

*Victorian Studies and Decolonization**Nasser Mufti***From Decolonization to “Decolonize”**

A short essay published in 1963 by literary critic Ruth M. Adams and historian Henry R. Winkler reflects on a course on Victorian England they cotaught at Rutgers University. The course, they tell us, was in direct conversation with the interdisciplinary mission of the newly founded journal *Victorian Studies*, which in its inaugural issue defined itself as having a “concentration on the English culture of a particular age; and openness to critical and scholarly studies from all the relevant disciplines” (“Prefatory Note” 3). “We wanted to test,” Adams and Winkler write, “how far the literary materials could be used in seeking a balanced and reasonably accurate picture of the era, to investigate what were the possibilities and the limitations of such an approach” (100). The syllabus they go on to describe covers topics that are still commonplace in Victorian studies: Chartism, the rise of the middle classes, the critique of utilitarianism, religion, Darwinism, and the tensions between rural and urban life.

Unsurprisingly, no mention is made of the British Empire. What should give one pause is how a course on Victorian England offered in the early 1960s, the heyday of decolonization, *could* ignore British imperialism. Vast swaths of the world had just, often quite violently, liberated themselves from European colonization, and others were actively struggling for independence. And yet Adams and Winkler appear to have made no connection between events in the Third World and the Victorian century’s most significant achievement: empire. How is it that in the United States in 1962 one could teach Mrs. Jellyby’s “telescopic philanthropy” in the Niger delta and not discuss Nigerian independence? Or teach the casual ellipsis of Pip’s time in Egypt in the conclusion of *Great Expectations* and somehow not talk about the Suez crisis? How can one talk about Jos Sedley and not discuss the plunder of British India? How does one read *Tono Bungay* in 1962 and not talk about Kwame Nkrumah?

And yet a course on Victorian England offered at a prestigious American university in the early 1960s, amidst the intensification of American interventionism in places like Vietnam, *could* be absolutely and effortlessly blind to the simple fact of decolonization and its condition of possibility, imperialism. Such oversights are centuries in the making and remained the norm in Victorianist scholarship until the quasi-institutionalization of postcolonial studies in the anglophone academy in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1985, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak declared that “it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism . . . was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (243). Even in the aftermath of Spivak’s essay, Victorian studies made the impossible possible by routinely ignoring the relationship between culture and imperialism. More scandalous has been the field’s complete avoidance of the Subaltern Studies Collective, which was anchored in nineteenth-century British historiography, sociology, and political thought.<sup>1</sup> For decades, it was not only possible but the norm to research what the young Friedrich Engels called “the commercial capital of the world” without talking about where all the money came from (36).

In stark contrast to the early decades of Victorian studies, and particularly since the “undisciplining” turn in the field’s American circles, today it is entirely uncontroversial to “decolonize” Victorian studies. The slogan “decolonize” and its cognate “decolonizing” have recently proliferated at major conferences, workshops, reading groups, and essay prizes in the American academy. Both generally serve as umbrella terms for antiracist pedagogy, reflections on the Whiteness of the Victorian corpus, and attention to the history of imperialism.<sup>2</sup> “Decolonize,” no doubt, builds on the gradual increase of scholarship on nineteenth-century British imperialism from the 1990s onward, especially in the last ten years (typically in the key of empire studies, very rarely in the mode of postcolonial studies). But “decolonize” also names an institutional shift in research on empire, one that I would say departs from empire studies and especially postcolonial studies. For Victorian studies is not alone in its embrace of “decolonize.” Over the last decade, there has been an efflorescence of the verb in the American academy and beyond. Surprisingly versatile, “decolonize” and “decolonizing” can be found across a range of discourses, from scholarship on education and literary studies to self-help to social justice to graffiti to TED Talks, and can be applied to a vast array of contexts, including education, ethnography, literature, anthropology, urbanism, the vote, Christianity, mindfulness, everything.<sup>3</sup> A category like “postcolonial” could have never dreamed of such popularity.

