THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Otherwise Victorian

SIMON GIKANDI

On Becoming a Victorianist

I studied Victorian literature, or the thing that goes by that name, in three different institutions in three different countries, and each of these experiences, which involved modes of disciplining and undisciplining, consolidation and displacement, taught me that the making of literary fields was a malleable process overdetermined by time and place. As an undergraduate at the University of Nairobi in the late 1970s, I learned that the nineteenth century was the favored period of the new intellectual class not because of what postcolonial criticism claims—that it was the age of empire and hence the fulcrum of decolonial discourses—but because it provided important lessons about the necessity and danger of progress, the most quintessential Victorian idea of all. The industrial novels of Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*), Elizabeth Gaskell (*North and South*), and George Eliot (*Felix Holt*) occupied a prominent position in the Nairobi curriculum; Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was considered a primary text. The theoretical primer was Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, especially the chapter dealing with industrial novels.

In contrast, at the University of Edinburgh, where I spent two years in the early 1980s, I lived in a country where the insignias of progress that had enchanted my grandparents' generation were everywhere, allegories of the ruins of an industrial culture that belonged to both past and present. Here, too, the Victorian period seemed to occupy a special place in the curriculum. My teachers were some of the foremost authorities on Thomas Carlyle, Dickens,

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Anthony Trollope, George Gissing, and Thomas Hardy. The startling thing was that I was rereading texts that I had first encountered in high school in East Africa, but my relationship to these texts, my disciplining as it were, was taking place in a changed and sometimes vexed context. At the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, its landscape and texts, was the epicenter of Victorianism.

As it was understood in this Scottish context, Victorian studies revolved around the figure of Carlyle, whose Scottishness was assumed to have provided a unique perspective on industrial society and culture. I had come across Carlyle in Williams's *Culture and Society*, where the Chelsea sage was described as "a major element in the tradition of English social criticism," but it had never occurred to me that his Scottishness mattered (71). As I reread Carlyle's "Signs of the Times," *Past and Present*, and *Sartor Resartus* with Edinburgh Castle in the background or a few miles from Leith Walk where the sage had had a spiritual reawakening in 1821, I came to realize that context did matter because it called attention to the relationship between signs and signifiers and made "the terms, the formulations, the morphology of ideas" in Carlyle's thought "the subject of influence" (Williams 71, 72).

Victorianism came to acquire a different meaning for me when I moved to the United States to study at Northwestern University in 1982. Here the study of Victorian writers was comprehensive, canonical, even ecumenical, locked neatly into the modes of close reading that did not allow the violence of history, of the everyday, or of the margins to interfere with the task of exegesis. Indeed, Victorian studies was considered to be a major buffer between Ronald Reagan's culture war and so-called French theory. Victorian fiction could be deployed as a case study in the defense of realism (see Graff 8–9, 175–80).

I start with these reflections on my own education and induction into the institutions of interpretation to make three points touching directly and indirectly on the questions of disciplining and undisciplining raised by the articles by Emily Steinlight and Jacob Romanow—that contrary to the universalism that seems to inform the aesthetic ideology of literary studies in the United States, the meaning of Victorian studies depends on locality; that literary criticism is driven by nationalist ideologies, which it nevertheless must conceal behind the aura of disciplinarity; and that all attempts to either globalize or provincialize Victorian and other studies lead us back to the prison house of the state and its institutions. Claims for globalization or provincialization remain incomplete without attention to what Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* calls "the contexts of locality" (182–85). Thus, in Scotland in the 1980s, in the midst of what was described as the breakup of Britain, the tenor and tone of Scottish awakening was part of the Scottish people's claim to sovereignty predicated on their privileged place as the architects of industrial culture.

In effect, what was being described as the breakup of Britain was a questioning of the terminologies that informed fields of study in or out of a national context (see Nairn). One of the issues here was the meaning of terms such as *Victorian* in the face of the crisis of the British state that had consolidated its authority in the nineteenth century. And if this issue seemed to trouble literary debates in Scotland more than in England, it was because Victorianism was in effect what Louis Althusser would call a presence/absence (344). In Scotland, Victorianism was legible in the iconic landmarks of industrial culture, such as Waverley Station and the Fourth Bridge; however, before devolution in 1999, the state charged with rationalizing the institutions of interpretation was located somewhere else, in Westminster. In the United States the relationship between the objects of study and the institution of interpretation was reversed: there were few signs of a Victorian past (at least not in the traditional sense); however, a state apparatus had enabled an infrastructure called Victorian studies that was going to dominate how the nineteenth century was thought and taught for over half a century.

