THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Notes on a (Victorian) River

ANJULI FATIMA RAZA KOLB

In November 2023, I visited the Tarbela Dam, about fifty kilometers upstream from Attock Fort on the Indus River, or a bit north of the halfway point between Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, and Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the northwest mountainous province that abuts Afghanistan. I was beginning research on two book projects and hoping to reestablish relationships in a part of the country in which my family never really lived. My little daughter had taken her first steps days before—on the day that we landed in Pakistan—and, on her still-unsteady legs, she climbed the stairs of the Tarbela Dam Monument (fig. 1). The site features a replica of the river, the surrounding topography, and the main dam itself. The area is highly militarized. Our permission to enter the dam site, to cross the dam road and stand at the top of the massive spillway, to touch the opal water in the pool below was brokered by the son of a long-ago slain army pilot, on those credentials. After visiting the monument, we were served tea and aloo cutlets at the officers' rest house, and then another tea after viewing construction progress on the fifth extension hydropower project, which is slated to begin producing energy this year (2026) following nearly 700 million dollars in investments from the World Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Tarbela is the largest earth- and rock-filled dam in the world. The haze, the mountains, the calcium deposit stains leaking down the spillways, the rebar, the random application of handmade tile, the chipped-paint steel guardrails, the spiraling paths up the earth-filled hills, the opaque, nearly sick blue of the water—like Shark Bites gummies—no matter how many horrifying things you have read

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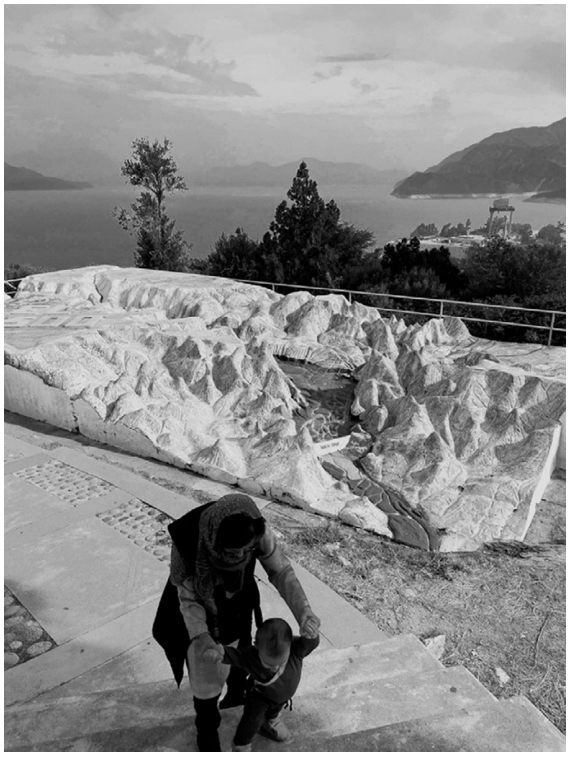


Fig. 1. Personal photograph, Tarbela Dam and Monument, Nov. 2023.

about megadams, the scale is still insane to behold.[1] It is violent beyond comprehension. It is astonishingly beautiful. You can see it from space.

When the Northern India Canal and Drainage Act was signed by Thomas Baring, Governor General of India, in 1873, it declared the government's entitlement to "use and control . . . the water of all rivers and streams flowing in natural channels, and of lakes and other natural collections of still water" for "public purposes" ("Act No. VIII" 51). Partly as a provocation and partly as historical acknowledgment, one might say this was the moment the Indus became Victorian. This might also be a fun moment to remember that Empress Victoria never once visited India. From the 1830s onward, the Indus —a silty, sometimes slow, and inconsistently channeled river flowing down from Himalayan snowmelt—was a heavily trafficked transportation channel for goods and soldiers. Enormous, heavy steamships sludged waters along the north–south routes between the military bases in the mountains and the Arabian Sea.[2]