The wholesale institutional embrace of “decolonize” should give one pause. As I am sure many chapters in this book note, and as has been noted by others, it would be a gross misunderstanding to mistake the verb “decolonize” for the noun “decolonization.”<sup>4</sup> The verb is new and emerges out of a middle-class encounter with the complicity between culture and imperialism. This is why it is seemingly possible to “decolonize” everything. The noun, however, is much older, has a closer relationship to the “postcolonial,” and primarily describes anticolonial nationalism and Third Worldist self-determination of the mid-century (though it remains a salient concept for contemporary Indigenous activism and scholarship). If the bourgeois revolutions of the nineteenth century sought to “create a world after its own image” through empire, then decolonization sought (and seeks) to recreate what this image looked like. As Frantz Fanon famously characterizes it in *The Wretched of the Earth*, decolonization “sets out to change the order of the world,” is an “agenda for total disorder,” and “is an historical process” that “reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives” (2, 3). So ambitious is its scope that decolonization reintroduces “man into the world, man in his totality,” not better pedagogical practices or more inclusive syllabi (62). Fanon, in fact, almost never uses the verb “decolonize” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, and when he does, he actually uses it to describe the tactics of neocolonialism.<sup>5</sup> “Decolonizing” is entirely absent in his text. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s classic *Decolonising the Mind*, to which this volume owes a great debt, also never uses “decolonize” or “decolonizing” other than in the title. Ngũgĩ’s interest, as he states in the conclusion, is in the project of Third Worldist universalism: “This is what this book on the politics of language in African literature has really been about: national, democratic, and human liberation,” and then echoing Fanon’s humanism, “It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle” (108). Contemporary calls to “decolonize” Victorian studies have little interest in such rediscoveries, much less the abolition of English departments or conducting research in the languages of the Global South.<sup>6</sup> To put it perhaps too starkly: while decolonization “reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives,” “decolonize” reeks of stale conference hotels and online workshops organized by Dean’s initiatives.

I highlight this difference not to trivialize recent calls to decolonize Victorian studies or to downplay the recent increase in Victorianist scholarship on the British Empire, but to emphasize how “decolonize” and decolonization are products of radically different historical conjunctures and should not be run through one another. Their difference is thrown

into even sharper relief when one considers how not only were the leaders of decolonization bourgeois intellectuals trained in the Western academy, but they were also complete Anglophiles and Francophiles. As I illustrate in the next section, the leaders and intellectuals of anticolonial thought in the British colonial world never had a problem with Victorianism. They freely utilized, quoted, and valorized the White, conservative patriarchs of nineteenth-century British literature and culture. From the perspective of W. E. B. Du Bois, B. R. Ambedkar, and C. L. R James, “decolonizing” the Victorian canon would be absurd, as it is this very canon – formed with and alongside colonization – that they loved *and relied on* to theorize the project of decolonization.<sup>7</sup> They might tirelessly work for the liberation of the colonial world, but they do so oftentimes by way of the writings of Victorians like Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, and Alfred Tennyson. From this perspective, it becomes possible to adapt Spivak’s maxim: it should not be possible to research Victorian studies without remembering that Victorianism was integral to decolonization. The relation between anticolonial thought and Victorianism remains underresearched, even amidst the popularity of “decolonize.”

### **Indian in Blood, English in Taste**

A testament to the successes of Macaulayism, anticolonial intellectuals across the anglophone imperium were well versed in the British canon. In a famous speech in 1941, Rabindranath Tagore discusses the impact of British literature on the early intellectuals of colonial India: “Their days and nights were eloquent with the stately declamations of Burke, with Macaulay’s long-rolling sentences; discussions centered on Shakespeare’s drama and Byron’s poetry add above all upon the large-hearted liberalism of the nineteenth century English politics” (2). Reflecting on his own formation, Tagore recalls listening to the speeches of John Bright in his youth, “overflowing all narrow national bonds, had made so deep an impression on my mind that something of it lingers to-day, even in these days of graceless disillusionment” (3). When Jawaharlal Nehru writes (while imprisoned by the British, it is worth remembering) of his education, he praises his teacher Ferdinand T. Brooks, a late Victorian theosophist teacher and follower of Annie Besant. Nehru gives credit to Brooks for his taste in reading: “the Lewis Carroll books were great favorites, and *The Jungle Books* and *Kim* . . . I remember reading many of the novels of Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray, H. G. Wells’s romances, Mark Twain, and the Sherlock Holmes stories, I was thrilled by the *Prisoner of Zenda*, and

Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* was for me the last word in humor. Another book stands out still in my memory; it was Du Maurier's *Trilby*; also *Peter Ibbetson*" (28).