Discipline and Discontent

Although the interventions by Steinlight and Romanow are concerned with Victorian studies as disciplinary formation, what is at issue in their essays is how what

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appears on the surface to be about the infrastructure of reading nineteenth-century British literature is excessive of the textual economies and modes of criticism that we have adduced to it. For even when it was locked in modes of reading that insisted on the autonomy of the literary text, as was the case in the schools of American New Criticism in the 1950s and 1960s, the term *Victorian*—or *Victorianism* as I prefer to call it—functioned as a set of ideas and cultural practices in which the text was asked to intervene and mediate the politics of an imaginary or reimagined Victorian time frame (see Altick; Briggs). It might be useful then to probe what these ideas and practices meant in different settings, outside the mandate of literary debates that are, by their very nature, inward looking. Furthermore, if we think about Victorian studies as more than a preoccupation with the anxieties of the present, of the diminishing authority of the institution of the university in general and literary criticism in particular, then we might have a better understanding of how specific ideas about the Victorian were structured by diverse histories and temporalities.

In Africa and the Caribbean, for example, the chronology of Victorianism bears little resemblance to the timelines of Victorian studies as it was imagined in the United States. The idea that the Victorian period began with a specific event (the Corn Laws of 1815 or the ascension to the throne of Queen Victoria in 1837) or that it ended either in the 1890s or with Queen Victoria's death in 1902 would not have made sense to Africans born in the 1880s or 1890s, many of whom continued to define themselves as Victorian as late as the 1960s. Nor would these institutional timelines have made sense to C. L. R. James growing up in Trinidad in the 1920s and the 1930s, where, as he once put it, his generation "lived according to the tenets of Matthew Arnold; we spread sweetness and light, and we studied the best that there was in literature in order to transmit it to the people—as we thought, the poor backward West Indian people" ("Discovering Literature" 237). For this generation of colonized black subjects, the project of decolonization was conceived as a long struggle for sovereignty and modernity, two terms closely associated with Victorian ideas of progress and what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has described as "soul making" (244).

Now, assuming, as both essays do, that disciplinarity is a mode of control and surveillance that performs its work by concealing its interests in the name of universality, then the task of undisciplining has to begin with a genealogy of the nationalist condition of possibility of literary criticism often concealed under the cover of theory or method. Despite its perennial insistence on autonomy, Thomas Docherty reminds us in *Criticism and Modernity*, the institution of criticism is founded on a nationalist condition (1). This does not mean that criticism is unanimously overdetermined by nationalist desires and fantasies, but as Steinlight argues the disciplinary formation, the one that determines which texts are read and which modes of criticism are authorized, is tied to the institution of the state. Steinlight's article lifts the veil of autonomy by providing a powerful genealogy of what we call Victorian studies as an American invention in the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on what she calls the "institutional infrastructure" of the field in an American context, Steinlight carefully maps out the ways in which Victorian studies claimed aesthetic autonomy even as it was chaperoned by intellectuals aligned with, or sympathetic to, the ascendant American state.

In Steinlight's account, the Americanization of Victorian studies took place in a specific postwar world system defined by expectations of globalization, including a temporal model that was analogous to the politics of development in so-called developing nations. Victorian studies provided the United States a set of categories—education, development, and even nationalism—that fit neatly into the doctrines that were being promoted in the social sciences. The expectation was that knowledge of industrial Britain would perhaps inform the American present. However, key Victorian ideas such as progress and industrialization were already part of decolonial projects across Africa and Asia during the same period. In fact, the language and form used to represent industrialization in Jawaharlal Nehru's India or Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana provide vivid examples of how, as Edward W. Said

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has argued, theories travel from one locality to another and are transformed in the process ("Traveling Theory" 226–27). In discussing the travel of Victorian ideas in the United States, Steinlight turns to the question of why the topic of empire was largely absent from Victorian studies in the United States before postcolonial interventions. She also gestures toward but does not fully address another question: What would happen if we reversed the flow of some key Victorian ideas and traced their movement from (post)colonial peripheries to metropolitan centers rather than the other way around?

Victorianism in the Archive

The absence of empire in Victorian studies as the field emerged in the United States during the Cold War was, of course, the catalyst for postcolonial theory and criticism, a project driven by the desire to recover the imperial trope and to institute new forms of "a contrapuntal reading" of the English text (Said, *Culture* 66). As we read Romanow's intervention, it is important to keep in mind the origins of postcolonial criticism as a counterpoint to Victorian studies, for his essay is implicitly critical of revisionist postcolonial debates in the unfinished quest for a new Victorian studies. As I understand it, Romanow's major complaint is that instead of functioning as a series of conceptual irruptions and disruptions, revisionist accounts of Victorian studies have retreated further into the enclosures of the discipline and its hegemonic episteme. Romanow falls back on Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of provincialization—the displacement from Europe of the authority of the universal symbol—as a pathway outside the hermeneutical enclosure of the discipline. He then turns to *Marita*, a nineteenth-century West African novel by an anonymous author, as the kind of text that might allow us to work with, and against, the key paradigms of Victorian studies. Here, what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might call a minor text is asked to deterritorialize the Victorian landscape of meaning (18–21). A significant part of Romanow's argument is his recognition of *Marita*'s ambiguity as a text that gestures toward what we assume to be the defining characteristics of a Victorian novel yet refuses to work with the established rules.

