EDITOR'S COLUMN

Victorian Studies and Its Others: An Introduction

The Theories and Methodologies dossier in this issue is the product of a fortuitous coincidence at the February 2025 meeting of the *PMLA* Editorial Board.

There is a consistent rhythm to our sessions: over the course of two full days, the six members of the board and I review approximately two dozen anonymous submissions, discussing the articles themselves as well as the two or three readers' reports and correspondence with the authors regarding any revisions they have made.[1] Although sometimes board members share similar senses of the strengths and weaknesses of a given piece, we often reach consensus only through extensive discussion and debate, in which we strive to formulate specific recommendations—bibliographic, analytic, conceptual, or organizational—to hone the argument and amplify the potential impact of the article as much as possible. Whatever the outcome—whether the board decides to accept a submission, to request further revisions, or to decline it—*PMLA* is unusual in that, in addition to the readers' reports, authors receive a letter in which the editorial board provides its own feedback and gives a rationale for its decision. As a result, our conversations almost always revolve around practical suggestions for the article under review.

We consider each article independently on its own merits. Given the size and heterogeneity of the MLA, it is impossible to presuppose or rely on a particular methodological inclination, period focus, or political orientation: instead, as we make our way through the pool, we are forced to grapple with a staggering range of languages, periods, interpretative approaches, and interdisciplinary amalgams on their own terms. But the eclecticism and constant gear shifting are a big part of what makes it fun. Serving on the editorial board is exhilarating in part because it demands intellectual flexibility as well as breadth—not only the determination to articulate one's own individual objections or concerns, but also "the dialogical pleasures of thinking-with-others" (Scott x): the openness to learn through

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discussion, as one's colleagues' comments shape and sometimes even transform one's estimation of a given article.

One interesting and unpredictable element in the meetings is that, even though each submission follows its own path through the review process, we sometimes notice common themes, methodological approaches, or theoretical questions emerging across multiple articles in a given batch. In 2016, looking back at his work over two decades as the founding editor of the Caribbean studies journal *Small Axe*, David Scott argued that receptivity and generosity were the "moving spirits" of journal editing because "what journal work entails, above all, is less the ability to identify excellence, as such, than the cultivation of a capacity for attunement to the work of others, and a responsive ability to shelter and enable perspectives on common and uncommon themes that do not necessarily align with, indeed, that sometimes willfully diverge from, one's own" (vii). As I myself have suggested, building on Scott's insight, the art of editing is above all an art of orchestration informed by such an attunement (11): the careful arrangement of articles to create patterns of resonance or dissonance, in order to "to compose each issue with an eye toward continuity, counterpoint, overlap, and overall coherence" (Mackey 245). In this sense the Theories and Methodologies dossier in this issue could be considered an experiment. Instead of curating the arrangement of the sundry articles in a given issue in the editorial cutting room, what if we allowed the unanticipated concerns echoing among a set of submissions that happened to come in to dictate their own orchestration? What if we even let them start their own conversation, commissioning commentaries on the issues they raised?

In the batch of submissions we discussed in that February 2025 meeting were two strong articles that we ended up accepting, Jacob Romanow's "Provincializing Victorian Studies: A. Native's *Marita* among Literary Traditions" and Emily Steinlight's "Victorian Studies and the American State." They diverge in style and approach. Steinlight's article is an eye-opening revisitation of the history of the journal *Victorian Studies*, in which Steinlight makes a case that "the study of Victorian literature is contingent on that field's relation to the American state," pointing out the surprising ways that the field came to frame itself as an interdisciplinary cognate to social scientific area studies in the Cold War–era United States. As she summarizes it in her response to the dossier, "this partial history of a subfield illustrates what forms of 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." One of the more remarkable discoveries of her article is the prevalence in the early years of *Victorian Studies* of explicit comparisons between Victorian England and the United States of the late 1950s, often characterized by a peculiar penchant to "downplay" Victorian imperialism and to detach "the category of race from Victorian culture through the very analogy linking it to the United States."