In a totally different context, but to a similar end, no anticolonial thinker was more devoted to British literature than C. L. R. James. And in *Beyond a Boundary*, it is Britain's nineteenth century that James privileges in his reflections on national culture. The conclusion famously narrates what James describes as the West Indies' entry into the "comity of nations," but this cannot be done without a detour to those who James describes as the founders of Victorianism: Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby, Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, and W. G. Grace, the preeminent Victorian cricketer. Indeed, James devotes two chapters of *Beyond a Boundary* to these figures and digresses toward the Victorians countless times in his text. Rather than his teachers, James credits his parents for his devotion to the English canon, one rather densely populated by nineteenth-century writers. James's mother "was a reader, one of the most tireless I have ever known. Usually it was novels, any novel. Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Hall Caine, Stevenson, Mrs. Henry Wood, Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Breame, Shakespeare . . . Balzac, Nathaniel Hawthorne, a woman called E.D.E.N. Southworth, Fenimore Cooper, Nat Gould, Charles Garvice, anything and everything, and as she put them down I picked them up."<sup>8</sup> His father: "a man of some education he knew who, if not what, the classics were . . . 'The Pickwick Papers,' my father would say, taking up the book. 'By Charles Dickens. A great book, my boy. Read it.' And I would buy it" (*Beyond a Boundary* 16). One book in particular made an impression on the young James: "Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. My mother had an old copy with a red cover. I had read it when I was about eight, and of all the books that passed through that house this one became my Homer and my bible" (17).<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on his formal education, in *the early days of West Indian independence*, it is worth highlighting, James writes:

Our principal, Mr. W Burslem, M.A., formerly, if I remember rightly, of Clare College, Cambridge, part Pickwick, part Dr. Johnson, part Samuel Smiles, was an Englishman of the nineteenth century . . . No more devoted, conscientious and self-sacrificing official ever worked in the colonies . . . He was a man with a belief in the rod which he combined with a choleric and autocratic disposition. But he was beloved by generations of boys and was held in respectful admiration throughout the colony . . . How not to look up to the England of Shakespeare and Milton, of Thackeray and Dickens, of Hobbs and Rhodes, in the daily presence of such an Englishman and in the

absence of any nationalist agitation outside? . . . What I think of him now is not very different from what I thought then. (29)

How is one supposed to “decolonize” such a statement? Or this one: “*everything* began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading . . . it was the beacon that beckoned me on” (30)? In the 1930s, James followed this beacon to England, where he researched and published *The Black Jacobins*, arguably the founding text of anticolonial historiography.

For someone like James, the Victorian canon was entirely compatible with, indeed necessary for, the project of decolonization. More than being biographically significant, nineteenth-century British literature and culture offered anticolonial thinkers analytical frameworks to conceive the project of decolonization. B. R. Ambedkar begins his lengthy pamphlet on the partition of India by turning to Thomas Carlyle’s *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*. In the passage Ambedkar quotes, Carlyle is concerned that class conflict in England would erupt in a civil war and laments that the England of the 1840s lacks a heroic figure like Cromwell to lead it to political and social unity: “Awake before it comes to that! Gods and men bid us awake! The Voices of our Fathers, with thousandfold stern monition to one and all, bid us awake!” (ii). “This warning” of impending civil war, Ambedkar explains, “applies to Indians in their present circumstances [at the cusp of independence] as it once did to Englishmen and Indians, if they pay no heed to it, will do so at their peril” (ii). If the Victorian Sage helps Ambedkar frame his problematic, late Victorian jurists provide him the theoretical backbone for his argument. “No one,” writes Ambedkar, “is more competent to answer [the question of the national unity] than James Bryce” (187). Ambedkar’s ultimate, and rather worrying, advocacy for the partitioning of India along religious lines at Independence comes through, not in small part, the writings of Henry Sidgwick and James Bryce, to whom he turns in discussions of the role of constitutional law, the history of empires, and the impact of secession on the nation state.<sup>10</sup> For these thinkers, political unity, be it nation or imperium, was tantamount, and if it required partitioning off a portion of the body politic, then so be it.

