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Empire

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SINCE the rise of postcolonial theory and criticism in the 1980s, it has become commonplace within Victorian studies to understand empire as a necessary category of analysis. In drawing on the pathbreaking analyses of critics like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, our field has long recognized how imperialism and colonialism functioned as crucial backdrops to the literary and cultural output of nineteenth-century Britain. At the same time, much of the current scholarship on empire and Victorian literature has still, in practice, tended to replicate imperial priorities and the spatial logic of settler colonialism. Frequently in this work, Britain remains the assumed center, as texts published within or about the metropole occupy an assumed-privileged status. Often building upon Said's influential method of "contrapuntal reading," these analyses construct important arguments about empire that nonetheless remain grounded in a relatively limited range of sources. Thus, in Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things*, for instance, empire reveals itself in the imperial things that appear in Brontë and Dickens.¹ Or in Nathan Hensley's *Forms of Empire*, he shows us how several British texts encode the foundational terms of sovereignty and violence within their aesthetic structures.² Moreover, even when scholars have looked further afield and beyond the British Isles themselves, such as in Hensley's chapter on Haggard or in Jason Rudy's wide-ranging *Imagined Homelands*, white emigrant or colonial writers frequently remain at the forefront, which leaves many issues and subjects in the margins even as they undertake the important work of recuperating authors and texts from understudied archives.³

Each of these books makes necessary interventions in our field, and their incisive and imaginative analyses have enriched our discussions of empire enormously. Nevertheless, their contributions mainly lie in how

they construct a more robust account of imperial and settler colonial ideologies, in ways that keep our critical attentions firmly centered on those who were engaged or complicit in the project of global expansion. While this is not to say that these accounts are monolithic or simplistic—far from it—they illustrate the prevailing limits that frequently frame our objects of study when it comes to addressing the British empire, in ways that continue to overlook the cultural output of those who were occupied and colonized. Certainly there are exceptions to this rule—with the work of Priya Joshi and Sukanya Banerjee offering two salient and influential cases in point, in their penetrating analyses of nineteenth-century Indian sources—but their exceptional status usefully illustrates how Victorian studies still operates within a paradigm of empire that might be postcolonial in a temporal sense, but not yet decolonized.⁴

I draw this language of decolonization from Indigenous studies, a field whose contributions offer a compelling counter to this paradigm and challenges its fundamental assumptions. In offering an approach that, according to Chadwick Allen, explicitly centers “Indigenous concerns and perspectives within academic research” and “localiz[es] Indigenous theories and analytic methodologies,” it provides an emphatically international and, in fact, antinational framework that dismantles the binary of center and periphery itself.⁵ To do so, it “locates itself firmly in the specificity of the Indigenous local while remaining always cognizant of the complexity of the relevant Indigenous global,” by bringing together the literary and cultural productions of peoples in the Americas, Australia, and Africa, to name just a few, and articulating how they operate both within and outside colonial structures and epistemologies.⁶ Furthermore, rather than seeking to gather these materials under a single sign—in contrast to the much-critiqued category of “world literature,” with its tendency to flatten difference—Indigenous studies instead emphasizes theories and methods that think across time, space, place, and language and that incorporate a full awareness of the problematic limits that such comparisons create.

Incorporating these approaches within Victorian studies would allow us to undertake the vital work of questioning the primacy of the British canon and the often-unspoken assumption that it provides the most compelling accounts of British imperialism. By forcing us to examine a much wider corpus of writers and thinkers who actively engaged and resisted colonial norms, as the recent work of Jane Stafford and Coll Thrush has already begun to illustrate, Indigenous Studies would transform how we conceptualize our archives and how we approach them.⁷ It

would not only help us expand our discussions to include authors that explicitly address or allude to nineteenth-century British and colonial texts—such as Sol Plaatje, E. Pauline Johnson, and Toru Dutt—but would also require that we interrogate and decolonize the boundaries that would delimit this new set of texts, in considering works beyond English and even beyond the medium of alphabetic print itself. Doing so would recognize the full range of indigenous cultural productions that took shape outside the literary, but within and alongside the context of colonialism nonetheless, including in oral culture, the visual arts and handicrafts, and various forms of dance and movement.

Certainly, making these moves is not without difficulty. Our field is a largely monolingual one, and the difficulties of working in multiple languages or with translations present their own obstacles. The same is true in working across various forms of media and with modes of aesthetic expression that are, by definition, ephemeral and therefore absent from any written archive or present only in the highly mediated documents of colonial agents or observers. In this light, to center indigeneity might also require reconsidering the temporal boundaries of the Victorian as it has been traditionally defined, in recognizing how various indigenous communities define oral storytelling cultures as transtemporal in ways that connect ongoing contemporary practices with those that occurred in what we typically call the nineteenth century. In this sense, an account of indigeneity in Victorian studies would not only push us to develop a more diverse canon, but would also frame the contradictions and contingencies that I just outlined as the most urgent focus of our analyses rather than as their impediments. Thus, a move to indigeneity in Victorian studies would not be characterized by an effort to recover an authentic indigenous subject, but would follow the injunction of Standing Rock Sioux theorist Vine Deloria, Jr. of “we talk, you listen,” in order to question how the normative methods and materials in our field have created and perpetuated forms of silence and how we must develop new approaches that allow us to listen in different ways.⁸

NOTES

1. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
2. Nathan Hensley, *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

3. Jason Rudy, *Imagined Homelands: British Poetry in the Colonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).
4. Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture and the Novel in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). See also Sukanya Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Subjects: Indians in the Late-Victorian Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
5. Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xx.
6. Allen, *Trans-Indigenous*, xix.
7. Jane Stafford, *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). See also Coll Thrush, *Indigenous London: Native Travelers at the Heart of Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
8. Vine Deloria, Jr., *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).



Empire

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EMPIRE, like Flaubert's ideal author, has a way of seeming everywhere present yet scarcely visible in much Victorian literature. While review sections of the field's journals attest to robust interest in nineteenth-century imperialism and settler colonialism, racial and "free trade" ideologies, cosmopolitanisms and oceanic rims, the significance of empire for our reading of Victorian literature has remained more equivocal. Often immured within a sub-canon of important but fairly familiar works, empire—and especially its relation to literary forms and themes—can seem to be a subject more easily discussed at a dedicated conference panel than in an undergraduate survey hoping to demonstrate what is particularly valuable or interesting about nineteenth-century literature, and in particular the novel. Critics may agree that an empire based on a massive, coerced drug trade, indigenous genocide, and the unfree labor of millions was a key socioeconomic factor in nineteenth-century British culture, but it can be difficult at times to see how this history figures in the novel canon's conservative but resilient core of metropolitan,