Romanow's piece considers the utility of the term *Victorian* through a reading of the referential codes and circulation of a single case study: the remarkable novel *Marita; or, The Folly of Love*, serialized under the pseudonym "A. Native" in the Ghanaian newspapers the *Western Echo* and the *Gold Coast Echo* from 1886 to 1888. At first glance, *Marita* would seem to call for what some scholars have termed a "global Victorian" approach, considering the driving tropes and concerns of that age as a phenomenon with resonance far beyond the English canon that has tended to monopolize the attention of Victorian studies as a field. *Marita* is not a "Victorian novel" in any conventional sense, Romanow argues. Instead it insists on a "purely local application," animating the concerns of a particular readership, a "fairly small, highly politicized community of multilingual African cosmopolites" in anglophone West Africa. But *Marita*'s intervention depends on its "contrastive relationship to what it considers a Victorian literary tradition to produce its meaning" for its specific audience, so it "relies on a concept of the category as a portable but limited cultural field"—as what Romanow calls a "narrow" sense of the Victorian. So the term remains useful

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not when it is assumed to be global but instead precisely in the ways it is provincialized. As Simon Gikandi elaborates on Romanow's point in the dossier here, "specific ideas about the Victorian were structured by diverse histories and temporalities." The Victorian is "a category in and out of time," according to Gikandi, flecked by a strange "concurrence of coevalness and belatedness" as it travels across contexts.

As different as they are, both articles take up the calls for globalizing or "undisciplining" Victorian studies that have unsettled the field over the course of the past decade, first as a result of the V21 Collective's provocative ten-point manifesto in 2015, and then in response to the influential *Undisciplining Victorian Studies*, a special issue of *Victorian Studies* edited by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong in 2020. At our meeting, reading the submissions and the deeply engaged readers' reports they received from colleagues including a number of the key protagonists in these developments, the editorial board had the impression that we were eavesdropping on a high-level discussion at the cutting edge of these ongoing debates.

It occurred to us that it might be possible to take advantage of the coincidence that the articles had come to us at the same time as the occasion to take the conversation public, as it were, and to invite some of the peer reviewers as well as other colleagues into a broader discussion about the current state of the field, using the Romanow and Steinlight articles as points of departure. The idea was not to create some sort of opposition or competition between the articles, of course, but instead to use the intriguing contrast between them to revisit these debates. *PMLA* seemed like an appropriate venue, not only because the issues at stake reverberate far beyond Victorian studies itself, but also because *Undisciplining Victorian Studies* originated in a roundtable at the 2019 MLA convention in Chicago titled "Critical Race Theory and New Directions for Victorian Studies," where Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong convened (in Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb's recounting in her contribution to the dossier here) "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."[2]

The title of the special feature, "Victorian Studies and Its Others," was initially something of a placeholder when we approached the contributors, but it came to seem serviceable as a phrase with multiple connotations that highlighted a number of the ongoing conundrums and ironies of the recent discussion in the field. First of all, it raises the issue of what it means to imagine an alternative or other to Victorian studies itself. As Chatterjee summarizes it in her contribution to the cowritten piece in the dossier, one of the main questions she, Christoff, and Wong posed in their introduction to the 2020 special issue was whether "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." How could we gauge the "capacities of a field to truly become porous to new, more insurgent thought, and to reshape itself," Chatterjee asks—or, to return to the language of their 2020 special issue introduction, "to read, think, and write otherwise" (Chatterjee et al. 378)?

From another angle, Zachary Samalin's reflection on the dialectic between institutions and formations can be taken as an observation about the ways that not only scholarly fields but any number of hidebound institutional spaces in the academy—including universities, professional organizations, and, well, journals—can other and remake themselves. "It is possible," he avers, "for a cultural institution, even an established, nonoppositional one, to resist full incorporation into the dominant order, but to do so it must itself integrate the formations that challenge its interests and force it to change its rationales."

