beyond mere commerce and maximising the productivity of his estate through slave labour, also extending to science, or the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and racist proto-eugenics. Early on, it is revealed that there is a building on the plantation used specifically for shady, sinister, anatomical experiments. Langton is attempting to write a scientific work, entitled *Crania*, the "manuscript he'd been working on for five years" (p. 56), which will cement him in history as a great man of the age. Whilst assisting Langton in his endeavours, Frannie also has numerous and conflicting interactions with Langton's wife and the mistress of the house, Miss-bella – the full significance of which readers do not learn until the middle of the novel. When a fire quickens the financial ruin that Langton has been narrowly avoiding, Miss-bella's brother – now the controller of the state's finances after the death of the sibling's father who kept Langton afloat with loans – banishes Langton from Paradise. Langton and Frannie, as "the only thing Langton hadn't mortgaged" (p. 56), head to London to seek publication of *Crania*. Arrived in the capital, Langton gifts Frannie – whom readers eventually discover to be both his sex-slave and daughter – to George Benham, an influential natural philosopher, to curry favour in his endeavour to be published. Benham's home, where Frannie henceforth works as an unpaid, enslaved housemaid and later as personal maid to Benham's French wife, Marguerite ('Madame' or 'Meg'), also becomes the site of Frannie's romance with the mistress of the house. The two women develop a troubling relationship, amorous and sadistic in equal measure.

*The Confessions of Frannie Langton* begins at the end of the protagonist's trial for the murder of her white English 'master' and his French wife, and from the outset, the novel takes pains to remind the reader that what is to follow is not an attempt at a standard narrative about slavery.


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Indeed, the very first chapter ends with Frannie, speaking from the dock, almost metafictionally addressing the reader: "[n]o doubt you think this will be one of those slave histories, all sugared over with misery and despair" (p. 8). Frannie is right to some extent, in a sense anticipating the expectations of many of Collins's readers, perhaps already familiar with neo-slavery narratives by the likes of William Styron, Toni Morrison, and Caryl Phillips, among others. In form alone, the novel resists categorisation as a straightforward narrative about slavery emulating or pastiching period texts. The writing we associate with the form was often pressed into service of abolition: humanising enslaved persons in depictions of their sorrow and mistreatment. Yet Frannie's confessions, in fact, serve only to attempt to save herself, after her lawyer presses her to give him something, anything, to save her neck. Collins also is not interested in representing Frannie as innocent, diverging from the traditional format of having the enslaved emerge from victimhood morally uncompromised. Instead, Frannie is shown to have the nuances of a deeply flawed person – to Collins, Frannie reflects a truly humanised character by being "angry […] complicated […] and not strictly good" (Collins in Dalley, Neil and Patmore 2020). This novel acts, then, as a tripartite reconstruction. It chronicles Frannie's struggle to remember and, in doing so, reconstruct herself in the service of freedom. It resists the shape of traditional slave narratives as laments, excluding graphic details of the abhorrent things done to the enslaved, which have equally been represented in writing for shock effect and deliberately obscured to spare reader sensitivities. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the novel recalibrates how to think about neo-Victorian fiction – forcing readers to question the stability of the 'known' Victorian world. It seems fitting, then, to survey the influence of three texts on Collins's novel, which the writer herself picked off the shelf in Waterstones 'Shelfie' episode: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).

The novel seems vital for the current appeal to 'undisciplining' the Victorians, as noted in a spring edition of *Victorian Studies*, guest edited by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff and Amy R. Wong. They explain that "[u]n-making Victorian studies involves exploding the field's limited geographic imaginary which continues to exhibit particular difficulties in dismantling a center/periphery model and its attendant forms of knowledge" (Chatterjee, Christoff and Wong 2020: 375). Collins's novel


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demonstrates several characteristics that adhere to these attendant forms of knowledge. Frannie's romantic entanglements seem intended to explode the presuppositions about how Jamaican women can and should be represented in neo-slavery novels. On the podcast 'Like a Real Book Club' in April this year, Collins explained her ideas for Frannie:

> It was very much about the fact that I had this early obsession with Gothic romances like *Jane Eyre*, like *Rebecca*, like *Wuthering Heights* […] and so I wanted a Jamaican *female* character, a Jamaican woman to be the star of her own Gothic romance. (Collins in Dalley, Neil and Patmore 2020)

