Theories and Methodologies

Dislodged

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"Undisciplining Victorian Studies" was published five years ago, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the global uprisings that followed the brutal murder of George Floyd. We are grateful to be given the opportunity to consider its afterlife here among other methodological problems that the two essays anchoring this forum pose: the persistence of the field marker "Victorian" and the partial origin of the field of Victorian studies in Cold War American imperialism and class politics. Nonetheless, we found ourselves unmoored by the terms of this feature's title, "Victorian Studies and Its Others," lacking the coordinates for the very conversation we wished to have amid personal and professional shifts (motherhood; the neoliberal realities of higher education, including hiring freezes; the collapse of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; and the sharp rise of AI), and ongoing global catastrophe (fascism, the genocide against Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere, the retrenchment of capital in a supposedly "post" pandemic landscape). We proceeded by asking one another questions in the collective spirit of the original essay in the hopes of retracing a scholarly thread between then and now.

Ronjaunee Chatterjee: Part of the project of "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" was to think collectively without collapsing into the "we" that Dionne Brand writes is "innocently, casually summoned" when writing and talking about the nineteenth century (*Salvage* 11). It seems to be a point of trouble for both essays that inaugurated this feature: Who—and where—are "we"? I am curious as to how both of you locate yourself—or not—vis-à-vis this question of the "we" of reading. How far can we "stretch"?

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Alicia Mireles Christoff: I am so compelled by the text you cite: *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck*, in which Brand speaks to the deformations wrought on her own subjectivity by her education in the English novel, first in Trinidad and later at the University of Toronto. As you say, Brand questions the interpellative violence of a "we" that presumes whiteness, whether actual or aspirational, and, perhaps even more strikingly, she carves out an alternative space: "a reader like me." *Salvage* consolidates critiques by thinkers like Edward Said, Simon Gikandi, and Sylvia Wynter, but what makes the book so powerful is how directly Brand names the violence and racism of English novels, including *Robinson Crusoe*, *Mansfield Park*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Vanity Fair*: "A reader like me gets it" (117). Brand is careful to mark the complexities of autobiographical constructions, but she returns to this phrase repeatedly as a site of both devastation and power: Brand's reader is a Black colonial subject whose "life" has been in some ways "destroyed by books" (14) and yet who can see through the "thrall" of colonial narratives to name their pleasures and aesthetics as violence and directly speak to the impact of their "philosophy of humanism that we know is riven through with states of slavery" (135). Among the things that I want to mark is that it may be impossible both to be "a reader like me" and to willingly take on the moniker of being a "Victorianist."

I think this is part of what we were grappling with in "Undisciplining Victorian Studies." What were some of the mystifications we'd had to adopt, including about our own subject positions, in order to assimilate (albeit imperfectly) into the "we" of Victorian studies? Without imagining our experiences to be identical to Brand's or to one another's (the phrase "like me" is crucial and returns us to your question of stretch, Ronjaunee), we did recognize in one another an aspect of being destroyed by our reading, and for that matter by our training, which could also be described, in Brand's manner of understanding, as a kind of professional deformation. The live question was if our reading practices could be different within that space. This remains an open question, insofar as the warm reception of our essay does not necessarily indicate a change in practices in the scholarship and sociality of the field. Along with some of the other contributors to the special issue of *Victorian Studies* we edited, we worried in advance (and tried to write this concern into our piece) that our intervention would be domesticated along the lines of Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's "elite capture" or Jodi Melamed's "represent and destroy." Five years out from publication, has the field changed in a substantive way? Or does the premise of this forum not indicate that the terms of the debate ("Victorian Studies and Its Others") have not evolved as we hoped? If we recognize that both Emily Steinlight's and Jacob Romanow's articles might work, despite their sharp critiques of the field's formations and practices, to further entrench Victorian studies as a stable field, we might wonder not only why the debate has not evolved more fully but also how the debate can feel urgent at all given the current crises in higher education—and for that matter, the evisceration of civil rights enforcement across primary and secondary level public education and all the urgencies that creates.

Amy R. Wong: This question of how a discussion focused on field formation and its futures can feel urgent at all in this moment is so important to pose directly because it gets at a sense of enervation that I think the three of us share, which has crept up on us within the short span of the last five years. We can look to Brand to help us historicize what has happened since the summer of 2020. In a talk she gave in March 2021, when vaccines were rolling out and Joe Biden had been in office for a couple of months, Brand spoke about what was happening with the assumed "we" at that moment ("What We Saw"). She offered an urgent warning that this coercive "we" of the Global North—which was momentarily discomposed by the pandemic—was quickly recomposing, renormalizing into the liberal capitalist order desirous of getting back to "reality": that is to say, getting back to patterns of working and spending that bolster an enduring ideal of a bourgeois life. This is a "reality" that refuses to know the forms of racial capital—from

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policing and systemic dispossession to labor extraction from the Global South—on which it relies.