At the same time, the title draws our attention to what could be described as the constitutive outside of the field: the perplexing status of the many historical figures who remain, as Priti Joshi points

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out, "largely unintelligible to Victorian studies," defying assumptions about language, dating, genre, and geographic scope. The field is unabashedly narcissistic in that "it cares about others only to the extent they reflect it," she notes sardonically, highlighting the case of the pioneering Bengali novelist and editor Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, whose hugely influential career still doesn't seem to fit, even in the scope of a global or transnational Victorianism. In her own contribution to the dossier, Olivia Lingyi Xu demonstrates that there is a related dynamic in the international orbit of Victorian studies, in which contemporary Victorianists trained in the United States and based in South Korea, alongside figures like the mid-twentieth-century Chinese Victorianist Wu Mi, are placed in an inherently awkward position: "disciplinary self-critique—especially when it proceeds from diagnoses of exclusion—often leaves those traditionally excluded uncertain, or even uneasy, about how they are meant to relate to such critique."

It also occurs to me that "Victorian Studies and Its Others" can be taken another way in the context of *PMLA*, given that the readership of the journal so greatly exceeds the subfield. The second thesis in the manifesto of the V21 Collective excoriates the "positivist historicism" that dominates Victorian studies as the product of "a situation in which Victorianists are our own and only interlocutors. It fails to imagine paths of argument compelling to scholars who do not care about Victorians as Victorians." In the context of this *PMLA* special feature, Dionne Brand's resonant figure of "a reader like me" (invoked by Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong) might be taken in a particular way: as a figure for that other sort of interlocutor, a non-Victorianist encountering a dossier about Victorian studies.

I myself have engaged with the field mainly through formal concerns (through my work in periodical studies and on the politics and aesthetics of seriality) and above all through the towering roster of anticolonialist and Pan-Africanist intellectuals including W. E. B. Du Bois, Hubert Harrison, Marcus Garvey, and C. L. R. James, all of whom, as Nasser Mufti has shown elsewhere, "understood Victorian literature and culture as fields of intelligibility for the twentieth-century project of decolonization" ("Hating" 395). How do the debates around the subfield speak to a reader like me?

In another essay very much in dialogue with Steinlight's article here, Mufti has suggested that "there is good evidence that the very idea of Victorian culture, 'English culture of a particular age,' was invented in the United States *in negative relation* to decolonization" ("Victorian Studies" 415). He writes that as it emerged in the United States, "by naturalizing the nation state as the privileged domain of humanistic inquiry," Victorian studies

> foreclosed any connection between its object of study and the liberationist struggles of the Third World, both of which are connected rather well by the history of imperialism. As such, it positioned itself as a complement to the interventionist impulses of area studies fields. What is instead produced is scholarship on culture and society, not culture and imperialism. The field's usefulness to the state, one might hypothesize, was precisely in *not* making the connection between civil society and imperialism, thereby offering a vision of a world in which it is possible to read a novel like *Daniel Deronda* and not think about Palestine. (414)

As Steinlight emphasizes in her response to the comments here, the calls to "undiscipline" Victorian studies have led to a "presentist turn" in which scholars have struggled to come to terms with the dire political exigencies of the past decade, from anti-Black police violence and the decimation of the neoliberal welfare state to the ascendant authoritarianism, blatant profiteering, and militaristic thuggery of the second Trump administration in the era of "homeland empire" (see Singh). It should not be surprising that some of the commentators here, writing from what feels like the "ruins of our profession" (as Barbara Black puts it), express such grave discomfort with the very prospect of what Chatterjee describes as "helping renovate an inherently colonial field" at a moment of such grave crisis. Nor is it surprising that, just as the murder

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of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement animated the urgency of the special issue *Undisciplining Victorian Studies* in 2020, the ongoing litany of atrocities in Gaza seems to crystallize the demands of the current moment for a number of the contributors, especially given what Samalin describes as the "violent crackdown on student and faculty protest of the genocide in Palestine" in American universities and academic organizations since the fall of 2023.