Prior to the enactment of the 1873 Canal and Drainage Act, Indian waters, particularly those deemed necessary for drainage and transport, were under imperfect jurisdiction and heavy use by the Crown. This ever-growing bureaucracy frequently challenged private ownership and community management.[3] Large-scale infrastructure, once supported by private investment, rapidly reverted to the recently established state in the decades following the Government of India Act in 1858, mostly in response to the military's "failure" to suppress the 1857 uprising. A push for accelerated railway development—the most efficient means of transporting soldiers around the lower deltas of the Himalayan rivers, where the waterways were, according to observers, "tortuous in the extreme" (Andrew 10)—filled many pages of the reports and recommendations dispatched by British officials stationed in India in the years following the Mutiny. Labor, materials, and land for the railway were requisitioned in the ordinary, bloodthirsty ways, but I can find no law in this period of British imperial history, including the Land Acquisition Act of 1870, that arrogated complete control of every square meter of earth (Beverly).[4] The domestication and governance of the waterways posed different metaphysical challenges. As the historian David Gilmartin points out, the sweeping megalomania of the Canal and Drainage Act was shocking even in its moment:

> The extent of this claim to state ownership over water astonished some foreign observers. As one American commented, the government's claim in the Canal Act to "absolute right" over "the waters of all streams and lakes" was beyond anything that could be contemplated in the United States (except perhaps in unsettled territories). (106)[5]

The act further outlines the government's intention to construct watercourses and canals and to collect water rent from all who use them ("Act No. VIII" 67); it articulates the unilateral right to decide if "improvements" need to be made, and then to

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charge annually, with interest, for use of these improvements (74); it states the Crown's intent to compel labor from local landowners' tenants and neighbors in the case of urgent hydrological works (76); it outlines punishments for refusing to work or making autonomous use of water resources that have been otherwise "improved" (77). In short, the 1873 Canal Act formalized total ownership and right to monetize and repurpose the snowmelt of the Himalayas for British advantage.

This legislation, perhaps even more than the construction of the Tarbela Dam (operational in 1976) and all its unfathomable human and environmental costs, erased millennia of history and community riparian life in the Indus basin, including the legacy of one of the four oldest civilizations in the world. It also set the terms, legal and metaphysical, of water control and ownership that continue to bedevil Pakistan and India, the latter of which suspended the world's longest-standing water-sharing agreement after a group of rebels killed twenty-six people in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, in April 2025 ("'Act of War'").

The breakdown of this treaty has been in Indian sights for decades because of the mistaken perception that the treaty favors irrigation, agriculture, and the right to build works for Pakistan. Policy experts are predicting World War III and a nuclear winter. Anyone who has been paying attention knows the rate of glacial melt will mean even less water to mince and chop, cubic meter by cubic meter. As I read analyses of the treaty's breakdown, I receive yet another email from my employer offering me money (more than my last three annual raises) in exchange for incorporating generative AI into my classes. While I am deleting the email, I get a *Guardian* alert that AI data centers have produced as much CO_2 as New York City in 2025. I wonder how much purchase I can get out of a lesson plan for a class on empire and ecology built around the data showing that glacial melting and deforestation are supercharging climate crises and displacement in Pakistan (Chughtai and Ali). I think about how much historical background I will need to provide so that we can collectively contemplate why a water-sharing agreement between India and Pakistan—negotiated (of course) by the World Bank between 1947 and 1960—was necessary. I wonder if my students will accept that the answer can be located once again in the last decades of the nineteenth century. What it will mean to wager that partition was Victorian, that South Asian nation states are Victorian. Perhaps this is the worst insult I can think of.

I don't have space in these brief notes to elaborate the geopolitical and hydrological transformations that connect 1873 to the signing of the Indus Waters Treaty in 1960 or to the bloodbath over Kashmir that has long been used as an excuse for control of natural resources. But this is the framework within which I am thinking and working right now: a stretch of years from pre-Mutiny to post-independence in which everything is, at some cursed point in its historical DNA, Victorian. In my scholarship, it is always something of a perverse hypothesis to identify something as *Victorian*—an act of grief, often in a hyperbolic register that on closer examination reveals a queasy truth. The gesture is also practical in the sense that perhaps more than ever before, my ultraprofessional, decades-in-the-making technical take on what it is that writers do when we do research is to follow our honest and serious questions with the love of living human beings as our North Star. We should try to keep things tight and recursive, and keep an awareness about the whys of our questions. Much of the time this involves acts of archival recovery and inspiration, in the technical sense of breathing life into things. Equally often it leads us down historical paths at the ends of which are cartoon villains, tapping their tented fingers to a sinister chuckle and unfurling the blueprints of a devastating, dehumanizing future. Like many second-generation American children of the formerly colonized world, I was given Hardy, Forster, and Maugham by my parents when I was an adolescent. I still teach Defoe, Shelley, Humboldt, and sometimes even Austen. I don't think I've ever torn through novels in my life the way I have in the last three years. But when I tell my students that I do not care for English literature, I mean I want it to *die*. I mean it like Kincaid meant it when she wrote, in "On Seeing

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England for the First Time," that the Dover Cliffs were "the correct height from which all my views of England . . . should jump and die and disappear forever" (17).