Pan-Africanists from the United States and the Caribbean also turned to nineteenth-century British writers as a field of intelligibility into the project of decolonization and transnational affiliation.<sup>11</sup> Marcus Garvey’s writings are indebted to Carlylean hero worship, and Tennyson looms large in the slogan for the Black Star Line: “One God, One Aim, One Destiny” (Garvey 206–14). Similarly, Victorianism, especially Macaulay

and Carlyle, saturates the nonfictional writings of Du Bois (Lewis 75). *Souls of Black Folk* opens each chapter with quotations from nineteenth-century poets, including Tennyson, Byron, Swinburne, and Browning, and Du Bois's language echoes Carlyle's ornamentalism and what J. Hillis Miller calls "Carlylese" (304). For Du Bois, the condition of England question illuminates the condition of the African American working class during Reconstruction. Not unlike Ambedkar's turn to the "hungry forties" of Victorian England, Du Bois argues that "the economic system of the South" is "a copy of that England of the early nineteenth century, before the factory acts, – the England that wrung pity from thinkers and fired the wrath of Carlyle" (138). Rather than the English bourgeoisie, it is "the sons of poor whites fired with a new thirst for wealth and power, thrifty and avaricious Yankees, shrewd and unscrupulous Jews" who have emerged as the new "captains of industry" (138). The sensibility of this industrial bourgeoisie, like that of the England that Carlyle reflected upon, is anchored in "neither love nor hate, neither sympathy nor romance; it is a cold question of dollars and dividends," or what Du Bois, directly quoting Carlyle refers to as "the Gospel of Mammonism" (138). Eric Williams's understudied *British Historians and the West Indies* traces the invention of the Caribbean in colonial historiography. A precursor to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Williams tracks the ways in which historians like Macaulay, J. R. Seeley, Lord Acton, J. A. Froude, and many others invented the Caribbean in their writings. As he sums up, "a century and a half of denigration of the West Indies in British universities have . . . left their mark on British attitudes to the West Indies . . . The historical field therefore provides the battleground on which imperialist politics struggle against nationalist politics" (182). For Williams, a critique of colonial historiography such as the kind undertaken in his text is central to the anticolonial project.

Victorian studies, and nineteenth-century British literary studies more generally, has had no time for the simple fact that its archive resonates in the history of decolonization. Even amidst recent calls for the field to better address the demographic homogeneity of its canon and its practitioners, Victorianists have primarily looked to contemporary critical race theory (which typically takes the United States as its site of analysis), not critical race theory's antecedents in Pan-Africanism and anticolonialism – movements that are proper to the colonized world. Everyone in the field appears to have read Christina Sharpe, while everyone says, countless times and with nervous energy, that they "own *The Black Jacobins* and have been meaning to read it for years." What is the basis for this



resistance to decolonization – a world-historical process that impacted the majority of the globe – in Victorian studies?

To begin thinking about this oversight and find a way forward, it is important to repeat a fundamental disparity: while anticolonial thinkers *could not do without* Victorian thought, Victorianist scholarship has easily *done without* anticolonial thought.<sup>12</sup> For a field so rigorously historicist, it is quite odd that the connections between the archive of Victorian culture and the great thinkers of decolonization have never been substantially pursued. Depending on the audience, such realizations can evoke a sense of moral failure, at which point slogans like “decolonize” and “undisciplining” are always near at hand. In contrast, I want to suggest that these historical oversights have to do with the institutional (and therefore ideological) conception of Victorian studies as a field and its own implication in the culture of American imperialism, both of which must be understood as emerging and developing alongside decolonization in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. In what follows, I offer a concise history of the birth of Victorian studies in the United States so as to better understand why it is that a field, perfectly poised to encounter the intimate links between nineteenth-century culture and decolonization, did not do so.

