SPECIAL CLUSTER: VICTORIANS IN LOCATION

Victorians in Location: Introduction

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TO think of location is to think of "place," a concept that has been variously reworked in critical scholarship over at least the past few decades. The turn to deterritorialization in the 1990s put place in dialectical tension with space, and the abstracting gesture of the latter term enabled important imaginings of social formation.[1] However, even as homogenizing notions of space became crucial to envisaging the "nation," for instance, they did not supersede more granular accounts of place and the particularity or descriptive thickness that it yielded. In fact, the latter assumed increasing significance with the turn to new materialism and ecocriticism in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Place, therefore, can be read two ways. It can be read in relation to space, as a manifestation of the dialectic between the universal and the particular. Place can also be read in its totality, as a repository of evidentiary possibility. In thinking "location," this cluster of essays thinks of place both in terms of possibility and relation. In so doing, it ventures beyond the conventional ambit of Victorian studies by tracking not only the myriad locations that Victorians variously occupied—an endeavor that by now has been underway for a few decades—but, equally important, by acknowledging the multiple geographic locations that Victorianists currently and variously inhabit. It is in that multilocational spirit that this cluster includes authors located in

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South Korea, India, and the UK. It also includes U.S.-based authors working on sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and South America.

The essays were conceived as talks for a 2022 MLA panel that was originally designed to meet in person, and they retain some of the conversational features of a panel presentation. They range widely in topics (from the literary ecology of colonial Bengal to the temporality of Caribbean Victorianisms), objects of study (from Victorian maps of Africa to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century journals in Korean), and critical concepts (from thinking about translation in terms of place to unthinking the solidity of place altogether). Written and presented in the spirit of sharing ongoing research projects, the cluster constitutes a bricolage that may well function as a hallmark for conversations of this nature. Admittedly, the cluster represents but a modest effort to stage a multilocational conversation; however, even attempting such a conversation is to open ourselves, located as we are in the North American academy, to the possibility that questions and concerns of salience to us might not register with the same urgency elsewhere even though we may be working through the same texts and authors. Conversely, it is also to remain alert to the connections and linkages that our shared interests engender such that we do not freeze locational difference into unrelenting fixities or incongruities. Above all, to think of "Victorians in location" is also to rethink "Victorian" from a multilocational perspective. Such a perspective may offer a counterintuitive take on the term itself or reorder its implied temporality, as evident in the essays by Ji Eun Lee and Faith Smith on nineteenth-century Korea and the Caribbean, respectively. But it is precisely for that reason that a multilocational perspective is necessary to render "Victorian" a term of continual critical—rather than historical or descriptive—inquiry.

Even as we acknowledge the importance of expanding our locational perspective, it is well to keep in mind that location is never self-evident and that places can remain invisible or opaque. In her essay "Where Oceans Come From," Alice Te Punga Somerville writes: "To write about the Pacific is to constantly feel unacknowledged. . . . One feels the need to write 'please read our scholarship' so often that it feels like a punishment."[2] Te Punga Somerville's statement is resonant for several reasons. First, by focusing on oceanic space, it speaks to the ongoing critical move away from land-based studies that have otherwise dominated literary scholarship in general. Second, Te Punga Somerville's recall of a perceived desire to write "please read our scholarship" (a statement that can be read as exhortation, demand, or plea) may well, and

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rightly so, be echoed by scholars who are left out of circuits of academic production that heavily skew Euromerican, a point of concern not just to Victorianists but to the academy at large. Finally, the point that Te Punga Somerville specifically makes here, however, is not so much about her own location (she was affiliated with the University of Waikato at the time of writing the essay) as of the location that she writes *about*: the Pacific, which, as she points out, remains underrepresented in bibliographies or academic job searches. She describes the Pacific as a "dynamic Indigenous-centered, endlessly decolonizing space,"[3] but, as she then points out, it is easier for Pacific literary scholars to find jobs as Indigenous studies specialists or as specialists in national or diasporic literatures rather than as Pacific-region specialists.[4] Without taking anything away from the critical importance of Indigenous studies or diasporic frameworks, the point that Te Punga Somerville is making is that place matters. In fact, a critical study of place—variously and expansively defined—becomes crucial to questions of I/indigeneity or diaspora.

But what does it mean to study place, to think locationally? Victorian studies has of course long engaged with place through its deliberations with provincialism or regionalism.[5] What aesthetic modes and critical strategies can we attend to in thinking of place within a wider geopolitical frame? In speaking of the Pacific, Te Punga Somerville underlines the importance of imagining it as a "region," which brings to mind the rich crosshatched knowledge systems brought into play through and by an interdisciplinary area studies approach. To be sure, area studies as an established discipline in the U.S. comes freighted with an instrumentalist outlook that has yet to shake off its legacy as a creation of the Cold War era.[6] But area studies also bears the potential to be recast in ways that make it conducive to humanistic inquiry.[7] We are reminded of the benefits of such an expanded focus by Sutanuka Ghosh and Adrian Wisnicki, who, in working on Bengal and sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, also present us with a wide range of literary and cultural objects, including maps and folk songs. The site-specific focus of their essays is counterbalanced by the ambulatory context of Alexander Bubb's essay that, in tethering a discussion of translation to questions of place, brings home (as do several other essays in the cluster) the heightened need to acknowledge a multilingual Victorian world, not least because it nuances and enlivens our notion of Victorian location.

An attentiveness to place, however, does not produce depth and granularity alone. Rather, place, as Josephine McDonagh's essay notes, can be "fragile." It can even upend conventional scholarly notions of colonization and settlement. To think locationally, then, is not just to

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adopt the view from the other side, as it were; rather, it is also to consider why we should grapple with the locatedness that engenders our own critical questions and notions of redress in the first place.

Notes

1. For a broader discussion of the relation between place and space, see Gupta and Ferguson, *Culture, Power, Place*. For a discussion of the abstraction of space with reference to nineteenth-century Britain, see Poovey, *Making a Social Body*.
2. Te Punga Somerville, "Where Oceans Come From," 27.
3. Te Punga Somerville, "Where Oceans Come From," 26.
4. Te Punga Somerville, "Where Oceans Come From," 27.
5. See Mary Ellis Gibson, "Regionalism and Provincialism."
6. For the pitfalls of U.S.-funded area studies research in Africa, for instance, see Lalu, "Breaking the Mold."
7. For a reenvisioned area studies model from a humanities perspective, see Arondekar and Patel, "Area Impossible"; and Watkins, "The New Mediterranean Studies."

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