THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

On the Clock; or, Stuart Hall and Us

EMILY STEINLIGHT

What is the function of disciplinary self-critique? Why now? The discerning responses collected in this cluster acutely register the timely and untimely conditions of a conversation stretching over the past decade, and they attend from several angles to what is altered or perpetuated in critical reflection on the scope, uses, and locations of a subfield. Echoing Jacob Romanow's observation that the rubric "Victorian" has become paradoxically more entrenched in the metadiscourses challenging its limits, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong consider whether these further interventions tend toward the same effect. Their landmark essay "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" and related interventions, including Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan D. Fong, and Helena Michie's "Widening the Nineteenth Century," which have fostered teaching and research beyond the Victorian as such, were circumspect about the force of assimilation—understandably so, since these projects have been ushered into the center of established Victorianist journals and conferences. Efforts to undiscipline, decolonize, or expand the field have appreciably changed how the nineteenth century is studied and taught and have valuably diversified the focus and the demography of conferences that were disproportionately white. But self-criticism, as Olivia Lingyi Xu aptly observes, can also recapitulate the center/periphery dynamic it aims to redress. Programmatic self-correction of Victorian studies' limits can homogenize categories and harden binaries—sometimes with the result that minoritized and international scholars are courted as "its others," implicitly personifying a field's self-critique in the familiar role of native informant. Perhaps this confirms Nasser Mufti's point that what makes academic disciplines "disciplinary" in Michel Foucault's sense is not

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their repression of knowledge but precisely their integrative energies and incitements to speak.

There are unquestionably multiple stories to tell about the study of the nineteenth century, its sources and itineraries, as Josephine McDonagh notes—and reversing "the flow of . . . Victorian ideas" from peripheries to centers, as Simon Gikandi puts it, can be a clarifying corrective. Equally clarifying is Priti Joshi's emphasis on writers and objects that this field rubric cannot coherently contain, since the category "Victorian" is not infinitely extensible even as it travels. Along these lines, I read Romanow's case for provincializing the Victorian not as an antidisciplinary critique but as a qualified defense of disciplinarity, premised on the necessity of limitation to define an object, to curb pseudo-universalism, and to make contrapuntal relations to and divergences from a historically dominant literary corpus more legible. The risk of assimilating the wide world of nineteenth-century texts and post-nineteenth-century phenomena as effects of the British Empire can here be weighed against scholarly efforts to redress insularity. Inclusion within Victorian studies is strikingly uncongenial at sites where calling something *Victorian*, as Anjuli Raza Kolb vividly attests in her discussion of the Tarbela Dam, is "an act of grief, often in a hyperbolic register that on closer examination reveals a queasy truth." Attending to "areas that had their own nineteenth century" (Banerjee et al. 6) and recognizing practical limits to expertise might also support Romanow's narrowing of the term *Victorian* from its referentially emptier and somewhat vestigial "institutional" functions to its more defined literary-critical uses. I find this easier to conceive as a matter of usage in particular writing and teaching situations than as a consensus within or among intersecting areas of study.

For reasons dramatized even in the framing of the current conversation, some ambivalence lingers for me about the outcomes of prescriptions for adjusting a field's parameters or renouncing its framework. Taken together, these reflections also illustrate how closely connected in practice (and this was a crucial impetus of "Undisciplining") are the nonidentical questions of defining one's objects and defining one's interlocutors. Here, Joshi and Zachary Samalin correctly maintain that Ranajit Guha, Edward Said, or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick may write about Victorian texts but not as Victorian*ists*; the same goes for Raymond Williams, Nancy Armstrong, and more—but what field has a single set of interlocutors, and who inhabits only one field? If a particular narrowly delimited yet widely disseminated corpus defines it, critical engagements with Victorian culture stretch in many directions. Self/other binaries may sometimes distort such engagements, as Xu's incisive account of Wu Mi's career as an Arnoldian critic in early-twentieth-century China painfully demonstrates. In a different key, Gikandi's account of "colonial subjects as . . . the first post-Victorians" bears this out in demonstrating how C. L. R. James redefined a belated Black Victorianism and put its moral grammars to unforeseen liberatory use (Gikandi 159). So does Mufti's analysis of what it meant for James and Eric Williams, and for the project of decolonization, not to hate Victorian culture in the sense of mere repudiation of an imposed imperial tradition, but in his Adornian line, to "hate it *properly*"—intimately grasping its cultural landmarks and semiperipheries, middlebrow touchstones, and internal static as interpretable and its dominant and residual values available to other purposes (Mufti 401; emphasis added).