### The Invention of Victorian Studies and the Age of American Imperialism

Although the term “Victorian” dates back to G. M. Young’s *Victorian Poets* (1875), and its usage became increasingly common in the early twentieth century (perhaps most significantly in the title of Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* [1917]), it was only in 1933, with the publication of the annual “Victorian Bibliography” in *Modern Philology*, that “Victorian” began to take shape as an academic field. In 1940, an important survey by Charles Frederick Harrold observes that “we are, of course, passing through a ‘Victorian’ vogue” and that “Victorian scholarship is achieving maturity. It will be found that scholarly advance has been irregular. In a field so new, and relatively so recent, as the years between 1830–1900, we must expect much that is tentative, or incomplete, or unsuccessful” (668). In 1952, the field gained further delineation with the establishment of *Victorian Newsletter*, which included scholarly articles, book reviews, and bibliographies (“Editorial” 1). But it was in 1957 that the field fully arrived with the formation of the journal *Victorian Studies* at Indiana University. The Modern Language Association endorsed *Victorian Studies* and anointed it the home journal for the field when they recommended



“Victorian Bibliography” be published there (“Prefatory Note” 3). During these years, Victorian studies groups formed at Cambridge University and the University of Leicester, both of which hailed the journal for galvanizing a range of scholars from numerous disciplines around the Victorian (Best; Collins). From all evidence, the founding of *Victorian Studies* was a truly generative event in the anglophone academy.

Victorian studies emerged amidst the efflorescence of area studies fields in the United States after the World War II.<sup>13</sup> Populated by experts in foreign languages, area studies fields were often Cold War knowledge factories of the Soviet Union and the Third World. As Spivak puts it, “Area Studies exhibit quality and rigor (those elusive traits), combined with openly conservative or ‘no’ politics” (7). Though all scholarly fields are ideological state apparatuses in Louis Althusser’s sense of the term, not all such apparatuses are the same or have the same function, and area studies offered the American state a specific tool for its imperial project. Paul A Bové explains: “Area studies has existed to provide authoritative knowledge to the state, specifically the government and its policy-makers, to enable the state to expand its power and to defend its interests geopolitically” (207). Cynically, one might think that the Victorian period would be fertile ground for American foreign policy during the Cold War. Nathan Hensley reminds us that “there were at least 228 separate armed conflicts during the [Victorian] period,” and the proliferation of imperial violence during what is commonly referred to as the “age of Equipoise” “suggests that the images we take to characterize the world’s first liberal empire should include not just the middle-class hearth or the democratic ballot box but the war zones and boneyards of England’s global periphery, where mutiny, and its suppression, were all but universal” (2).<sup>14</sup> It would therefore be reasonable to think that the study of British imperialism in the nineteenth century might prove useful for the United States’ postwar geopolitical interests. But it doesn’t take an insider to Victorian studies to know that research on the Corn Laws, *Middlemarch*, and Ruskin’s aesthetics have never been especially useful for assassinating democratically elected leaders, staging coups, installing dictators, or obliterating economies, landscapes, and entire societies in the Global South. Rather, the usefulness of Victorian studies for the state might be better understood as complimenting area studies by naturalizing the insularity of metropolitan national culture – the isolation of the domestic from the international – of, as Hensley put it, valorizing the “middle-class hearth” over “extrajudicial killing as everyday life” – a facet of any successful empire. If area studies encouraged expertise in seemingly far-off places, Victorian studies helped

naturalize the idea that the study of metropolitan culture could take place without any knowledge of those “far-off” places.