Perhaps because of my pessimism, I appreciate the prompts from Emily Steinlight and Jacob Romanow to once again approach the status and uses of the Victorian in literary studies in this moment of heightened fascism in the United States. I particularly appreciate the rigorous historical framing of the field that Steinlight provides. These essays also invite me to rejoin a conversation that began more than half a decade ago at the MLA convention in Chicago. At the conference, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Christoff, and Amy Wong gathered a hungry and irritated group of Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous scholars to think about our self-inflicted wounds in the field and what, if anything, could be rehabilitated. Even within the group it was clear that I never have been nor ever will be a Victorianist any more than I am, say, an epidemiologist. Because I am interested in the power grids of epistemology and large formalized systems of empires and their aftermaths, I am perpetually reaching into the nineteenth century for texts and contexts. But that is part of the work of my field. Despite decades worth of assumptions by colleagues that my research is limited to the period after formal decolonization, I am a postcolonialist who works with the field's tripartite methodology: postcolonial scholarship is historicist, comparatist, and oriented toward the political present. I am often asked to teach in the nineteenth century because of staffing issues and curricular demands, to read book manuscripts and tenure files in the nineteenth century (not always related to British literary studies, Empire studies, or history of science), to provide seasoning suggestions to colleagues for their bland nineteenth-century syllabi, and—for the sake of white comfort—to prove competence in fields of those who have no reciprocal competence in mine.

At this point in our history as an immoral, failing empire, the study of literature at the undergraduate and graduate levels means some last hope of accessing the dignity of thinking, of revolutionary poiesis, and of not being used as advertising or LLM training data, period. These are incredibly humble ambitions that are extremely hard to achieve. Beyond these goals, I have never been less interested in participating in the gatekeeping hierarchies of the academy, and even less so in defining or fussing about what constitutes a field, a curriculum, or an adequate example of student work. Young people should be allowed to focus, share, talk, perceive, judge, act, think, create, and rest. These are, of course, luxury goods sold at astronomical financial, legal, and existential prices in 2026. Because I still believe in the political promise of serious play, I expend most of my professional energy trying to establish an environment that facilitates it and to encourage art making as an insurgent activity. Sometimes this is more effective and easier to do when you are working against the grain of student and administrative expectations, for example in a class that purports to be about Mary Shelley.

Imagine a group of young women dressed in matching anachronistic outfits of beige and light blue (fig. 2). Their kurtas bear embroidered patches of the Pakistani flag on one sleeve and a logo for their organization, the Pak Khawateen Painting Club, on the other. Their dupattas are arrayed with Girl Scout–style patches that seem initially to certify their skills in natural history, practical trades, and the arts—in fact, these patches are embroidered with provocative icons: zipped lips and floating topographies. They wear black plastic name tags bearing only their first names, reverse embossed in bureaucratic white. They carry simple leather satchels containing cameras, paints, paper, phones, and iPads. The women observe and sketch, snap photos and make rubbings. They love the river. They follow it north, north, and further north. They record its sounds. They ask about and try to find ancient petroglyphs from the Hindu Shahi and Buddhist periods. They sit with local trackers hired by rich foreigners who want to shoot deer in the game reserve. They are just girls! Painters appreciating the beauty of the Indus from all angles and every vantage point. They gain access to

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Fig. 2. Saba Khan, Untitled (Diamer Bhasha Dam, Kohistan), Mundane Futures Pavilion: Pak Khawateen Painting Club, 2022, mundanefutures.art/pak-khawateen/. Slide 9.

highly secured dam sites, administered by the Army and Water and Power Development Authority, and to future flood plains. They dine with Chinese engineers working in Kohistan. They scramble on boulders in remote, difficult-to-access sites in the shadow of Nanga Parbat (Diamer), the fastest-growing mountain in the world.[6] It is 2019, 2020, 2022. They are pretending.