What Brand's talk five years ago and her indictment specifically of the English novel in *Salvage* makes me recognize now is how quickly that violent—indeed, psychotic—"we" was rhetorically ushered back into being by the North American political elite, as predicted and feared. By psychotic, I mean in a psychoanalytic sense: how the maintenance of a dominant aesthetic of "real life" depends on the splitting off from our consciousness the violence that living materially within this aesthetic requires. If Brand diagnoses "the gaiety" of Thornfield Hall in *Jane Eyre* as "animated by [the] sublimated violence" of the plantation in the nineteenth century (*Salvage* 44), then today we might diagnose the (Taylor) Swiftian joy of Kamala Harris's Democratic National Convention as animated by the sublimated violence of ongoing genocide. It is important to say that the summer of 2020, when we published "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," was a really different moment—one of real possibility, in that the global Black Lives Matter movement was taken up (if in part) by liberal elites and a US president put money directly into the pockets of Americans simply because we needed it. But retrenchment came so quickly. The psychosis of this retrenchment has been nowhere more horrifying than in the response to Gaza—for me, the continuity is clear between Victorian realism's innocence about colonialist violence and the sneering use of "idealism" to mock student encampments for being unrealistic while we daily streamed, on our phones, the reality of Palestinian children and other civilians being torn apart by US bombs.

As we noted in our essay, the continuities between Victorian literature and American imperial aesthetics were directly addressed by postcolonial scholars during the 1980s and into the 1990s, and we tried, as well, to bring attention to additional insights about racialization, including from Black studies and Afro-Caribbean scholarship, that had received less engagement in our field. Steinlight's essay, which sheds light on the field formation's imbrication with American statecraft at mid-century, asks us to reflect on the enduring "Americanness" of Victorian studies, cautioning against forms of presentism that may overstate the continuities of a "coherent Anglo-American world," even in critique. At the same time that I appreciate the importance of this kind of reflexivity in thinking about how we construct the past for the uses of the present, another part of me wants to weigh more heavily what Wynter calls the "social effectivities" of scholarship—even against a certain form of precision itself (241). What kind of world are we ushering forward in what we choose to pay attention to, and what we choose to emphasize? Something that has been perhaps harder for us to say directly—and that Alicia was just underscoring—is that we wanted to rethink how the moment in which we trained to become "Victorianists" brought with it social and political complicities that the postcolonial intervention of the 1980s had tried to break. From the standpoint of our generational position in the field and as women of color, it does not seem surprising that the field has been deafeningly silent on Palestine, as Priti Joshi has also recently noted (373). I wonder, how do you both see how the work in our special issue has been taken up in this most recent context, with the latest retrenchment that we have experienced in the last five years in mind?

RC: One question we posed in our essay is if Victorian studies could be re-formed, not reformed in the liberal sense of incremental improvement but quite literally reshaped to be unrecognizable to a status quo that privileges incuriosity about and sometimes outright dismissal of the deep racialized and economic violences that structure modernity and the literary texts and readers shaped by that process (and to refer back to Amy's point, a continued incuriosity and outright dismissal of the most pressing violences of the present, which include the genocide in Palestine and now Sudan). This is not simply a question of objects versus methods, because I do not think the two are that easily separable.

When I asked how far we can "stretch," I had in mind two contexts for the word that are at odds when we consider the capacities of a field to truly become porous to new, more insurgent thought, and to reshape itself. The first are the material

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realities of higher education today: the "stretching" of resources, teaching labor, and time amid their vast curtailment under a neoliberal austerity model. The second is Frantz Fanon's comment from *Wretched of the Earth* that "Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem" and that "everything . . . must here be thought out again" (5). The two are at odds because the real flourishing of a nonhomogenous "we" that does not simply entrench certain kinds of institutional power and privilege requires resources: funding and time for language training to undertake transnational and transimperial research, the ability to hire and tenure scholars without consideration for administrative imperatives, and the ability to take risks in how a field perpetuates—or does not perpetuate—itself.