In the United States, for example, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) was instrumental in producing such a body of provincial knowledge. A rather remarkable essay by Russell Wyland, Deputy Director of the NEH, is straightforward about the US government’s Arnoldian relationship to humanistic inquiry: “Like postwar scholars, Congress had come to regard the civilizing effect of the humanities as protection against anti-democratic forces,” and therefore justified public funding projects like the NEH in the mid-1960s (11).<sup>15</sup> Wyland notes how Barnaby C. Keeney’s (the first chairman of the NEH) “vision for the Endowment’s ideals of scholarly research could just as easily have been a description of the intellectual project pursued by [Walter] Houghton, [Michael] Wolff, and the early editors” of *Victorian Studies* (13). During its first eight years, the NEH funded forty-four fellowships and summer stipends in the field of Victorian studies (only one of which engages with British imperialism). By funding such projects, the NEH provided Victorianists working in the United States the financial resources to organize the field’s archive in the form of bibliographies, nineteenth-century periodicals, editions of primary texts, and the publication of letters and diaries. After proudly mentioning that Lynne Cheney was the NEH’s first Victorianist chairman (in the very years her husband directed wars in Panama and Iraq), Wyland declares that the “NEH can rightly claim credit for building the infrastructure of modern Victorian studies.” Having funded collations such as the diaries of Elizabeth Barrett Browning into one volume, five volumes of Thomas Hardy’s poetry, a volume of Thackeray’s correspondence, and many others, the NEH had effectively produced and made accessible the very archive that was to prove fundamental to scholarship in Victorian studies. This is, of course, what public funding *should* do. But when done in a metropolitan center like the United States, the implication of such cultural production in the imperial milieu in which it is set is unavoidable. The reproductive quality of such institutional support (again, in the Althusserian sense) is evinced by how, as Wyland celebrates, “Victorian studies can rightly claim credit for the success of the Endowment. The rigor of funded Victorian studies scholars helped set standards for funding, not only for other Victorianists but also for scholars in other emerging disciplines” (23). Such is “sweetness and light” in the age of American imperialism.

Why, one might ask again, would the collected letters of Thomas Carlyle and Jane Welsh Carlyle be useful to postwar American

imperialism? Why would Dickens's working notebooks ward off the barbarism that threatened American "democratic values"? Is it conceivable that Lynne Cheney's admiration for Matthew Arnold, who believed in the civilizing effects of culture, impacted Dick Cheney's decision to bomb Iraq? No, they wouldn't, and it isn't conceivable. Wyland's account suggests instead that it was precisely the field's *avoidance* of theorizing the link between culture and imperial politics that rendered it so compatible with an institution like the NEH. Bové notes something similar in the ideological function of American studies: "there was no sense in which the state needed the knowledge produced by American studies for its own executive purposes," but "rather, it was an instrument of the state" (211, 212). He goes on to argue that while American studies attended to the cultural heterogeneity of the United States, its resistance to comparative research meant its domain remained thoroughly domestic, rather than the international scope of the culture and politics of postwar America. Victorian studies too seems to have been such an apparatus in the United States, for, by naturalizing the nation state as the privileged domain of humanistic inquiry, the field 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 (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 14). 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.<sup>16</sup>

### Epilogue for a Preface to Post-Postcolonial Criticism

Four decades after the publication of Adams and Winkler's "An Inter-Departmental Course on Victorian England," *Victorian Studies* published Erin O'Connor's infamous "Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Criticism." The essay accuses postcolonial criticism (mostly just Spivak) of appropriating the Victorian novel for the critique of empire, and for having "silenced" and "colonized the critical imagination of the Victorianist," who otherwise pursued the "unapologetic study of literature as a viable, worthwhile, eminently respectable end in itself" (228, 240). Sarcastic though it is in its characterization, when placed in relation to the early days of Victorian studies, the essay reads as longing to go back to a simpler

time, when *Jane Eyre* was “just” a novel, before the advent of poststructuralism and postcolonial theory. For an essay that looks forward, “Preface” has a strange affinity for the past. It is not especially fruitful to revisit O’Connor’s argument, or the debates she followed, or to show that postcolonial criticism was in fact the exception in Victorianist scholarship and not the overwhelming force she paints it as, or to recount how a “genre’s thematic subtleties, structural indeterminacies, and genuine intellectual rigor” and ideology critique can, in fact, go hand in hand.<sup>17</sup>

But it is worth revisiting O’Connor’s essay if only to register how her premise is that the field of Victorian studies existed in isolation from decolonization, and that talk of empire was an artificial insertion into the Victorian art-object by outsiders/theoreticians to the field. My argument in this chapter has been the opposite. Not only was Victorian literature and culture formative to the great theorists of decolonization, but it was also central to how they conceived of and articulated postcolonial liberation. Even the most superficial historicist would have to recognize the salience of this conjuncture. Furthermore, 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. The art-objects that O’Connor is so interested in saving from postcolonial ideology critique were invented as such amidst the Cold War milieu of American imperialism and produced as “civilizing” forces in the crusade against the Third World socialisms (“anti-democratic forces,” as Wyland puts it). Attending to the history of decolonization-as-noun and its rather intimate relation to Victorian culture and society seems to be one way to recover “English culture of a particular age” without isolating culture from imperialism.