Steinlight opens her article with an account of the recent turn to "strategic presentism" in the subfield. This posture doesn't imply an unthinking anti-historicism, she writes, so much as a "prompt to historicize the present and to recognize the historical contingencies of interpretation. New conditions sharpen or occlude continuities and ruptures; ongoing struggles change the uses of the past." In this regard her piece can be taken as an important rejoinder to the call for "presentism" in the V21 Collective manifesto, where a "new openness to presentism" is counseled as an antidote to the supposedly endemic positivist historicism in Victorian scholarship that "aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past." Steinlight's analysis demonstrates that, on the contrary, "indexes of contemporaneity"—in other words, a recourse to what was framed in its time as strategic presentism—were "key to the enterprise of making the Victorian age into a past worthy of comprehensive study."[3]

She briefly alludes to one example of such an "early presentist-Victorianist thought experiment": a 1987 article in which one of the founding editors of *Victorian Studies*, Michael Wolff, recounts that his "first memory of the politics of *VS* was of a 'sympathy march' from the campus to the center of Bloomington in 1960 in support of the lunch-counter sit-ins which were one signal of the start of the civil rights movement in the South" (Burgan et al. 84). But Wolff does not describe this episode as serving to detach "the category of race from Victorian culture through the very analogy linking it to the United States" (to return to Steinlight's phrase), but instead as an index of linkage: thus he calls it one of "the more obvious instances of what I believe is a general condition (cause or effect?) connecting *VS* with the real world, and thus connecting the study of a period often stereotyped as reactionary with a practical commitment to social change" (84).

George Levine, another early member of the editorial team at *Victorian Studies* at the University of Indiana, remembers being shocked when one of his favorite teachers as a New York University undergraduate, Edwin Berry Burgum, was "subpoenaed by the House Committee on Unamerican Activities on charges of being a Communist" and summarily fired (Levine 602), as Samalin recounts in his bracing documentation of the events at NYU in his contribution here. In 1960 Levine also participated in the "sympathy march," and he joined a faculty group at Indiana that called itself the "Committee of Concern," which

> attempted both to study the issues and the politics, to engage with the students in their protests, and to mediate with the administration. We weren't very effective, but each of us felt that we needed to make our scholarly acumen somehow immediately useful, while the campus at Bloomington, like campuses all over the country, was astir. (610)

The question is, What are the politics of that "connection" and that compulsion to "usefulness," and how do they play out in one's scholarship as well as in one's institutional activism? In other words, in this or any field, rather than pretend the task is a matter of proclaiming a turn to the present conjuncture, as though it had been ignored or sidestepped before, we should acknowledge that recognizing the historical contingencies of interpretation must mean coming to terms with the changing valences of strategic presentism over time, with the ultimate aim of anchoring ourselves more securely in what Raza Kolb calls "an awareness about the whys of our questions" in the constantly shifting ground of our political now. As she adds, the aspirations of "accessing the dignity of thinking, of revolutionary poiesis, and of not being used as advertising or LLM training data, period" are "incredibly humble ambitions that are extremely hard to achieve." But for a reader like me, as a modest wish list emerging from an overheard conversation in another field, they're a decent set of guiding commitments in these dark times.

Brent Hayes Edwards

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Notes

1. See Edwards for an explanation of the *PMLA* editorial process as well as a reflection on the journal's 1980 adoption of anonymous peer review (12–14).

2. The speakers on the roundtable were Zarena Aslami, Manu Chander, Chatterjee, Christoff, Jane Hu, Tricia A. Lootens, Raza Kolb, and Wong.

3. Steinlight's most forceful elaboration of this argument is her 2016 article "We Have Always Been Presentist," where she writes that "Victorians were obsessed with historicity *because* they were obsessed with contemporaneity" (105).

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