Given the latitude of Victorian culture's uses, meanings, and determinate negations in the world, the overwhelming scale and apparent naturalness of American involvement in Victorian studies come into relief here. At the risk of recentering this other center, my turn to the United States aimed to observe some effects of its ready conflation with Britain in the particular context of a Cold War boom in global modernization research. The headline is not, I hope, that Victorian studies was a CIA op, much less that academic disciplines as such are forever caught in state ideology. One cannot reduce the distance, as Said would stress, between "the big dominating fact" of empire and the local choices composing cultural and intellectual work, which are not mechanically determined, though the site from which one studies an area or period remains "by no means an inert fact" (*Orientalism* 11). This partial history of a subfield illustrates what forms of

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comparative insight and interdisciplinary experimentation were enabled, as well as what analyses of decolonization and of imperialism past and present were foreclosed or transcoded, by an alignment of humanistic research with state interests that seems nearly unimaginable now. Remarking on the changing conditions of its underexamined "Americanness" would serve little purpose today if framed as a fantasy of transcending past complicity, and still less as a resigned self-implication in institutionality and hegemony. The former would not abolish the relations in which one sits; the latter would not only forfeit agency but also misread the current conjuncture. Attention to scholars' past commitments during a phase of hegemonic expansion, for those who study the nineteenth century in the United States amid the catastrophic global fallout of a phase of hegemonic crisis, may suggest more and less strategic ways of inhabiting this problem.

If outrage, despair, and disaffiliation are now likelier attitudes of humanists toward the state,[1] this speaks both to the longer-term structural disempowerment of academic labor and to the conditions of the current discussion in early 2026 amid ICE abductions, neocolonial atrocities, and systemic assault on higher education and civil rights. Interconnected crises have occasioned critical polemics over the past decade, including the interventions challenging Victorian studies that Barbara Black narrates. Resurgent nationalism, xenophobic border violence, and accelerating climate collapse periodized the presentist turn in 2015–16; "Undisciplining" challenged a literary subfield's tacit racism in 2020, a year harrowed by police murders that galvanized Black Lives Matter, the death of millions from COVID-19, the neoliberal care crisis that the pandemic laid bare, and institutional retrenchments that threw coworkers and students onto unemployment and motivated unprecedented organizing. To confront contemporary struggles both in daily political life and as conditions for interpreting past texts and problems is to reaffirm on the most basic level that culture matters and cannot be "antiseptically quarantined from its worldly affiliations" (Said, Introduction xiv), and that reading, teaching, and thinking together are social practices responsive to their own situations. The laggier tempos of research and publication are not always in sync with the urgencies of the moment (witness, for instance, the nearly five years now elapsed since I first wrote "Victorian Studies and the American State"). And literary studies, especially when its objects are located in the past with potentially indeterminate futures, has some obligations beyond the immediate. Even so, critical interventions today can feel like inadequate answers to the question of what is to be done. The urgency of that question (to which I return at the end) has never been plainer.