### Notes

1. Ranajit Guha has even published on Charles Dickens but remains obscure to the field (“Colonial City”).
2. This is to say nothing of the term “decolonial,” which stands in sharp contrast to (how I represent) decolonization below. The former, Walter Dignolo tells us, “emerged at the very foundation of modern/coloniality, as its counterpoint” and is invested in a “thinking that de-links and opens . . . to the possibilities of hidden . . . by the modern rationality that is mounted and enclosed by categories of Greek, Latin and six modern imperial European languages” (46). Decolonization, as I argue below, is a determinate negation of modern rationality.
3. For, as I see it, symptomatic examples, see Bejarano, Juárez, García, and Goldstein (2019); Eckhardt. And for critical reflections on “decolonizing,” see Thomas; Allen and Jobson; Mbembe.

4. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang put it bluntly: “The easy adoption of decolonization as a metaphor (and nothing else) is a form of this [settler] anxiety, because it is a premature attempt at reconciliation. “The absorption of decolonization by settler social justice frameworks is one way the settler, disturbed by her own settler status, tries to escape or contain the unbearable searchlight of complicity, of having harmed others just by being oneself.” The desire to reconcile is just as relentless as the desire to disappear the Native; it is a desire to not have to deal with this (Indian) problem anymore” (9). Being a literary critic, I am unsure of Tuck and Yang’s dismissal of metaphor as such (even in the context of decolonization) and concerned by their ontological framing of colonial discourse. But I echo their main claim: the verb “decolonize” can, in fact, be a technology of empire because of its disavowal of the continuing effects of imperialism, and the ways in which empire continues to structure, amongst many things, the discourse of social justice.
5. In one of few such instances, Fanon considers the contagiousness of anticolonial rebellion from the standpoint of the colonizer: “The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer strictly speaking a Vietnamese victory . . . A Dien Bien Phu was now within reach of every colonized subject . . . This pervading atmosphere of violence affects not just the colonized but also the colonizers who realize the number of latent Dien Bien Phu’s. The colonial governments are therefore gripped in a genuine wholesale panic. Their plan is to make the first move, to turn the liberation movement to the right and disarm the people. Quick, let’s decolonize. Let’s decolonize the Congo before it turns into another Algeria” (31). Faced with the potential domino effect of anticolonial rebellions in one colony, the colonizer uses the slogan “decolonize” to end formal colonialism and continue it by the other means of economic dependency.
6. Anecdotally, but perhaps tellingly, when I approached one of the organizers of the annual North American Victorian Studies Association conference about encouraging crosslingual research by requiring all participants to engage with a language other than English in order to present at future conferences, the idea was dismissed because it would mean the end of the conference altogether. Such is the (perceived) incompatibility of Victorian studies and comparative literature.
7. The same is true of anticolonial thought in the Francophone world. Gary Wilder notes Negritude’s “contradictory character,” at once complicit with the colonial order of things and simultaneously contesting it, at once Francophilic and anticolonial. See especially chapters 6 and 7.
8. It is worth pointing out that none of the writers discussed above make much of a distinction between, say, late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century writers, or between romanticism and Victorianism, and slippages between British and American literature are common. This is in part because, as I suggest below, the “Victorian period” as an analytical category was itself invented in the mid-twentieth century.
9. See also Gikandi, “Embarrassment” and “Afro-Victorian.”

