Theories and Methodologies

Field and Formation

ZACHARY SAMALIN

In his writings on the sociology of culture, Raymond Williams distinguished between institutions and formations. Institutions, in Williams's framework, facilitate the selection, incorporation, and dissemination of cultural practices into a dominant order. In *The Sociology of Culture*, Williams begins his analysis of cultural institutionalization with a historical survey of the changing position of medieval Welsh bards; he ends with a long discussion of intellectuals, including their place in the modern university. In both cases, he describes how institutions mediate the relationships between cultural producers and the social systems that organize their worlds. The processes of socialization and education, Williams writes in *Marxism and Literature*, also depend on the selective transmission of cultural practices and norms through institutions: "Education transmits necessary knowledge and skills, but always by a particular selection from the whole available range, and with intrinsic attitudes, both to learning and social relations, which are in practice virtually inextricable" (117–18).

Williams insists, however, that attaining a comprehensive sociology of culture "is never only a question of formally identifiable institutions. It is also a question of *formations*; those effective movements and tendencies, in intellectual and artistic life, which have significant and sometimes decisive influence on the active development of a culture, and which have a variable and often oblique relation to formal institutions" (117). Circles, coteries, clandestine groups, shared habits of thought and focus—such formations contribute to culture, Williams writes, without being reducible to that culture's institutions. Thinking about formations reminds us that even the dominant culture is necessarily a subset of a broader

ZACHARY SAMALIN is associate professor of English at New York University. His book, *The Masses Are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust*, is published by Cornell UP.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America
PMLA 141·2 (2026), doi:10.1632/S0030812926101850

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cultural whole—indeed that "typically [dominant groups] are dominant *within* rather than over and above" a culture (*Sociology* 218). Formations fall outside, offer necessary alternatives to, and can even oppose a hegemonic culture and its institutions. Consistent with Williams's thinking on most topics, these are relations of degree, not binary characterizations. Even within "an apparent hegemony . . . within what can be recognized as the dominant," Williams qualifies, there are "effectively varying formations which resist any simple reduction to some generalized hegemonic function" (*Marxism* 119).

Williams's discussion of cultural formations frames my response to Emily Steinlight's and Jacob Romanow's essays about the institutionalized study of the British nineteenth century. Williams's sociology of culture can also help us think through our brutal present, as the spectacular collapse of US hegemony continues to throw our institutions of higher education into an intensified political crisis, to which they are either unwilling or incapable of responding. Steinlight's intervention, in particular, bears directly on the inability of our academic institutions—including universities, departments, disciplines, journals, professional associations, and so on—to meet the moment. While our institutional failures have been thrown into sharpest relief during the present authoritarian escalation under Donald Trump, academic institutions have long shown unmistakable signs of increasing instability and contradiction, most acutely in universities' violent crackdown on student and faculty protest of the genocide in Palestine. This violence has tended to be rationalized in the name of institutional self-preservation, reflecting the sharp divergence of interests between institutions and their own members around one of the central political issues of our historical moment. Scholarly associations such as the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association have also invoked institutional interests as rationales for refusing to recognize the legitimacy of members' pro-Palestinian advocacy. In all these cases, people have asked for more from their institutions, only to be let down again and again. What generates the expectation that such institutions will respond to demands from the bottom up in the first place? Cruel optimism, perhaps. But today's volatile situation is usefully illuminated by thinking granularly about our place in the institutions to which we belong, however ambivalently, which Williams's formulations challenge us to do.

In the face of such broad and severe crises, it can feel almost decadent to worry about the comparatively narrow interests of a single discipline, let alone a subfield of that discipline—in this case, Victorian studies. As the hegemonic project of US imperialism collapses and gives way to more nakedly coercive forms of domination, it is not only specific disciplines and fields that are at risk but also long-standing commitments to the relative autonomy of academic institutions and inquiry. The Trump Department of Education's Compact for Excellence in Higher Education, for instance, directly targets the foundations of postwar higher education. It seeks to undermine the contradictory arrangements of sanctioned independence and mutual need that, since the start of the Cold War, have existed between the research university and the scientific, political, and cultural aims of US hegemony. Perhaps most fatally, university leaders have been unwilling, if not structurally unable to make the case even for the kind of universities they once led. Instead, boards of trustees, many of them including ride-or-die participants in the right wing's nihilistic agenda, along with a perversely incentivized class of opportunistic administrators, relay and even amplify the coercion. Together, these leaders have been abandoning our universities from within while the Trump administration dismantles them from above.