For those still employed, under wildly unequal and broadly eroding conditions, in the study and teaching of literature, addressing it does not mean abandoning our fields as irrelevant, conceding to the instrumentalist logic of management consulting firms gleefully sunsetting hundreds of humanities programs. I share Chatterjee's feeling of "scouring all fields, all traditions, looking for what might point to a future that does not look like this present." I share Black's sense of working "in the ruins of the profession" and grief at the violent destruction of much else, as well as commitment to the work and the people who do it, overwhelmingly on contingent appointments. Insofar as field formations can sustain one scale of commitment, it seems most feasible to approach categories like "Victorian studies" along the lines Lauren Eriks Cline suggests, not as exhaustive or primary but as "tactically useful: for understanding [certain] objects of study, for retaining tenure lines, for resisting the devaluation of expertise, or for convening conversations," while recognizing the reality "that most academic workers perform most of their labor . . . outside the bounds of any scholarly subfield in which they might have been trained" (58). Contending with the evisceration of most disciplines by decisions far upstream of this conversation, "an approach in which each specialty seeks to justify its own existence will not be up to the task" of renovating or preserving existing methods or of building new social arrangements (58). As a defensive crouch, mere affirmation may not settle substantive questions. Conversely, the

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impulse to welcome dissolution amid the dismantling of institutions—or to treat ongoing work and active struggles as already lost causes in a catastrophically suspended present—can seem like *amor fati*. At the end of the day, the study of past texts and critical analysis of the present seem most vital when they keep in view that the conditions we work and live under are not inevitable.

Crises occur, Stuart Hall explains, "when the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the pre-existing system of social relations" ("State and Society" 96). Far from spelling defeat, the still unfolding hegemonic crisis may show that "there is no law of history which can predict the outcome of a political struggle. Politics depends on the relations of forces at any particular moment" (Hall, "Gramsci and Us" 169). Recognizing this contingency gives weight to the way one temporalizes the present and evaluates the twentieth-century legacies of many disciplines. It can also adjust the way literary scholars conceive of intellectual and cultural work and of their own agency in relation to the state. That relationship—and the structure of the administrative state itself—underwent drastic shifts from the postwar expansion of higher education to the neoliberal era and is changing more drastically as we speak. Crucially, as Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò reasons, drawing on Rana Dasgupta, "the state now faces serious competition for center stage in the organization of human society" as private asset managers control "an unprecedented share of human wealth" and are rapidly stripping the copper wire out of universities and public resources (13). If reinvigorated imperialism, racism, and petrocapitalist plunder in this century make the nineteenth century seem unsettlingly present, or if the decimation of institutions seems like a tragic exit from history into a conversation-ending state of exception, this was precisely the dream of reactionary efforts to undo the emancipatory projects (decolonization, civil rights and Black Power, feminism, queer liberation, socialism, internationalism) and forms of statist compromise that shaped the short era between then and now. At the close of the Cold War, the economist, Cato Institute founder, and self-styled anarcho-capitalist Murray Rothbard saw an opening for the ascendant right: "We shall break the clock of social democracy. We shall break the clock of the Great Society. We shall break the clock of the welfare state. We shall break the clock of the New Deal. . . . We shall repeal the twentieth century" (qtd. in Ganz 101).[2] As that neoliberal anti-statist project assumes a more overtly authoritarian character, the question of how to read the nineteenth century after the "American Century" seems germane.

For the same reasons, the far-reaching effects of postwar state support for higher education and the range of commitments it enabled can clarify how literary scholars based in the United States understand their present situation and act in it. Alongside the assault on education, corrosion of literacy and historical knowledge by tech oligarchs, and open ruling-class indifference even to the pretense of reconciling the interests of capital with democracy, what Samalin describes as a "radically impoverished interest in culture" in the contemporary United States can indeed be read as another morbid symptom of the collapse of consent hegemony now. Dismissing literary studies as useless and turning in despair from institutions as such—including universities and in fact the varied, internally fractured, and contested institutions of the administrative state itself—concedes ground that must not be lost.

