Theories and Methodologies

# Disciplining and Punishing Victorian Studies

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For a long time, the story goes, we scholars supported a Victorian racial regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Disciplines were an injunction to silence discussions about race, an affirmation of its nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know. Such was the hypocrisy of our field with its halting logic.

But have we not liberated ourselves from those long decades in which the history of race must be seen first of all as the chronicle of an increasing repression?[1] Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Christoff, and Amy Wong's blockbuster "Undisciplining Victorian Studies," published in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests and amid the springtime of institutional multiculturalism, marks a break from the past and finally brings the study of race and empire to the fore of Victorian studies. Look up a program from a recent North American Victorian Studies Association conference and compare it to one from a decade ago, and the change in the field will be easy to see. It is now routine to encounter Victorianist scholarship on race and the British empire, and not uncommon for scholars, many still in graduate school, to work across languages and national traditions. As both Jacob Romanow and Emily Steinlight demonstrate, the undisciplining turn built on decades of interventions into the historical, national, and cultural limits of the Victorian. That said, or perhaps to this point, a text like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Three Women's Texts and the Critique of Imperialism" (1985) or Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) could have only dreamt of the

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immediate field-defining success in Victorian studies as undisciplining has enjoyed.

The theoretical muse for undisciplining was found in Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe is primarily concerned with what she calls "Black exclusion," an "ontological negation" in the afterlife of slavery (14). Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong adapt the specificity of Sharpe's account of Blackness/anti-Blackness and broaden it to think about race in relation to "methodology and politics" (370). What is Sharpe's intervention into method and politics? Early in her book, Sharpe argues that those who study "slavery and its afterlives encounter myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history, ethics, research, and method as we do our work. Again and again scholars of slavery face absences in the archives as we attempt to find," quoting Hortense Spillers, "'the agents buried beneath' the accumulated erasures, projections, fabulations, and misnamings" (12). This is why, Sharpe argues, in lines now memorized by every card-carrying Victorianist, "we must become undisciplined," because "the work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery" (13). Sharpe characterizes this "new analytic" as an "unscientific method" and calls it "wake work" (17).

Sharpe thinks of disciplines as repressive, in Michel Foucault's sense of the term. Here, power acts downward upon the subject and its history, what Foucault calls the "putative mechanics of power . . . that only has the force of the negative on its side, a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable only of posting limits, it is basically anti-energy" (85). So in Sharpe's disciplinary hypothesis, disciplines stifle, repress, rupture, silence, and make absent. Undisciplining, a discourse that fashions itself against the (presumed) rationality of disciplines ("unscientific method"), therefore seeks to liberate us from these repressive knowledges. Undisciplining sees, encounters, and grasps what Sharpe calls "that moment of historical and ongoing rupture," of "the past that is not past" (13).

But to accept this would be to ignore Foucault's most foundational insight that modern regimes of power do not repress; they incite. Power does not merely act upon the subject but constitutes it through an array of discursive matrices. Hence the Victorians did not repress sexuality into "the long monotonous nights of the bourgeoisie" but proliferated it by other innumerable means (3). Beginning in the eighteenth century, Foucault sees "a discursive ferment," a "multiplication of discourses," and "an institutional incitement to speak" about sex (18). "Inconsequential bucolic pleasures" were no longer restricted to the borders of a village field; instead, they blossomed in the domain of the medical exam, the law, psychiatry, and education (31). We, Foucault teaches us, are not more sexually liberated today than our Victorian ancestors simply because we are sex educated and keep an open mind. If speech is the other side of "silence" and "erasure," as Sharpe suggests, then native informants would be unproblematic figures who do not speak in the voice of hegemony. In a different key, the fact that the first issue of *Victorian Studies* three-quarters of a century ago begins with a prefatory note about interdisciplinarity, and a recent issue with a note about undisciplining, should not indicate progress. Instead, it should alert us to the morphology of disciplines themselves, their varied ways of inciting speech, and the institutional quality of what we understand, celebrate, and feel as freedom and progress.

Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong are agnostic on the matter. They claim that "un-disciplinarity invokes a set of strategies for living, thinking, and being within a negative ontology: a 'total climate' of anti-Blackness that has produced and continues to produce the conditions that sustain Western modernity." They warn against "repeating" such violence and encourage scholars to "resist assimilationist claims" and "insist on the difference that structures each of our positions" (371). At the same time, they argue that "exploring race within a lexicon of power, disciplinarity, and political violence . . . wrenches it away from the isolated workings of identity," later describing racialization as, after Jasbir Puar, an "assemblage" (373). Beyond Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, has not the

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undisciplining turn itself led to a discursive ferment? Consider the amount of research now being done on race and empire (still not a ton, but a ton more than before), or the efflorescence of panels about race and empire that have emerged in the last few years. Consider the fora, the talks, and the keynotes that have been called forth in the field's reckoning with its racial complicity over the last half decade. No longer relegated to the peripheries, the so-called empire panel (itself a phenomenon at the V21 Collective's first and only symposium) has stepped into the mundanity of the conference center. Consider the reading groups and the genuinely impressive online resources on pedagogy and research methods that are now readily available (e.g., *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*), often accompanied by institutional documents like mission statements and codes of conduct. The undisciplining turn belies its name. To view this shift as institutionally and disciplinarily unmediated speech would be a gross misunderstanding of the basic premises of the critique of power and disciplines.