From the perspective of humanities disciplines, however, the intentional abandonment and withdrawal of resources are hardly news. Even the most economically secure and politically insulated humanities faculty member is in a position to see that it is the current intensification of destructive energies, not the dismantling of institutions itself, that is new. Over the course of my education and career, the professoriat in the humanities has been effectively casualized, and thereby denied any semblance of academic freedom, by our own institutions;

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press

surely this has transformed the terms of humanistic knowledge production more than anything else this century. That said, we should not let the self-inflicted austerity of today's academy gloss over yesterday's coercion. With this in mind, Steinlight's essay about the Cold War origins of Victorian studies offers a timely reminder. If in the 1950s the state took an interest in humanistic fields, even those that seem politically innocuous today, it was because it saw investment in culture as part of the broader, strategic pursuit of political dominance. The military-industrial complex once had a commitment to the liberal arts education. But in order to turn on the Ford Foundation–CIA funding tap, Steinlight reminds us, fields had to make the case for their utility. It would be perverse to be nostalgic for that incentive structure, but it should not be lost on anybody in the humanities that the United States of the twenty-first century takes a radically impoverished interest in culture. This withdrawal of the institutional resources that allow cultural inquiry to subsist indicates a more fundamental decline of US hegemony.

The study of the nineteenth century—and specifically of the nineteenth-century British empire—is meaningfully implicated in these broader questions about the imperial decline of the United States and the fate of the university. Steinlight shows how the newly institutionalized field of Victorian studies, like the area studies fields it emulated, was embedded in the Cold War projects of statecraft and knowledge production. She describes a fledgling field that eagerly sought to produce knowledge about the British nineteenth century that would suit the needs of the American twentieth. That this scholarly accommodation involved the designation of Victorian Britain as the "first of what we now call the emerging nations" showcases the field's pragmatic drive to make itself useful to the Cold War apparatus (Wolff 62). If knowledge of the Victorian past could be applied to the so-called developing world, then Victorian studies had something more than the historical comparison between US and British imperial rule to offer in exchange for institutional resources and prestige. This is not to say that every Victorianist circa 1960 was playing out some anticommunist, counterinsurgent Graham Greene plotline (though surely some were); but Steinlight does uncover an effective orientation, at the level of disciplinary structures and scholarly priorities, toward the accommodation of liberal empire at the height of the Cold War. The legacies of this accommodationist orientation are still felt today in the recent calls to transform or undiscipline the field. Scholars wishing to reform institutional Victorian studies will surely have to grapple with Steinlight's disinterment of the field's mid-century political entanglements.

The portrait of Victorian studies that Steinlight paints captures what Williams describes as an institution's capacity to press cultural tradition into the service of the dominant culture. But the institutionalized field of Victorian studies clearly did not exhaust the postwar cultural encounter with the British nineteenth century. On the contrary, precisely because the decolonization of the British empire enabled the transfer of hegemony from Britain to the United States, the mid-century intellectual encounter with nineteenth-century imperialism was felt to be urgent to a wide political spectrum of thinkers. Two significant counterpoints to the Cold War institutionalization of Victorian studies stand out: Jed Esty's account of British cultural studies and the rise of the New Left thinkers and Nasser Mufti's work on the centrality of Victorian culture to anglophone, and especially Caribbean, anticolonial thinkers in the early 1960s. These two cases confirm Williams's observation that a culture "is always more than the sum of its institutions" (*Marxism* 118).

In *The Future of Decline*, Esty describes Stuart Hall, Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Perry Anderson as "intellectual 'first responders' to the contraction of British power," engaged in the collective endeavor of analyzing what lay in store for a postimperial Britain (58). Perhaps most significant in this project was their analysis of what Esty calls the "deep freeze" of decline, or the sense that British society appeared to be clinging ever more tightly to its past despite incontrovertible evidence of historical movement. The waning of British power over the many decades of decolonization had not led to a concomitant dissolution of the ideologies of Victorian imperial dominance. Instead, they persisted as "undead leftover[s] from the long

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press

liberal hegemony of Victorian ruling-class habits of thought," Esty memorably writes (81). The "real mystery" for the British New Left, he claims, was "why decline exacerbated rather than mitigated the hierarchies of the Victorian age" (66). Williams's layered theorization of dominant, emergent, and residual historical formations, as well as his reassessment of the British literary tradition, Thompson's anatomy of the industrial working class, and Anderson's genealogy of the present crisis, all approached this question through a confrontation with the nineteenth century. These New Left thinkers produced, Esty argues, a collective account of 1960s imperial decline that offers a rough guide for navigating the collapsed hegemony of the United States of the 2020s.