Amid narrowed or even catastrophic conditions, the pressure on literary scholars to shore up tradition rather than continue to question it feels ever-present. I find myself unsatisfied with calls to think about, for example, this present as "Victorian, still," or other variations on that phrase that leave "Victorian" intact. Instead I have been thinking about historical difference through Hannah Arendt's description of Walter Benjamin as "a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange." In Arendt's words, these decayed fragments of the past "'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes" (206). It is interesting how Benjamin and the pearl diver are continuous with Brand's and Christina Sharpe's figure of the ship, the wreck, and the potential salvage work available when we confront the past as a catastrophe—yet a past that still might offer insight, perhaps in a radically recontextualized or new form. I am not disputing the impasse you point out, Alicia—that maybe a certain type of reader cannot and will not ever exist for Victorian studies. But given this lack of recognition or inclusion I find myself again searching texts for "the rich and the strange," or what I observe as emancipatory thought where it otherwise might not have been found.

ARW: The strangeness that you point to in salvage work is helping me think about a moment in Steinlight's essay, where Steinlight points to the elision of racial capitalism in a comment made by Michael Wolff, one of the founders of the journal *Victorian Studies*. In 1964, he drew an analogy between British classism and American racism in remarks on how examining "the modern white American's attitudes toward his Negro fellow-citizen, or, indeed, the general white attitude toward the nonwhite" could result in "a good deal to be learned about the respectable Victorian's attitude towards the nonrespectable worker." As Steinlight demonstrates, analogy keeps things separate and refuses the material historical facts of Anglo-American entwinement as colonial powers; the analogy is symptomatic of a form of American innocence that does not wish to know what makes the British empire continuous with American "soft power." I found it also strange and estranging that in 1964—which is the year the United States manufactured the Gulf of Tonkin incident to escalate military action in South Vietnam—Wolff chose to specify racism in the form of anti-Blackness in the domestic context of US citizenry (which perhaps was fantasized, in the moment of the civil rights era, to be attenuating). Simultaneously, it seems that the anti-Asian racism that contributed to millions of deaths in the so-called Cold War was relegated to the fogginess of "the general white attitude toward the non-white."

We might consider, then, what the mass killings of Asians in the Cold War—which are still so difficult for the West to conceptualize (in part because of its many "imperfect" victims, to borrow from Mohamed El-Kurd's recent critique of a colonialist "politics of appeal")—have meant for Victorian studies' field formation. Such considerations may very well mean an unraveling of our usual frames of reference, to pick back up on Ronjaunee's dissatisfaction with leaving "the Victorian" intact. Perhaps this gets us to the question that Romanow poses directly in his argument for narrowing the "Victorian" as a literary field of reference. One answer to what Victorian studies has to offer "other fields" is that it provides an extraordinary aesthetic archive of how coloniality and racial capitalist violence were produced. I agree that the concept of the "Victorian" as a literary field of reference does lend itself to nuanced explorations of how writers across

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the world engaged this field, a kind of complexity that Romanow models in his reading of A. Native's *Marita*. But I am not sure that "Victorian" needs only—or even primarily—to mean this.

AMC: You are both making such important points, and I feel again the thrill of thinking with you two. I am struck by your mention, Amy, of Wynter's notion of aesthetics informing "social effectivities"—how our modes of interpretation unwittingly reproduce our given social order unless we actively adopt interventionist "deciphering practices" (238)—and it makes me want to ask both of you where your work has taken you in the last five years, or really how you are even managing to keep on producing scholarship (or other forms of knowledge) given the crises unfolding around us.

In asking this question, I am inspired in part by a productive tension Steinlight highlights regarding the stakes of revisionary academic work:

> On the one hand, modifying methods or syllabi in disciplines facing planned obsolescence clearly does not in itself redistribute power or resources (or redress universities' perpetuation of racial capitalism through real-estate accumulation, racialized displacement, policing, and labor exploitation). . . . On the other, the expanded educational access and political mobilizations that have driven curricular changes, and the stakes of right-wing efforts to suppress the study of racism and gender and to monopolize so-called Western culture's meanings, affirm that universities are not only sites of cultural and class reproduction but also sites of struggle.

I appreciate this framing because it acknowledges that two things can be true at once: these smaller subfield correctives are most definitely not enough, and yet they are connected to a larger material struggle. For me, though, I have had to grapple with whether helping renovate an inherently colonial field is how best to participate in the struggle at the site of the university. (I think it's also useful to remember here that a central call of our essay was to simply ask that the interventions of previous generations be recognized in more substantive ways, as the major overhauls or course correctives they really are.)