This underscores the way in which Collins employs both Romantic and Victorian texts as influential when infusing the character of Frannie Langton with an 'undisciplining' spirit. Firstly, Collins is broadly hinting at the lack of Black women characters with agency in early Gothic and later Victorian Gothic fiction. She is at pains to place Frannie in implicit dialogue with these missing women, and this is no more clear than when she has Frannie confess: "She [Marguerite] read to me *The Castle of Ortranto* and *Vathek* […] but neither affected me as *Frankenstein* did" (p. 153). This is a significant admission, seeing as Frannie thinks of herself as a kind of creature, fashioned by Langton due to the same brutal desire for power as displayed by the inimitable Victor Frankenstein. Her residual fondness for Langton emerges when, whilst dining with Benham, he begins to choke and, breaking the stringent code of the house regarding servant behaviour, Frannie goes to the aid of her former enslaver. This act gets her caught up in a tense exchange with Mrs Linux, the housekeeper. Mrs Linux protests at the lack of propriety Frannie displays by helping Langton, which ends with Mrs Linux throwing boiling water over her. Later that night – ominously in the attic – Frannie confesses to another housemaid, Pru, that Langton is, in fact, her father. Crucially, the novel depicts Frannie's origins (akin to those of Frankenstein's creature) as monstrous and 'unnatural', but never her same-sex relations with Meg. As much is made clear by her revelation to Pru, which prompts Frannie to ask herself: "what did that make me? A patchwork monster. A thing sewn from Langton's parts" (p. 141). As it happens, Collins's novel, like Shelley's, is itself an exercise in the


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consequences of dark acts returning to haunt their perpetrators and is itself a text of patchwork influence.

Collins also draws on James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the third novel she cites as inspiration for her own, and perhaps the one that most rejuvenates expectations of an anti-slavery text. Part of the originality of Collins's story lies in the fact that the enslaved woman is not trapped only by an enforced sexual relationship with her male 'owners', since Frannie is also engaged in an amorous relationship with 'Meg', her intimate name for Benham's wife. It is in the expression of – and acting on – non-heteronormative desire that Frannie becomes a fully rounded character imbued with full humanity. Her affair with Madame fills Frannie with a sense of uncertainty, fused with her retrospective doubts about the reality of the affair and its genuineness on Marguerite's part. Writing about one night when she was caught by Mrs Linux in an intimate moment in the garden with Meg, Frannie notes of the affair's happening, "while I write it, I can still believe it did" (p. 199). If she is to unravel how the murder and subsequent accusation occurred, she must first investigate the complicated feelings she had for Meg.

This exploration evokes something sensory in Frannie – her confession is an act of feeling, precipitating "that same pricking of fear, the cold wash of terror, which [she] couldn't quite explain" (p. 199). Terror, to Frannie is the doubt she might not receive Megs affections in return. The fear of rejection takes on further significance when, soon after, Meg reunites with Olaudah Cambridge, "her little laddie, all grown up" (p. 201), the Benhams' onetime, petted, 'blackamoor' servant turned professional boxer. As Frannie remarks, "[t]he trouble wasn't the way he looked at her. It was the way she looked at him" (p. 206). This suggests that the root of her concern is the fear of being replaced by Laddie. Arguably, the influence of *Giovanni's Room* is recognisable in this conflicted same-sex relationship, conflicted not only on account of Frannie's jealousy over Meg's male lovers, but also due to the class- and race-based unequal power dynamics between the two women, which doubly 'queers' their clandestine affair and leaves Frannie with a sense of shame and inadequacy. Writing on *Giovanni's Room*, Garth Greenwell describes Baldwin's gay novel in analogous terms as "a kind of anatomy of shame, of its roots and the myths that perpetuate it, of the damage it can do" (Greenwell, 2016, n.p.). Shame in *Frannie Langton* materialises as the protagonist's guilt for being "a


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woman who loved a woman, chief among the womanly sins, like barrenness, and thinking" (p. 152). It is not the past and her involvement with a host of unsavoury acts committed by Langton that prompts the protagonist's mortified feelings in the present. As Frannie reconstructs her story, her identity falls apart when recalling a heated moment between her and Meg: "As soon as we leave this room, I vanish. That is all *your* trick" (p. 206, original emphasis). Her romantic affair with Meg, and the bodily experiences attached to it, are, in fact, the elements that render her less visible or even invisible, evoking Terry Castle's notion of the "apparitional lesbian" (Castle 1993). Frannie's queerness, at least as she explains it, renders her identity an unreliable memory, increasingly taking on a sense of unreality: she is only able to conjure this (defining) element of her self – like the ghost of the murdered Meg – as a recollection without corroborating witnesses.