If Esty reanimates the British New Left's post-imperial encounter with the nineteenth century, Mufti's work on Eric Williams and C. L. R. James stages an anticolonial one. Mufti describes how these thinkers saw "Victorian literature and culture as fields of intelligibility for the twentieth-century project of decolonization" (395). He makes clear that this field of intelligibility encompasses not only James's overtly political engagement with the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* but also his writings on cricket and his appreciation of William Makepeace Thackeray's novels. Mufti also observes that although this tradition of thought overlaps with that of British cultural studies, they do not coincide point for point, as James's critique of Raymond Williams's provincialism illustrated. Like the New Left thinkers who were their contemporaries, James and Eric Williams also set their sights on the nineteenth century. But they did so, Mufti argues, to counterintuitively envision and anticipate postcolonial independence rather than grapple with British decline from within. "What these thinkers embraced," Mufti concisely puts it, "was the force of their relation to the Victorian past as a way to negate it" (395).

It is useful to take a step back and consider these three mid-century encounters with the nineteenth century, bearing in mind Raymond Williams's distinction between institution and formation. In each case, knowledge of the nineteenth-century past was used in confronting a mid-twentieth-century present of decolonization, imperial decline, and a new consolidation of power. However, of the three, only institutional Victorian studies posited that this knowledge was useful to a hegemonic cultural project, even while the field ostensibly maintained relative autonomy. By contrast, British cultural studies and 1960s West Indian anticolonial thought were, in distinct ways, significant counterhegemonic formations. Their practitioners cut across and moved in and out of widely varied institutional settings in Britain, the Caribbean, and the United States; influenced a range of cultural practices far beyond those settings; and in crucial ways intersected with and were supplemented by each other and by other formations, such as feminist theory. All three encounters shared the nineteenth century as a common object, but the two formations put that object to uses that were irreconcilable with its institutional mobilization. Williams's distinction between institutional culture and the oppositional and alternative formations that exceed its domain is especially apt. If Victorian studies was attached to the dominant cultural order, it was "dominant *within* rather than over and above" the broader range of cultural practices shaping the mid-century intellectual encounter with the nineteenth century (*Sociology* 218).

It seems safe to say that the days in which Victorian studies could persuade either a CIA-backed foundation or the editors of *Foreign Affairs* of its urgency to the contemporary political field are behind us. Though no one should mourn the passing of those days, we should also attribute this field's relative devaluation and contraction in large part to the US university's abandonment of humanistic learning in general, in tandem with the slow collapse of the United States' hegemonic project. However, some interesting things have happened since 1960 to the institutional study of literature and culture, including that of the nineteenth century. In 1963, for instance, Edward Said was hired by Columbia University as a scholar of the late Victorian novels of Joseph Conrad. Starting with his early book on Conrad, Said produced one of the most significant comparative accounts of cultural production in the nineteenth-century British empire. His work had a tremendous impact on

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the entire discipline of literary and cultural studies, including Victorian studies—but I have never heard anyone describe Said as working in that field. He published his first and I believe only piece in *Victorian Studies* in 1970: a four-page review titled "Eight Books on Conrad." His other studies of Victorian texts appeared outside the field, including his landmark reading of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* in "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims," published in the first issue of *Social Text* in 1979.

One could say similar things about other thinkers—such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—whose work impacted the whole discipline of literary studies in the United States through profound encounters with the British nineteenth-century cultural field that did not, and could not, originate within institutional Victorian studies. In Williams's terms, the gradual acceptance of such work might appear as a process of institutional absorption of oppositional, even dissident formations, at the height of US hegemonic power. Certainly thinkers like Said and Sedgwick were embedded in institutions. Said, after all, became the president of the MLA, and it was likewise at an MLA convention that Sedgwick read "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl." But it is not clear whether such milestones indicate a process of institutional incorporation or the gradual transformation of the institution by the cultural formations that surround it. It seems to me an open question. Did formations like postcolonial studies and queer theory enter into the formal institutions of literary studies in the United States thanks to the ability of those institutions to absorb, even neutralize, dissident knowledge? Perhaps it was, on the contrary, thanks to institutional instability when facing the dissidence that such knowledge produces.

Williams asserts in *Marxism and Literature* that our cultural institutions should most often be understood as relatively rather than fully hegemonic, even when they do not notably stand in opposition to the dominant social order. It is their relative character that Williams always emphasized, reminding readers that institutions are themselves a terrain of struggle, not foregone conclusions. Given the forum for this piece of writing, thinking about the longer arc of our schools and professional associations is an apt place to conclude.