I am trying to speak, too, to the profound pain and disappointment of living in the backlash to the real possibility for change and reparation we glimpsed in the protests of summer 2020. This is not only possibility foreclosed, but now more precisely massive state force unleashed for the purposes of repression and retribution. Nikole Hannah-Jones describes the defeat this way: "we got symbolic victories and now we're being met with structural resistance," on a breathtaking and death-dealing scale. I find myself drawn to formulations that, however painful, help articulate what I uncomfortably perceive to be my own complicity with state power, despite my feelings of grief or rage over its injustices. I think often of a remarkable poem from *the black maria*, by Aracelis Girmay:

> What world is this,
> my world, your world of wealthy thieves
>
> holding the guns to your heads,
> breaking your cervixes & bones
>
> while the rest of us light our candles & buy lipsticks.
> How is anything able to grow as we theorize about
> purity & rhetoric?
> . . . . . .
> In my countries of genocide,
> I implicate myself & dullen on. . . . (23)

Returning to Ronjaunee's opening question, I am read by the "we" that Girmay scripts, this "the rest of us" who "light our candles" in mourning but continue to consume, we who wept on the floor listening to Brand's 2021 talk live but continued to "amass amass amass" (Girmay 23), we who see videos of murder by soldiers at food lines in Gaza and by ICE agents in the streets of Minneapolis and Los Angeles, and who make donations, sign petitions, and then recover by scouring the Internet for the right shade of AOC red. I am troubled by the postures (in line with Wynter's notion of aesthetics contributing to existing "social effectivities") many academics tend to adopt: How long can we keep pretending to be the innocent, the hero, the one on the right side of history, the astute and therefore beyond blame? It is possible to stage

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resistance from an implicated place—as guiding lights like June Jordan have made clear.

The work that I have been able to find, when not paralyzed by the ethical impasses of raising young children into our "world of wealthy thieves," has involved a long-overdue transition into US Latinx studies in my teaching and writing. I have found a particular resource for myself and my students in contemporary poetry. This field change does not feel like enough (and I'm very aware of what a luxury it is, and how teaching with tenure at a well-funded small liberal arts college makes it possible), but alongside institutional organizing work for the Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine Network and our chapter of the American Association of University Professors, it feels to me like a more livable engagement with universities as "sites of struggle." Building on Amy's insights, I notice that there is no mention of Latin America in Steinlight's essay, but that is of course another crucial geography for understanding Cold War anxieties about the spread of communism and the implementation of the 1957 National Defense Education Act. The Cuban Revolution of 1959, for instance, is a missing but crucial specter here; we could insert it into the story of the founding of Victorian studies, or perhaps even more usefully study it to understand the ongoing South-to-North migrations driven by the violences of US empire. As we now enter a moment of freshly charged (and brazen) interventionism in Latin America, and as we feel its domestic effects—state-sanctioned terrorist raids and kidnappings, entire communities living in lockdown or fear—I cannot imagine teaching a course where there is not an explicit framework to discuss and historicize these events. I recognize that others have done and are doing justice work while teaching Victorian literature. But the truth is, I do not know how to do that anymore, if I ever did, and I have needed to give my attention to contemporary literature and theory that give me direct access to grappling with the events of the present. I am not saying this as something righteous or as the only "right" solution. I am speaking to my own need and to how I am best able to answer the needs of my students. And there is no question that my current courses draw far more students of color and first-generation students than my previous offerings in Victorian literature or the history of the novel ever did, and this quite simply feels better to me. I can understand how some might dismiss this position as naive, but despite any critique that can be intellectually launched (including the questions I ask myself about culture, assimilation, and privilege as a Mexican American from a newly middle-class, Detroit-then-suburban family), I know that this is a decolonial effort and that "to tenderness I add my action," to once again quote Girmay (101).

Amy and Ronjaunee, what still feels important to you to read, teach, and circulate ideas about in this moment of genocide, rising authoritarianism, and the state terror daily unfolding on our militarized streets? What new forms of Wynterian "deciphering practice" or sites of intervention have arisen for you?

RC: Part of what I hear in your question, Alicia, and in your response, is Theodor W. Adorno's oft-cited remark that "even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter . . . to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). There is no moral high ground to take that could exempt itself from a catastrophic social totality, a totality Adorno chillingly called "an open-air prison" (34).

Now it is obvious that in 2026, the work of doing literary criticism, writing poetry, and teaching and producing scholarly research operates under the shadow of this era's defining catastrophe, which is Palestine. Why could such work be considered "barbaric"? There is the question of the murder of poets, intellectuals, and English professors in Gaza, and the intentional targeting of those figures who use poetry and literature to keep revolutionary hope alive. It also feels, to me, that the very question of figure is at stake—when we use figurative language like analogy (as you point out, Amy), what are we actually saying? Only a reader attuned to the fragilities as well as to the power of figure can really hear through lines like Girmay's to their literal ground, which is shattering.