The turn to a text that is minor even in the field of African studies is bold—it takes us right out of the American disciplinary formation—but also limited, in that it does not open up spaces for thinking about Victorian studies in a specific West African context where what it meant to be Victorian was central to narratives of subject formation. Romanow's quest for a "thick theory" that might open up spaces for an otherwise Victorian is achieved at the expense of a "thick description" for the meaning of Victorian terminologies in the West African context of the novel and its readers (see Geertz 6–10).[1] What is particularly striking in his recuperation of *Marita* is the absence of a referential register that might account for the way the text signals its relationship both to its world and to its real and implied readership. Without a referential code the text of the other is orphaned, condemned to be a floating signifier at the mercy of our Euro-American projects.

The issue of referentiality raises a complicated issue: What did the term *Victorian* mean to the West African Creoles who were the key addressers and addressees of *Marita*? To answer this question it might be helpful to separate the use and meaning of the term *Victorian* in literary studies from its sociocultural function as the sign of a *Lebenswelt*, a lived experience. Let me elaborate. Although neither the anonymous author of *Marita* nor his readers had the Victorian interpretive codes that animate scholarship in the field available to them, Victorianism was central to their identity as West African Creoles—they were part of an elite that needed Victorian ideas, ideals, and practices to distinguish themselves from other colonized Africans (see Echeruo; Wyse). *Marita* carries the signs of these Victorian rules but not quite in the way they were being rehearsed in Britain in the nineteenth century or in the way Romanow reads them; on the contrary, a closer examination of these codes reflects their simultaneous use and displacement—they are signs out of place, connected to the familiar Victorian literary tropes, such as romance and domesticity, but also excessive of them.

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The signs I have in mind here can be found in *Marita* at the most prosaic level—the question of marriage. As Stephanie Newell has shown in her authoritative introduction to the novel, *Marita* takes up the question of marriage not merely as a literary trope borrowed from nineteenth-century British fiction but as one of the central questions in Fanti identity in the face of the Marriage Ordinance of 1884, which prohibited polygamous unions among Christians (Introduction 4–10). Multiple marriages lay at the heart of Euro-African identity; they enhanced domestic relations that were simultaneously endogamous and exogamous, enabling Creoles to consolidate their claims to native law and custom while developing marital links across borders (see Cromwell; Mann). In effect, readers of *Marita* probably read marriage as a literary trope that carried the existential weight of community building for two sides: on one side were Creoles who needed a trope borrowed from Victorian romance as part of the foundational narrative of a formerly enslaved people reinventing themselves as free subjects; on the other side were Euro-Africans—descendants of the intermarriage between Fanti elites and European slave traders—who assumed that romance would help in the invention of a community in the gray zone between Africa and Europe.

Unlike the enslavement of the previous three centuries, Victorianism on the West African coast was seen as a cure for displacement: for Africans "returning" from enslaved worlds in places as diverse as Jamaica, Brazil, and Nova Scotia, Victorianism was the source of the habits and ideas that they had shared in the Americas in one form or another; rehearsing a "Victorian way of life" through writing, speaking, and fashion enabled West African Creoles to negotiate "the cross-roads of civilization" (Echeruo 35). And for Euro-Africans caught between the worlds of the European father and the Fanti mother, Christian marriage within the bounds of African beliefs and practices held the possibility of living in two worlds simultaneously—that of British law and Fanti custom (see Newell, *Literary Culture*; Jackson).

Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the deployment of the term *Victorian* in everyday life was a way of unifying black elites in the African diasporic world in the nineteenth century and a catalyst for narratives of decolonization across the Black Atlantic (see Gikandi, "Embarrassment" and "Afro-Victorian Worlds").[2] Looking back at his childhood in colonial Trinidad in *Beyond a Boundary*, James was categorical that the values and ideas that defined his world were Victorian, embodied by "the solid British middle class, Puritanism incarnate, of the middle of the nineteenth [century]" and associated with many forms of restraint (40). At the same time, this culture provided him, in the form of literary texts, an arsenal that would enable dissent: "The years passed. I was in my teens at school, playing cricket, reading cricket, idolizing Thackeray, Burke and Shelley . . ." (5). Later on, he writes, "I discovered in the college library that besides *Vanity Fair* Thackeray had written thirty-six other volumes, most of them with pictures by himself? . . . After Thackeray there was Dickens, George Eliot and the whole bunch of English novelists" (28).