I end with an episode taken from research that I am currently conducting with a group of undergraduate and graduate students, focusing on my home institution, New York University, during the McCarthy era. In 1946, Lyman Bradley, the chair of the NYU Department of German and the MLA treasurer since 1931, was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee for his work with the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, an organization aiding people fleeing violence and persecution at the hands of the Franco regime in Spain. As Phillip Deery has described in his pathbreaking work on Bradley's case, the entire JAFRC executive board, including Bradley, refused to turn over their books to the HUAC. They were subsequently convicted of contempt and sentenced to three months in prison; they appealed their conviction up to the Supreme Court, which upheld it, and served their sentences in 1950.

The NYU dean Thomas C. Pollock had suspended Bradley without pay following his initial conviction in 1947. Returning home from prison in 1950, Bradley held onto some small hope of resuming his teaching duties. Instead, Pollock brought charges against Bradley, accusing him of "a vicious crime involving moral turpitude" (qtd. in Deery 85). A hearing before a faculty senate subcommittee took place in January 1951. Bradley's colleagues found that he could be stripped of tenure and fired on account of his conviction for contempt; his dismissal was made official in late April that year. Thanks to Deery's important work, we know that Bradley's firing was part of a concerted effort by NYU administrators to "clean up the campus," ridding it of "suspicious or subversive" faculty members; these were the precise words that the NYU chancellor James Madden used during a visit he paid to FBI headquarters in Washington, DC, that March, asking for and receiving J. Edgar Hoover's assistance in NYU's proactive anticommunist efforts (qtd. in Deery 85–86). The FBI would provide NYU with apparent evidence not just of Bradley's subversive activities but also those of the English professor Edwin Berry Burgum's,

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who was fired for similar reasons in 1951. Examples of these punishable activities included organizing with the New York City Teacher's Union, founding and publishing in the Marxist journal *Science and Society*, and lecturing at the Jefferson School of Social Science, a left-wing workers' school, in the company of other subversives such as Dashiell Hammett and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Throughout the Bradley case, the MLA Executive Council remained deliberately neutral, though Deery shows that one member of the council was an FBI informant reporting about Bradley. Instead of taking a stand one way or another with respect to Bradley's conviction, the Executive Council decided to wait it out, while allowing Bradley to remain the treasurer of the MLA and to continue to draw his annual salary. Perhaps willfully, Bradley misinterpreted this studious neutrality as a vote of support for his academic freedom in the face of government and institutional persecution. He made public statements to this effect, for which he was reprimanded by the Executive Council after Pollock, also an English professor and MLA member, complained to the MLA secretary William R. Parker. Only after Bradley returned home from prison in late 1950 did the Executive Council finally stake out a position by passing a resolution, published in the February 1951 issue of this journal, that read:

> The Executive Council does not approve the past political actions of the Treasurer of the Modern Language Association. For these actions he has paid the penalty of the law. In the light of extended inquiry by the Advisory Committee and after full discussion, the Council now considers that no further action in the investigation of its Treasurer be taken. . . . For the future guidance of its officers, the Council suggests that since the MLA "makes no discrimination among persons based on racial, religious, or political preferences," its officers should abstain from activities involving such preferences except as called for by its pledge of national service to the government of the United States. (Parker 120–21)

Bradley resigned from his position as the treasurer in September 1951, surely reluctant to take the MLA's proposed monastic vow of political abstinence while all around him colleagues and comrades paid the heavy price of McCarthyism. A little over a year later, Pollock—who by then had presided not only over Bradley's termination at NYU but also that of Burgum's—joined the MLA Executive Council as the vice president. Unlike Bradley's antifascist activism, Pollock's ongoing efforts at NYU to square avowed anticommunism with a purported commitment to academic freedom never invited the formal disapproval of the MLA.

The MLA's wait and see response was a far less punitive course of action than those pursued by private universities like NYU, which had no legal obligation to take heed of the witch hunts in Congress but nonetheless proactively appeased and even joined forces with anticommunists in Washington against its own faculty. Yet the MLA's posture of neutrality, asserted in the pursuit of institutional interests, necessarily conferred legitimacy on government efforts to chill political speech and advocacy during the McCarthy era. The resonances of this Cold War episode with the MLA's actions in 2024, when the Executive Council refused to forward a proposed resolution in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement to the Delegate Assembly for a vote, are striking. In both the 1950s and 2020s, the MLA sidestepped the most salient political questions of the day, despite efforts by its own members to advocate against brutality abroad—in 1940s Spain and present-day Palestine—and against antidemocratic and authoritarian tendencies at home. It did so in 2024 in the name of its institutional interests—in this case fiduciary—even while implicitly recognizing that those interests are pressured and shaped by partisan, reactionary, and potentially unconstitutional political forces. As in the past, the effect of this posture of neutrality is to reinforce the power of coercion, while also undermining its own institutional legitimacy.