The Pak Khawateen Painting Club was, among other things, a piece of durational performance art initiated by Saba Khan in 2019 for the 2020 Lahore Biennale. The group's work includes documentation of expeditions, incursions into infrastructural works and works-in-progress, installations of fictional museums in the vein of Marcel Broodthaers, mid-scale multimedia machines that malfunction over time, and Web 2.0–styled sites that read like World Bank Geoguesser games ("Indus Water Machines"). In the words of one of its founders:

> A group of women artists called the "Pak Khawateen Painting Club" (Pure/Pakistani Women's Painting Club) venture to the frontier of the Indus River for "plein-air" painting of nationalistic infrastructure projects: mega hydropower dams in the strategically sensitive north. Stereotyped as [a] benign, bourgeoisie group of patriotic conformists, these female painters don uniforms inspired by Pierre Cardin's 60s design for Pakistan International airlines' airhostesses. They enter sites built and imagined by powerful men to generate power and energy for the nation—only to subvert their prescribed roles. . . . The foregrounding of . . . organic forces, traditions, and aesthetic forms challenges the masculine rubric of colonial modernity, the epitome of which is hydrological engineering oriented towards commercial agriculture. The latter, which has resulted in the displacement of indigenous populations, unequal division of resources and inundation of histories, finds an unexpected foe in its (not so) "Pak" provocateurs. (Khan)[7]

Pak Khawateen Painting Club outlines a practice of serious play that succeeds in dissolving securitized barriers and "highlight[s] areas of indigenous and natural land that have been wiped away" in waves of brutal development (Alvarez). They particularly note the power of the painters being "[s]tereotyped

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as [a] benign, bourgeoisie group of patriotic conformists," of being "an unexpected foe." The effectiveness of their subterfuge is shockingly transferrable, as I learned when I brought my baby along for a poetry project in 2023. Their work is detailed and feminist, as delightful as it is terrifying. It reminds me of the memorable essay "Lanterns at Guantánamo" by the Canadian poet Jordan Scott, in which he describes and records, among other things, the sonic landscape at Gitmo that he was permitted to observe as a presumably nonthreatening poet for a media tour approved by the United States Southern Command in 2015. Like the Pak Khawateen Painting Club, Scott transmutes the shame and vulnerability of abuse and erasure at the hands of the state and points it squarely back at the perpetrators of this violence, making them look ridiculous, grasping, desperate, and small in comparison to the ocean that laps at the shores of their brutality.

Pak Khawateen Painting Club's interventions under the guise of feminine innocence and presumptions of the politics associated with a Romantic investment in nature are not unlike how it feels to be in the space I have previously called "paravictorian" (446). Talk about Collins or even Trollope, and doors will open. You walk through stating your credentials in hating this field professionally and no one seems to hear you.[8] Fake your way through job interview questions about Dickens and the nerves of a near-retired future colleague who has been teaching the Brontës for thirty years are soothed. You're asked to keynote the North American Victorian Studies Association annual conference, perhaps because the intellectual wells of actual Victorianists are running dry and have crusted over with white sediment. It's not that I don't think people should know these books, or have the skills and curiosity (by which I mean anger) to look into these archives. Competence in nineteenth-century history and major texts is a corequisite for postcolonial studies. But, as several friends have also recently observed, the task of engaging the desire and aesthetic conservatism that so often surrounds Victorian materials (including the purposes it serves in laundering money for the university in the name of the politically neutral humanities) from inside the cataract of last-stage capitalism and American imperial violence can feel borderline psychotic. If other others of Victorian studies—serious students, early career scholars, disenchanted senior experts, the many, many colleagues at the margins of a livable existence in academe—find themselves with precious little to say about the field at the moment, perhaps they would like to join me in a simple historicist's prayer: Fuck ICE. Free Palestine.

Notes

1. Arundhati Roy's 1999 *The Greater Common Good* remains on nearly every one of my syllabi and exerts a huge amount of force on my capacity to perceive these hydrological works.

2. See Dewey; Andrew, esp. chs. 2 and 6.

3. See Gilmartin, ch. 4; Haines, ch. 2.

4. For a nuanced account of the legal and mental gymnastics that did take place in Indian land law, see Bhattacharyya.

5. We cannot fail to observe the violence of the "except, perhaps" here, given the corpse-littered status of the so-called unsettled territories then and now.

6. Chinese development in Pakistan has accelerated in the last decades because of, in part, CPEC, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, a massive infrastructure network project currently underway to increase China's access to Middle East oil. See Samad.

7. At the time of this statement, members included Saba Khan, Amna Hashmi, Malika Abbas, Natasha Malik, Emaan Shaikh, and Saulat Ajmal.

8. For this phrase I am indebted to Nasser Mufti's "Hating Victorian Studies Properly."

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