Writing at a parallel moment of hegemonic crisis in the Thatcher era, Hall turns to Antonio Gramsci for an apt reminder that "hegemony must be constructed, contested and won on many different sites," all of them arenas of social antagonism ("Gramsci and Us" 168). It is never merely imposed once and for all, and the outcomes of efforts to construct, maintain, and contest it are not preordained. This is evident in the struggles that have reshaped higher education in every phase of its history. Both as a feature of their relative structural autonomy and as a result of these struggles, educational institutions themselves are in practice sites of contradiction rather than of any monolithic ideology. Student movements and dissident areas of study that flourished amid massive postwar state investment, as Melinda Cooper underscores, were both its products and "radically in excess of" the technocratic and geopolitical

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interests that drove it (233). In challenging those interests, they realized—and fought to expand, redefine, and revolutionize—some of the actually emancipatory promises of publicly supported higher education. If US universities serve the military-industrial complex and racial capitalism in both shockingly direct and more oblique ways, they have also been crucial sites of counterhegemonic inquiry and of mobilization for housing and educational justice and against imperial war.

That is why, as most readers will know too well, universities have been key targets of long-term structural attack through state disinvestment and adjunctification and of frontal political attacks. This story extends back to Ronald Reagan's exploitation of white grievance politics to slash state education as governor of California, using student movements in the 1960s as a wedge to undercut support for free college, affirmative action, and social welfare (Cooper 232–51). The resegregating and class-consolidating effects of neoliberal policies are a bipartisan legacy, as Donna Murch emphasizes, illustrated by Ed Koch's imposition of fees in the 1970s to attend colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, "which functioned as a direct attack on the demographic transformation of the CUNY schools" and caused a more than fifty percent drop in Black student enrollment within a year (Wilkerson et al. 108). So are the coercive uses of debt and the capture of institutional governance by private equity and boards of regents enabling the current assault. Students, faculty members, library workers, and clinicians who have been arrested, disciplined, and fired for protesting the annihilation of Gaza or for nearly any kind of speech about Palestine since 2023 have faced upper administrators' collaboration with repressive power, often at the behest of CEOs.[3] International workers and students have seen university management shred past commitments to sanctuary; diversity and nondiscrimination policies have been unilaterally reversed and Title VI and Title IX weaponized for purposes antithetical to civil rights. Members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and other unions fighting for collective rights to academic freedom—including in PSC-CUNY's recent win reinstating three non-tenure-track faculty members wrongfully terminated for speech supporting the human rights of Palestinians; in *AAUP vs. Rubio*, which overturned the detention of noncitizen students and workers for political speech and won a ruling affirming that First Amendment rights belong to everyone; in the organized pushback by academic workers in Texas, Ohio, and more than thirty other states against legislative censorship of teaching about gender and race; and on many campuses fighting program closures—have found themselves defending institutional principles that managers of liberal institutions have abandoned.

The lesson is not that universities are an apparatus of domination or of empty proceduralism from which one can only turn away in principled disgust. As Samalin rightly stresses by way of Raymond Williams, "our cultural institutions should be understood as relatively rather than fully hegemonic, even when they do not notably stand in opposition to the dominant social order." The actual political economy of some universities has strained this premise in sadly obvious ways and made it easy to see their educational mission cynically as the idealist fig leaf concealing the brute reality of the university as landlord, union-busting employer, corporate tax shelter, research arm of the war machine. It has been further betrayed, as Samalin notes, by administrators' pseudo-legalistic overcompliance and distorted by pretexts of neutrality now being used to muzzle classroom speech. The relative autonomy of universities and colleges (like academic freedom, free speech, and labor protections won and lost over the past century) does not defend itself. But it gives ground to meaningful contestation of who in fact can claim rights to define an institution's interests and decide what it does. Realizing this principle and remaking higher education demand democratizing university governance. Under oligarchic siege, the essential social functions it is meant to protect—including the free pursuit of learning for the public good and for its own sake, and space for expression and intellectual and political freedom—are contending purposes worth fighting for.

