Located by Victorianism

FAITH SMITH

WHAT are the implications of being located, placed, mapped by Victorianism? Writing in the context of what is generally termed the "English-speaking Caribbean," I want to reflect here on pasts that have not *passed* but that have instead been *passed on*—bequeathing, replicating, accumulating, burnishing, tarnishing. Here it is not only those gestures of erasure, silence, or genteel substitution that we might associate with the machinations of those identified as or with the powerful that interest me, but the continuing hold over constituencies identified as the powerless (or at any rate their descendants) of precisely those negating and deathly instruments that secure their disempowerment.

I want to point out, first, how the impact and reach of *Victorianism as such* was challenged but also extended by the adjacency of other imperial contexts to British rule—as administrators of neighboring territories exchanged advice or as the British succeeded or preceded other imperial systems and found themselves competing for cultural authority in non-Protestant environments. These require us to attend to what appear to be non-Victorian, non-*British-as-such* characters, objects, imaginaries in the texts we are examining, to see how Victorianness deflects, retreats from, or asserts itself in the face of this multiplicity; how its gestures in a particular place look different from what is defined as *Victorian* in some other location. Contending and colluding with the shifting contours of U.S. interests in the Caribbean across and (particularly toward the end of) the long nineteenth century, the symbolic power of Britain's English-speaking whiteness is significantly contested and diluted, but also reconstituted and revivified, with the ascendance of the imperial United States in the early twentieth century.

Then I want to think about the nineteenth-century imperial project in terms of its ability to mark as valuable and to diminish, continuing earlier generations of material and symbolic power and extending into the present: "Walking compost hideously promising tender cane and silky

Faith Smith's *Strolling in the Ruins: The Caribbean's Non-Sovereign Modern in the Early Twentieth Century*, which maps a "quiet period" in the British Caribbean, is forthcoming from Duke University Press. She edited *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* (University Press of Virginia, 2011). She is an associate professor in the African and African American Studies Department and the English Department at Brandeis University.

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cotton" describes the personhood of the enslaved and indentured subject reduced to refuse in the process of yielding untold prosperity.[1] In the 2020 summer of corporate apologies for founders who once owned enslaved people, the compound interest and other instruments of accumulation that continue to activate the wealth from enslavement and the postemancipation period were missing from the calculated phrasing that insisted that the past came to an end in the past. Catherine Hall and her coauthors remind us of the "invisibility" of slave-ownership in British history: "elided by strategies of euphemism and evasion originally adopted by the slave-owners themselves and subsequently introduced widely in British culture."[2] How do we read for this evasiveness, what are these euphemisms, and which bodies bear the brunt of the material consequences of these rhetorical contradictions in the Caribbean and its diasporas today?

For Deborah Thomas, "there is the sense that there is some kind of baseline where British influence is merely civil and institutional. This is a presupposition that leaves no room to explore the real institutional and ideological legacies of colonial violence."[3] *British* violence is not seen as *violent* but as *law and order* conferring worth and modernity. We would do well to comprehend this complex accounting of modernity when Caribbean citizens repeatedly defend the right to continue to enforce Victorian-era laws punishing same-sex desiring subjects and violators of so-called cross-dressing laws, and when successive British prime ministers champion the revocation of such legislation or urge Caribbean people to "move on" from dwelling unduly on the subject of slavery.[4] On one hand, British rule does not acknowledge its own enactment and revocation of these nineteenth-century laws in the moment that it admonishes Caribbean territories; on the other, the critique of Caribbean people as homophobic and belated does not attend to the specific histories of the region's racialization and sexualization—histories that cast Caribbean people and space as hypersexual, that continue to justify punitive legislation aimed primarily at working-class people, and that also underlie the region's tourism advertising.[5]

Creative writers of the Caribbean and its diasporas wrestle with these legacies of spaces and bodies marked out as pleasurable and dangerous sources of wealth, permitting other bodies and spaces to emerge and remain untarnished and prosperous. (Recall how starkly this differential mapping is expressed in Rochester's distinction between the foul, mosquito-ridden climate of a region that has made him wealthy, and the "sweet wind from Europe.")[6] In Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*,

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Clara, the offspring of "a naval man from Scotch Land" who dies "just before he was to manumit her and her mama," keeps these manumission papers in a box, ready to show whomever wishes to see them, signaling her anxiety about her inability to dispose of a *not-free-ness* inherited from her mother and that has left her father untainted.[7] This is what Christina Sharpe terms the "monstrous intimacy" of investing in the patriarchal figure who is neither disposed nor required to recognize her as his kin.[8] This twenty-first-century novel set in the 1820s and 1830s is arguably not *Victorian*, though I am suggesting that the mid- and late nineteenth century inherits, consolidates, and passes on these debilitating structures. In Austen Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, set in the 1950s and punctuated by detailed recollection of generations of sexual abuse, it is as if the period between (pre-1830s) enslavement and the 1950s is experienced as a single extended and unchanging time of ravaged kinship relations, with no end in sight.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* specifies the late Victorian and Edwardian periods in order to indict the capacity of the white English gentleman to combine frolic with the civilizing mission and then return to England with his respectability intact, while the Black Jamaican teenager he has impregnated is left to figure out her options. Yet here Smith (as if presciently discerning the fate of Caribbean-born British citizens in the UK's "Windrush" debacle, circa 2012) shows how the circumstances of this pregnancy in Kingston are bound to continue to distinguish the "haphazard" births of Black women and their descendants from the middle-class children of "singular and long-lasting" unions between white English men and women.[9]

I am drawn to recent accounts that center the ways in which Caribbean people have confronted the devastation attendant on living in the "afterlife" of slavery and indentureship.[10] "Thiefing sugar" and claiming the charge of savage animality suggest the capacity to identify one's abjection and the determination to live fully anyway.[11] This still leaves unchanged the disproportionate allocation of disaster to certain constituencies and not others. Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* focuses our attention on "that woman Bola who spread her children around so that all would never be gathered in the same place to come to the same harm."[12] In a period that appears to be the early Victorian period (but of which the narrative and its characters are oblivious or disinterested, at least partly because of their geographical and social isolation in colonial Trinidad), Bola understands that her status as a Black woman bequeaths disaster and that her loved ones must be

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kept at arm's length for the sake of their own thriving. She proves the logic of the colonial state's assumption of her immoral or indifferent motherhood, but we are meant to see it as her strategic negotiation of her reality. Bola presses us to disentangle maternal care from *possession* and to understand that the negotiation of past and future, arguably freeing for her, will leave her children bereft.

Notes

1. Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*, 28.
2. Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership*, 1.
3. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence*, 124.
4. Mason, "Jamaica Should 'Move On.'"
5. Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body."
6. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 334.
7. Levy, *The Long Song*, 71.
8. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.
9. Smith, *White Teeth*, 280, 292; Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal*.
10. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.
11. Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar;* Gosine, *Nature's Wild*.
12. Brand, *At the Full*, 198.

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