Foucault taught us about the importance of genealogy so that we would not mistake incitement for liberation, not view equity and inclusivity as a discourse outside a regime of institutional power. What would a genealogy of Victorian studies that does not fall into the trap of the "disciplinary hypothesis" look like? Steinlight's essay offers one powerful answer. She argues, in plain Foucauldian language, that an institutional incitement to speak about Victorian culture began in the 1950s. The twist is that this incitement had a great deal of ideological affinity and institutional support by the American state and its imperial ambitions. Victorian culture functioned as a "historical analogy for mid-century US global hegemony, informing the imagination of a particular class invested in statecraft at its Cold War apogee."

And Victorian studies is only part of these Cold War affiliations; Britain's nineteenth century as a whole came to be in the 1950s. If Victorian studies found a home in English departments, then so did the emergent field of Romanticism, with a second home in comparative literature. While the cohesiveness of the Romantic movement and the valence of Romanticism as a field of study could be debated by figures like Arthur Lovejoy, Morse Peckham, and René Wellek in the 1920s through the early 1950s, both field and movement had consolidated by the 1960s. *Studies in Romanticism* was founded in 1961, and in the following year the English Institute solidified the field further when it featured prominent papers by Wellek and M. H. Abrams that announced both movement and field to have arrived (Frye). Like Victorian studies, Romanticism could not escape its proximity to American imperialism. Not only did it also confine its archive and imaginary to the shores of Europe, but it too was incapable of understanding how Orientalism, defined by Edward W. Said as a classically Foucauldian regime, was so central to the Romantic movement's imagination and was an immensely productive and generative cultural, economic, and political force. Just as Steinlight shows the institutional continuities between the American state and Victorian studies, so one may find a similar dynamic in the uneasy proximity of comparative literature and area studies to the paradoxical apolitical tendency of the latter's closeness to the state (Bové; Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*; Shih).

Cultural studies, too, came to be in the aftermath of the Second World War. As every history of the rise of the British New Left notes, the Soviet Union's taking of Budapest and the British and American response to Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Suez clarified the need for a new theory of culture (Dworkin 45–78; Davis; During). The disillusionment with the Communist Party of Great Britain and the recognition that Britain retained its imperial ambitions even amid its decline (a useful lesson for our present) galvanized leftist intellectuals and occasioned the need for a new theory of culture and history (Esty, *Shrinking Island*; Esty, *Future of Decline*). This theory was found in Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), and E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955) and *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which were the

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founding texts of the British New Left, the core of its first wave, and the cornerstones of cultural studies. With the exception of *The Uses of Literacy* (and even that is somewhat marginal), all these texts rely on Britain's nineteenth century to theorize culture and consciousness. Cultural studies, it is fair to say, arrives on the scene as a theory of nineteenth-century culture.

In sum, one can say that there is an "incitement to speak" about Britain's nineteenth century, a "discursive ferment" across a diverse range of fields, disciplines, topics, and periodizations during the 1950s. Of course, one can understand this ferment as provincial and as occluding, silencing, and repressing the Orient. But I suggest, and Steinlight rigorously demonstrates, it is equally possible to understand the efflorescence of talk about nineteenth-century modernity, metropolitan and white through and through, as an imperial discourse completely preoccupied with the Other. Is it not the premise of early postcolonial theory and historiography to read against the grain of the imperial text, tracking its "cognitive failures" in the (sometimes) romantic hope of "touching the consciousness" of the Other (Spivak, "Subaltern Studies" 5; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 80)? If this is unconvincing, and one needs the Other to represent themselves neither by proxy nor portrait, then we can summon them, too (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?").

For no story of the Cold War is complete without the story of Third Worldist internationalism. Fredric Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s," in fact, begins by noting this very point, characterizing the period as uniquely "convulsive" (180). More recently, Peter J. Kalliney tells us that "the literatures of decolonization and the literatures of the cold war are tightly conjoined, not to be separated, contextually or otherwise" (4). To this, one may add that the academic disciplines of the Cold War and the academic and intellectual formations of decolonization are tightly conjoined, not to be separated, contextually or otherwise. Similarly the periodization of the 1950s, and its nested periodization of the 1800s, is incomplete without anticolonial and postcolonial renderings of the same. As I have noted elsewhere, there is a striking conjuncture of the birth of Victorian studies, a field that studies the heyday of British imperialism, and the age of decolonization, when those very colonies sought to remake a world made in the image of the West. As it turns out, the period and national tradition central to the emergence of interdisciplinary study, New Criticism, comparative literary analysis, and cultural studies was also immensely helpful in thinking decolonization.