Compared with the 1950s, however, the organization's membership today has been far more vocal in its criticism. Two members of the Executive Council have resigned, and eight past MLA presidents have authored a public letter calling on the MLA to let Resolution 2025.1 come to a vote in

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Delegate Assembly (Bérubé et al.). Many members of the MLA, myself included, have protested by refusing to renew their membership or attend the annual convention, and two members have publicly declined MLA publication prizes (Bhattacharya; Mor). Most significantly, many members of the MLA's executive forums have resigned in protest, including members of the forums on postcolonial studies; Marxism, literature, and society; twentieth- and twenty-first-century English and anglophone; and memory studies, among others (Newfield et al.). These resignations impact the MLA at the basic level of the production of knowledge.

Such principled criticism reflects the extent to which members of the profession want, and perhaps even expect, our institutions to reject the Cold War political and cultural project of US hegemony, of which unconditional support for the partition and occupation of Palestine has long been a part. The expectation that institutions no longer participate in this political project indexes the desire for and, at least, the possibility of their relative autonomy. Many people I know were reluctant to leave the MLA, and this does not strike me as cruel optimism. The MLA has allowed many in our profession access to important intellectual formations that have not always found alternative institutional homes. Yogita Goyal, for instance, has written that the recently founded Association for Postcolonial Thought "had its inception in an MLA Executive Forum on Postcolonial Studies." Yet the association's independent formation was partly motivated, she writes, by "the 2017 MLA resolution against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement" (8). The statement captures the institutional double bind we now face on a larger scale. It is possible for a cultural institution, even an established, nonoppositional one, to resist full incorporation into the dominant order, but to do so it must integrate the formations that challenge its interests and force it to change its rationales. At the present moment, when not just the brittleness but also the exhaustion of US hegemony is on full display, such resistance is necessary for our institutions' survival.

Works Cited

Bérubé, Michael, et al. "Former Modern Language Association Presidents Call for BDS Vote." *Literary Hub*, 7 Jan. 2025, lithub.com/8-former-modern-language-association-presidents-call-for-bds-vote.

Bhattacharya, Tithi. "My Letter to the Modern Language Association (MLA) Refusing the Prize for My Book." *Tithi Bhattacharya*, 3 Dec. 2025, www.tithibhattacharya.net/new-blog/2025/12/3/my-letter-to-the-modern-language-association-mla-refusing-the-prize-for-my-book.

Deery, Phillip. *Red Apple: Communism and McCarthyism in Cold War New York*. Fordham UP, 2014.

Esty, Jed. *The Future of Decline: Anglo-American Culture at Its Limits*. Stanford UP, 2022.

Goyal, Yogita. "Anticolonialism as Theory." *Representations*, vol. 162, no. 1, spring 2023, pp. 1–10.

Mor, Liron. "MLA and BDS 9: Letter by Liron Mor Declining 2025 Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literary Studies (Guest Post)." *Remaking II: Long Revolution*, 26 Nov. 2025, utotherescue.blogspot.com/2025/11/mla-and-bds-9-letter-declining-2025.html.

Mufti, Nasser. "Hating Victorian Studies Properly." *Undisciplining Victorian Studies*, special issue of *Victorian Studies*, edited by Ronjaunee Chatterjee et al., vol. 62, no. 3, 2020, pp. 392–405.

Newfield, Christopher, et al. "MLA and BDS 9: Open Letter to MLA Leadership from MLA Forum Executive Committees." *Remaking II: Long Revolution*, 11 Mar. 2025, utotherescue.blogspot.com/2025/03/mla-and-bds-8-open-letter-to-mla.html.

Parker, William R. "Meetings of the Executive Council." *PMLA*, vol. 66, no. 1, Feb. 1951, pp. 120–21.

Said, Edward W. "Eight Books on Conrad." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, June 1970, pp. 429–33.

Said, Edward W. "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims." *Social Text*, no. 1, winter 1979, pp. 7–58.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford UP, 1978.

Williams, Raymond. *The Sociology of Culture*. U of Chicago P, 1995.

Wolff, Michael. "Victorian Study: An Interdisciplinary Essay." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1964, pp. 59–70. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3825211.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812926101850 Published online by Cambridge University Press