The influence of Morrison's *Beloved* underscores this emphasis on memory. In *Beloved*, the onetime enslaved Sethe carries with her the memory of her formative years on the plantation called 'Sweet Home', from which she managed to escape. Morrison's novel itself is a meditation on what is missing from the formal or traditional historical record in terms of oral and embodied traumatic histories of slavery, thus 'queering' the archive. Sethe's early memories return to haunt her – and the novel – via the eponymous Beloved, the apparent manifestation of Sethe's dead infant daughter, as well as a representation of Sethe's shame of having killed her in order to prevent Sweet Home's overseer from forcing Sethe and her child back into slavery. Collins's novel employs similar tropes of flight from a plantation and the exposure of the inner workings of the institution of slavery, while also replicating how certain acts punctuate an (enslaved) individual's life, continuing to hang over her. Kate Mitchell reminds us of the value in recognising literatures of slavery and how some neo-slavery narratives resonate with the same disruptive energy as neo-Victorian fictions. For Mitchell, *Beloved*

> self-consciously eschews historical representation in favour of memory, or in the novel's lexicon, 'rememory', as a means to honour the past, to understand its reverberation in the present, and to find a way to move forward. (Mitchell 2010: 28)


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The significance of *Beloved* to Collins's text should not be underestimated. If Collins's novel, like *Beloved*, functions as a "memorial" (Morrison, qtd. in Mitchell 2010: 28) and consuming the trauma of slavery is a necessary part of engaging with history, one of the most uncomfortable scenes in Frannie's confessional narrative self-consciously emphasises just this queer tension between commemoration and consumption. After the young Frannie is discovered reading Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) by Langton, her enslaver tells her she can keep it. Yet what he means is that she must – quite literally – ingest it, by tearing the pages, chewing them to a pulp, and swallowing them one after another as punishment for her transgression (see p. 32). Frannie describes this as digging a hole into her. Rather than filling in the blanks, the act of enforced consuming creates a void in her sense of self. Frannie's writing of her own narrative thus becomes what Morrison calls "a 'memorial' to lives lost to slavery" (Mitchell 2010: 28), including queer lives lived in the interstices of the historical record as elisions, while also commemorating the blank spaces in her own consciousness and identity, which she struggles to fill. Like *Beloved*, Collins's novel is a memorial that leaves more questions than answers. As in Morrison's novel, in *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* too the function of memory is to hurt and yearn over that which is irrevocably lost. This is perhaps best encapsulated in the final moments of Frannie's recollections, when she begs the pardon of those she feels she has betrayed. The void caused by eating *Candide* is filled by her own narrative's memory of her earliest guardian, the children she bore to her rapist-father, and "*every last headless body left behind at Paradise*" (p. 369, original emphasis). The tragic reference to numerous, anonymous, lost lives evokes the victims of the sinister tests carried out by Langton in his coach-house laboratory, the results of which Frannie helped document.

*The Confessions of Frannie Langton* acts as a reminder that culture is something not hemmed in by period alone. The lives of formerly enslaved people cross the threshold demarcating the start of the Victoria's reign. The novel highlights the proximity of abolition to the beginnings of the Victorian era, even whilst Frannie herself does not live to cross that threshold. To take up the work of 'un-disciplining' the Victorians means to accept *Frannie Langton* as a narrative that stitches together Regency and Victorian influences. In this way, Collins's novel might represent one of the means by which to approach neo-Victorian apprehensions towards


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narratives of or adjacent to slavery. Rethinking – or, perhaps 'queering' – the parentheses of era poses a crucial endeavour for un-making Victorian limits to do with the monarchy and nation, as well as with the construction of cultural memory of Empire today. For instance, we might question why UK school children are taught about abolitionism and the work of the West African Squadron in suppressing the Atlantic slave trade after 1807, but not about Britain's century-long profiteering from that very same trade or about the lives of enslaved peoples on British soil. Accordingly, the mention of C. L. R. James in this review is two-fold. He appears in *Mangrove* as a symbol of unremitting and formidable scholarship about dual identity, about identity being pulled in two directions: between the Caribbean and Britain. He is also a Caribbean working within Victorian scholarship but who put it to use in the service of the twentieth-century project of decolonisation (Mufti 2020: p. 395). The parallels are clear for a novel which, fundamentally, stands *outside* the traditional demarcations of the Victorian period but raises important questions about it. *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* disturbs the stability and parameters of the 'Victorian'. It does so with the help of a queer, Atlantic-crossing, formerly-enslaved protagonist, charged with constructing her personal history – and the traumatic history of non-white enslavement – from memory. If the task of undisciplining is to make jagged the conventional and expected, we might do well to remember that stories like Frannie's are rarely told in straight lines.

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