An early instance can be found in the writings of Elsa V. Goveia, one of the founding figures of West Indian historiography. Wilson Harris places Goveia alongside C. L. R. James as the only West Indian intellectuals to have offered a philosophy of history (Walmsley). Her *A Study of the Historiography of the British West Indies to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (1956) is a groundbreaking account of the writing of West Indian history, offering an expansive and interdisciplinary survey from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Though using mostly British sources, Goveia centers the West Indies in the story of modernity. And this story, she reflects in the conclusion, seeks an "analysis of the whole society" (167). For readers of Raymond Williams, Goveia's phrase should be familiar, anticipating his famous definition of culture as "a whole social process" and "a whole way of life" (39, 40). Goveia's *Slave Society in the British and Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (1965) uses what is effectively a Gramscian framework (Antonio Gramsci had not been translated into English or French at the time) for what one might call an analysis of a whole slave society (Scarano; Chamberlain). It is beyond the scope of this essay to draw out the parallels and divergences between Goveia, Raymond Williams, and Gramsci, but I flag the interrelations of their works as an important moment of conjuncture between the study of West Indian historiography and Marxist theories of culture and hegemony.

If Goveia's anticolonial moment centers the West Indies in the story of modernity, then a subsequent moment in the history of decolonization made Britain the object of analysis. Between 1962 and 1964, at precisely the moment of transition

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between the struggle for independence and postcolonial disillusionment, James, Eric Williams, and V. S. Naipaul all published cultural histories of Britain's nineteenth century. James's 1963 *Beyond a Boundary* is as much about cricket in Trinidad and his own life as it is about the formation of Victorian national culture. The following year, Williams published *British Historians and the West Indies*, which traces the discursive invention of the Caribbean in British colonial historiography of the nineteenth century. At around the same time, Naipaul published his first two travelogues, *The Middle Passage* (1962) and *An Area of Darkness* (1964), both of which contain extensive meditations on writers like Charles Kingsley, Anthony Trollope, and James Anthony Froude, as well as the formation of British national culture in the nineteenth century.

Almost simultaneously, these four leading postcolonial intellectuals (none of whose work resided in academic institutions of the West) produced numerous counterpoints to the story of the nineteenth century that has been foundational to the institutions of literary criticism like Romanticism and Victorian studies. This incitement talked about British modernity to understand the contradictions of postcolonial modernity. It should not surprise us that attending to this quartet reveals an understanding of race radically different from the one found in Sharpe's *In the Wake.* Far from ontological, race for writers thinking decolonization is vividly historical and intertwined with the project of the nation-state. Williams, for example, traces how the Victorian historiography of figures like E. A. Freeman, Bishop Stubbs, and Alfred Lord Tennyson yoked liberal freedom to the myth of Teutonism. Crucially, though, he argues and demonstrates that such race thinking simultaneously linked unfreedom to Jamaica's Black peasantry, the paradigmatic example of which is the British response to the Morant Bay Rebellion. James articulates West Indian national identity through Victorian muscular Christianity and the homosociality of the popular arts, particularly cricket. In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul, racist *par excellence*, grapples with increased racial tensions between the Indian and Black communities in postcolonial Trinidad but also keeps reaching for his Froude and Kingsley. In *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul becomes completely disillusioned with the promises of postcolonial nationalism, claiming that these failures have been "all there in Kipling" (203), and begins what would become a career-long meditation on and assessment of the dialectics of postcolonial Enlightenment.

None of this is "a new analytic." None of this is "unscientific." None of this is "undisciplined." In the starkest of contrasts, understanding Britain's nineteenth century as a "worldy" category, in Said's sense of the term (*World* 4), frames terms like *Victorian*, *Romantic*, and even *culture* as having a history, and specifically a history that extends beyond the shores of Europe. Remembering basic Foucauldian lessons, I have argued, allows one to grasp the vast discursive incitements—James called it "the fever and the fret" of a historical moment (*Black Jacobins* xi)—to speak about the nineteenth century in the heyday of decolonization. It was during this period that a substantial portion of humanity liberated itself, often using the very language and categories of Western modernity, from the shackles of colonialism and confronted a new antagonist: neocolonialism.

## Note

1. As I hope readers will recognize, these sentences are slight adaptations from Michel Foucault's introductory chapter to *The History of Sexuality.*

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