Returning to her native South Africa in 1955 for the first time since she left as a child to study in Britain, Noni Jabavu, the Afro-British writer and editor, assumed almost instinctively that the photograph of her illustrious grandfather, John Tengo Jabavu, found in a chest of drawers in her family home in South Africa (fig. 1), was emblematic of the Victorian world of IsiXhosa elites:

> [A] solemn group posed outside the old office of my grandfather's newspaper. He was only in his early thirties, but he looked imposing, old, established, wearing a big Victorian moustache, in buttoned-up jacket, wing-collar. The other men, sub-editors, reporters, were in full fig-frock coats, cravats, spats. (105–06)

Here, we have an example of Victorianism on display as fashion, sign, and insignia.

Coevalness and Belatedness

Whether it is pegged on globalization or provincialization, Victorian studies has generally suffered from what Johannes Fabian has called "a denial of coevalness"—a tendency to locate the experiences

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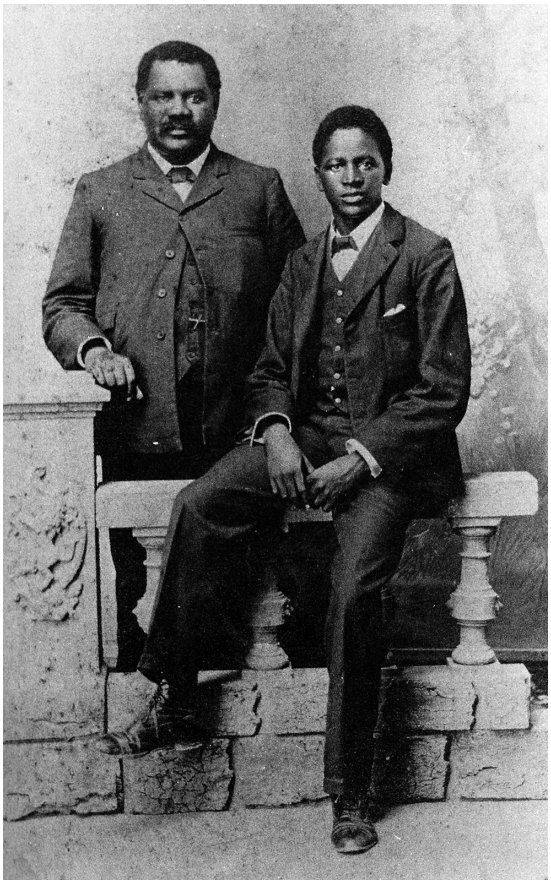


Fig. 1. John Tengo Jabavu and his son Davidson Don Tengo.

of others "*in a time other than the present*" (31). As both Steinlight and Romanow deftly show, the Victorian studies project of mid-century and the new Victorian studies of the twenty-first century generally assume that the colonized operated in a temporality removed from the world of the colonizers and subordinated to the logic of power. However, the lesson from the archive is different: Sol T. Plaatje, the South African writer, was a witness at the 1899 siege of Mafeking, considered by many to be the last gasp of the British Empire, and his *Mafeking Diary* should be essential reading in Victorian studies. James Hutton Brew, who was probably the author of *Marita*, was born in 1844, was sent to England at eight, and started practicing law on the Gold Coast in 1864; he was without doubt a contemporary of the so-called eminent Victorians of the period.

Still, the question of coevalness is complicated by the belatedness of Victorianism in Africa—the fact that the ideas and texts of the age gained traction on the continent when it was considered over in Britain. In Africa, the high point of Victorianism was the 1940s, not the 1840s. Although Plaatje's novel *Mhudi* was not published until 1930, it echoes, as do many African novels in the early twentieth century, Victorian romances of the 1880s and 1890s. Victorian ideas and texts resonated when Victorianism was no longer associated with empire. Given this temporal doubleness—the concurrence of coevalness and belatedness—literary critics need to figure out the meaning of the term *Victorian* as a category in and out of time and of Victorianism as a cultural practice that resonated in different ways across the landscape of empire. What we want this Victorianism (or Romanticism or modernism) to do for us is a subject worthy of attention and debate, but it would be useful to think of how ideas and theories germinate and circulate outside what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called North Atlantic universals (142–43).

Notes

1. My idea of an otherwise Victorian is analogous to Trouillot's notion of the "otherwise modern": "As part of the geography of imagination that constantly recreates the West, modernity always required an Other and an Elsewhere. It was always plural, just like the West was always plural. This plurality is inherent in modernity itself, both structurally and historically. Modernity as a structure requires an Other, an alter, a native—indeed, an alter-native. Modernity as a historical process also created this alter ego, as modern as the West, yet otherwise modern" (147). My concern in this essay is the cultural work of the native, not as the other but as a Victorian with a difference.

2. Some of the arguments in this essay were first presented in "The Other Victorians: What If Jane Eyre Was a Missionary?," the third of the Clarendon Lectures that I presented to the English Faculty at the University of Oxford, on 4 Nov. 2025.

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