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This bears on what it means to approach institutions of higher education as a terrain of struggle, structured by contending interests that we necessarily confront as scholars, as people in the world, and not least as employees in a workplace. A nontrivial reason, for those working at colleges and universities, is that it is simply where we are, and where our labor is a source of collective power. A professionally focused reason might be that scholarship can be sustained only by reversing the casualization of teaching and winning the working conditions that academic freedom requires. The timely political reasons are hard to miss. A more comprehensive reason is that higher education is of broad social consequence, both as a space of free inquiry necessary to democracy and as load-bearing economic infrastructure—essential to training for all professions and as an employment sector itself for four million workers (from dining workers to clerical staff to all ranks of academic workers) across the country. This scale, structural importance, and increasing labor organizing make colleges and universities strategic sites for local as well as wider efforts, for instance, to kick ICE's corporate enablers off campuses,[4] fight the imposition and extractive aims of AI at a strategic site of its dependency on ed-tech contracts,[5] defend civil rights and trans rights, and get billionaires' hands off our institutions. These fights are winnable. You and your coworkers and students may have begun to win some of them on campus, in court, in contract campaigns, and on the streets. Building campus and metro labor coalitions and joining broader wall-to-wall coalitions such as Higher Ed Labor United can allow coordination across existing unions to advance shared political aims, including expanded labor protections and public reinvestment to fund free education at all levels as a right of all people.

The slow, collaborative work of structure-based organizing that any part of this requires does not occur in the pages of journals, clearly, but in daily conversations with colleagues in attempt to overcome demoralization and build solidarity, often across real disagreement as well as managerially imposed divisions. Since many issues across institutions are shared, I am grateful to Nathan Hensley and Patrick O'Malley as coordinators of the 2025 North American Victorian Studies Association conference, to Simon Reader and Mary Mullen of the Northeast Victorian Studies Association, and recent coordinators of the American Comparative Literature Association meeting and other conferences for creating space for colleagues to strategize together. In the shorter term, efforts to protect one another and sustain the basic conditions for teaching and learning in a livable world are up against extraordinary forces of destruction, confronting genocide, ecocide, and catastrophic damage to the structures of shared life. But the reactionary coalition is not invincible; it is riven by conflicting interests among ruling-class factions, strained in capacity by lack of public consent, and revealed by its constant recourse to violence to have a tenuous hold on power. The outcome of the present crisis is not a given. The clock has not stopped. "There is nothing more crucial," Hall stresses, "than Gramsci's recognition that every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also, reconstruction" ("Gramsci and Us" 164). Facing catastrophe strains any affirmative vision necessary to motivate even preliminary forms of collective action, requiring the discipline of Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. In case your optimism of the will needs a recharge as mine often does, I close with a reminder from Anna Kornbluh that "too late is the most important time."

Notes

1. "The state we know today is rightly reviled," writes Táíwò—forged amid colonialism and often sustaining inequality and borders through violence; yet withdrawal from it, he contends, offers no viable avenue to redistributing resources and power or, as a matter of survival, to "the political defeat of fossil capital on a planetary scale" (25, 24).

2. My thanks to Simon Reader for bringing these lines to my attention.

3. Marc Rowan, the billionaire CEO of Apollo Global Management who takes credit for authoring the higher education loyalty oath (or so-called Compact for Academic Excellence) that the Trump administration proposed in October 2025, and whose

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private equity firm is the majority owner of the for-profit University of Phoenix—the single largest contributor to student debt in the United States—used his position on the Wharton Board of Advisors to attempt a hostile takeover of the University of Pennsylvania in 2023 and has used his political connections as a megadonor to attack racial justice and gender equality for a decade.

4. See schoolsdropice.com for resources to identify your institution's contracts with corporate enablers of ICE and to plan or join a Schools Drop ICE organizing committee with students, faculty members, and staff members on your campus.

5. See the AAUP report "Artificial Intelligence and Academic Professions," which offers tech policy and handbook recommendations, syllabus language, and contract language that higher education unions like Rutgers AAUP-AFT and the California Faculty Association are currently bargaining for to protect against the imposition of generative AI (AAUP Ad Hoc Committee). See also "Theory at the Bargaining Table" with Dominique Baker, Anna Kornbluh, and others, a roundtable discussion hosted by UIC United Faculty and featured on Matt Seybold's podcast *The American Vandal* (Baker et al.).

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