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Decolonizing, or “Undisciplining” and “Widening,” the Victorian Studies Classroom: Reflections and Suggestions

Decolonization refers to the process of dismantling the institutional racial hierarchies of the colonial legacy and institutional racial hierarchies that still haunt language and culture after the demise of an empire. Recently, at the call of “Undisciplining Victorian Studies” by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy Wong, some Victorian studies scholars started a digital humanities project that sought to innovate Victorian pedagogy by incorporating a race-conscious perspective into interdisciplinary teaching practices. This project titled “Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom” consists of syllabi, lesson plans, and podcast interviews. I joined them and have been working with my team on study materials and guidelines, especially about nineteenth-century Africa, the British Empire, and the African diaspora. Our project also speaks to the call to “widen” the nineteenth century, which, as Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan D. Fong, and Helena Michie argue, requires us to embrace linguistic diversity beyond Europe, set less restrictive boundaries of area studies, examine status as well as mobility, and promote contact with the nonhuman that disrupts the simple colonizer/colonized binary of empire. Today, I would like to share what I learned from this collaborative project. Decolonizing the Victorian classroom, I argue, calls for threefold recognition: diverse default canons, planetarity, and positionality.

Firstly, decolonization requires us to diversify the default canon associated with common literary topics, which can be accomplished by assigning Black-authored or Africa-centered texts along with the white canons in Victorian literature. A course unit on life-writing, for example, can include, besides *Jane Eyre*, people of color’s slave narratives such as *Bokwala: The Story of a Congo Victim* by a Congo Resident (1910) and *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). Both Bokawala and Equiano show some features common to general life-writing—chronological narration of childhood memories and the self-conscious narrator addressing the reader. Yet, they differ from the self-isolating, self-reflective tone of *Jane Eyre* (1847) in that they appear to record collective suffering linked with their tribes and their first-hand experience without much retrospection. White South-African feminist writer Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which features white children’s development in South Africa, however, does not even adhere to the accumulative, progressive narrative bound for self-fulfillment and justice that shaped Bokawala or *Jane Eyre*. The narrative

focalization switches from one character to another in an episodic manner, complicates the feminist perspective with derogatory representations of black Africans, and ends with the sudden death of two of the protagonists who have been searching for their life's purpose. Diversifying the canon of common literary topics helps us to embrace various types of default suggested in writings across space and race not as alternatives to the pre-coded understanding of the topic but as equal participants shaping and "widening" the purview of criticism. I ask, what other Victorian genres and texts can be employed to diversify generic parameters?

Secondly, decolonization should shift the locus of perspective, promoting planetarity in our reading. Responding to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's proposal for planetarity, which encourages an awareness of relationality and alterity against the homogenous globalization, I suggest that we look outward to read Victorian literature in relation to the colonies and also see it from the other side of the planet. Can we read dark-skinned Heathcliff in Liverpool in relation to the Atlantic slave trade (Cliff 43-44) or Magwitch's sponsorship from Australia and Pip's work in Egypt as part of the global British economy? Can travel narratives by white missionaries suggest not only the white dominating "seeing-man" (Pratt 7) but also uncomfortable facts about their planetary location in the environment exceeding the systematic knowledge of Western taxonomy? Can we shift the observation angle by reading the works about the British colonies written by people of color themselves, including a travelogue by an Anglo-African minister and a record for sanitary reform by a Krio-African medical surgeon?

Thirdly, decolonization calls for reflection on our positionality. Victorian studies has, for too long, taken for granted a white readership despite the occasional reconsiderations made by postcolonial studies. Only recently has it begun to encompass the growing concern for diversity and inclusion prompted by African American, Asian American, Latinx, Indigenous, Queer, and Critical Race Studies, and there is much further to go. As someone who first started reading Victorian literature outside the Anglophone world in Korean then later in English after I learned it as a foreign language, I always felt like an outsider peeping through a crack excluded from critical discourse until I moved to the states to pursue my PhD at UCLA, which welcomed me as a partner in collaboration. How can Victorian scholars stay informed about and address the multicultural, multilingual communities through which Victorian literature circulates? How can I, we, or they, participate in the ongoing discourse embracing the multiple axes of identity? If you feel like you are not supposed to study Victorian literature because of your race, class, gender, or nationality, I hope you know that you belong here just as I do. Your voice matters.

These are some thoughts that I have developed with the scholars who worked together for the project "Undisciplining the Victorian classroom." At this roundtable, I look forward to more conversation, more feedback, and more collaboration.

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