10. Partha Chatterjee makes the persuasive claim that Ambedkar's advocacy of partition had the ultimate aim of forging solidarity between those of lower caste and Muslims in the name of equal rights (21–22).
11. For an analysis of the importance of Victorian literature and culture for figures like Du Bois, see Dickerson.
12. A notable exception is Banerjee.
13. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was instrumental in this regard.
14. See also Gopal.
15. I am grateful to Devin Griffiths to pointing me to this essay.
16. This is, of course, precisely Said's intervention in *The Question of Palestine*, which usefully constellates Victorian culture, Zionism, and Palestinian self-determination – but which remains a less-than-minor text in the history of Victorian studies (56–114).
17. For the debates the followed O'Connor's essay, see Brantlinger and David.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Ruth M. and Henry R. Winkler. "An Inter-Departmental Course on Victorian England." *Victorian Studies* 7.1 (1963): 100–102.
- Allen, Jafari Sinclair and Ryan Cecil Jobson. "The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties." *Current Anthropology* 57.2 (2016): 129–48.
- Ambedkar, B. R. *Pakistan, or the Partition of India*. Bombay: Thacker, 1941.
- Banerjee, Sukanya. *Becoming Imperial Citizens*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bejarano Alonso, Carolina, Juárez Lucia Lopez, García, Mirian A. Mijangos, Daniel Goldstein, . *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Best, G. F. A. "The Cambridge University 19th-Century Group." *Victorian Studies* 1.3 (1958): 267–68.
- Bové, Paul A. "Can American Studies Be Area Studies." In Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002, 206–30.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. "Let's Post-Post 'Victorientalism': A Response to Erin O'Connor." *Victorian Studies* 46.1 (2003): 97–105.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Collins, Philip. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- "The University of Leicester Victorian Studies Group," *Victorian Studies* 6.3 (1963): 281–82.
- David, Deirdre. "She Who Must Be Obeyed: A Response to Erin O'Connor." *Victorian Studies* 46.1 (2003): 106–10.
- Dickerson, Vanessa D. *Dark Victorians*. Champagne-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

- Du Bois, W. E. B. *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*. New York: The Free Press, 1992.
- Eckhardt, Giana M., Russell Belk, Tonya Williams Bradford, et al. “Decolonizing Marketing.” *Consumption, Markets, Culture* 25.2 (2022): 176–89.
- “Editorial,” *Victorian Newsletter* 1 (1952): 1–11.
- Engels, Friedrich. *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*. London: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2004.
- Garvey, Marcis. *Marcus Garvey: Life and Lessons*, ed. Robert A. Hill. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Gikandi, Simon. “Afro-Victorian Worlds.” In Martin Hewitt, ed., *The Victorian World*. New York: Routledge, 2012, 671–90.
- “The Embarrassment of Victorianism: Colonial Subjects and the Lure of Englishness.” In John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, eds., *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Gopal, Priyamvada. *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. New York: Verso, 2019.
- Guha, Ranajit. “The Colonial City and Its Time(s).” *Indian Economic Social History Review* 45.3 (2008): 329–51.
- Harrold, Charles Frederick. “Recent Trends in Victorian Studies: 1932–1939.” *Studies in Philology* 37.4 (1940): 667–97.
- Hensley, Nathan K. *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- James, C. L. R. *Beyond a Boundary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919*. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.
- Mbembe, Achille Joseph. “Decolonizing the University.” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15.1 (2016): 29–45.
- Mignolo, Walter D. “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Question: A Manifesto.” *Transmodernity* 1.2 (2011): 44–66.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *Victorian Subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru*. New York: The John Day Company, 1941.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language and African Literature*. Oxford: James Curry, 1986.
- O’Connor, Erin. “Preface for a Post-Postcolonial Criticism.” *Victorian Studies* 45.2 (2003): 217–46.
- “Prefatory Note.” *Victorian Studies* 1.1 (1957): 3.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- The Question of Palestine*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243–61.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Crisis in Civilization*. Calcutta: Vivsa A-Bharati, 1957.



- Thomas, Deborah A. "Decolonizing Disciplines: From the Editor." *American Anthropologist* 120.3 (2018): 393–97.
- Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1.1 (2012): 1–40.
- Wilder, Gary. *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Williams, Eric. *British Historians and the West Indies*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
- Wyland, Russell M. "Public Funding and the Untamed Wilderness." *Victorian Studies and Its Publics* 55 (2009). [www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/1900-vi-n1-ravon3697/039554ar/](http://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ravon/1900-vi-n1-ravon3697/039554ar/).