Yet like you both, my intellectual life has been deeply impacted by raising a child and feeling the

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insufficiencies of thinking purely in terms of catastrophe and the "tarrying with the negative" to which I have typically been drawn in my work (Žižek). I find myself desperately scouring all fields, all traditions, looking for what might point toward a future that does not look like this present. I have become totally omnivorous about looking for beauty in art and literature that could also be revolutionary, radical, and communal, which could mean, for example, rereading George Eliot's *Middlemarch* for communist hope rather than liberal disappointment. Some of this is inspired by Refaat Alareer, the murdered Gazan poet, literature professor, and activist whose lectures and syllabi are available online. In addition to lectures on Palestinian poets, his syllabi contain quite a lot of the "traditional" English canon, from John Donne to Charles Dickens. I am not using this fact to justify the same old perpetuation of the English canon and of Victorian studies in classrooms and conferences. I am, however, questioning the approach to these texts as one of only bad feelings or utilitarian dispassion. Alareer taught *Beowulf* and *Frankenstein* in the same material and political context as the poems of Ghassan Kanafani. Can we see them all as part of the same world, the same "totality" where nonetheless glimmers of "the rich and the strange" peek through this totality's violence and homogeneity?

This is not my return to uncritical humanism but an attempt in my current work to balance critical negativity with a sort of "utopian impulse," as Ernst Bloch would have it. I am interested both in Brand's hard reading of Victorian texts and in experimenting with ways of dislodging them from the bourgeois frames of field-making in the discipline.

ARW: What you both are getting at, in different ways, is that in spite of the disappointments of the last five years, and the dire moment that we find ourselves in, there are ways in which literature can still ground us. As you point out, Ronjaunee, what is meant by "the ground" are the material conditions that the figurative makes—or unmakes, or remakes. The insight that refiguring aesthetic and cultural productions (again, if they can deform us, they can also re-form us) can shift the grounds of our shared futures is one that has been important for my work, especially Édouard Glissant's and Wynter's (through C. L. R. James) shared interest in poiesis as grounded, anticolonial labor. I find myself wanting to return to our sense of feeling "unmoored," which we began with, in order to point out that what is also true is that we have each of us also found some bearings: not in the sense that we know where we are, but in the sense that we are feeling out potential coordinates in relation to one another, the essays that occasioned this conversation, and other others in our work and our lives (meant not as separate but as continuous spaces here). As Glissant teaches us in his concepts of *errance* and *métissage*, a poetics of relation engages opacity but is not the same as blind wandering without regard for the impact of our encounters on others.

I realize, as I am writing, that I am somewhat dodging your question, Alicia, about what new forms of work I am doing amid this time of retrenchment and terror. I find it hard to reinhabit the energies we found in 2020 when we put "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" together. It is an immense privilege, of course, to even get to think about my own avoidance. In this moment of not only retrenchment but, as Alicia notes, a return to "brazen" forms of interventionism, I find myself, like others, also thinking about the enduring consequences of Cold War–era liberalism and securitization before the latest wave of Sinophobic panic. In a new project, I am thinking about "quiescence" as a political and psychoanalytic strategy that contemporary Asian American literature deploys to confront difficulties in speaking about intergenerational trauma, given the still-limited ways in which the West has reckoned with the causes and consequences of violence in Cold War Asia.

I have been thinking quite a lot about what we avoid and defend against, and how those avoidances continue to condition the possibilities of not only what can be said but what can be collectively—and then also individually—understood. This thinking has driven me to seek training as a psychotherapist while I continue to hang on to a university job that feels increasingly untenable

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because of a number of reasons related to material and psychic sustainability that I am sure many of us in higher education—especially at regional and smaller colleges and universities, and nonelite publicly funded universities—have experienced. The work I am doing as a clinician feels serious and grounding in ways not unrelated to what we have been thinking about here. I am very new to clinical work and so I hesitate to say much more about it at present. But a colleague of mine at my training institute—who is also a writer—was remarking that the therapeutic hour can feel congruent with the time of writing in that both offer figuring capacities that enable small resistances to late-stage capitalist productivity's large-scale disabling and devastating effects. That seems right to me. Both literature and the therapeutic hour can carve out space for small disruptions and forms of living and not just surviving, even under the most dire conditions imaginable—as Alareer's life and work show us. It is good to be reminded that such work is always possible and that it may require, in this moment, a "dislodging" sensibility that Ronjaunee has so evocatively described—whether in relation to literary frames of reference, fields, or institutions.

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