

Whiteness, Curriculum, and the Infrastructures of Victorian Studies

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IN fall 2021 the English department of Lehman College began implementing a new curriculum that featured Latinx and African and African diasporic literature as the requisite core, replacing the previously mandated courses in British and American literature. Student activism incited this revision. Two years earlier, the Latinx Student Alliance wrote a letter to the department and dean of humanities, asking for this change as part of their desire to “see themselves in their classes . . . as possible authors of their own texts, experts in their own fields.”¹ This letter was followed by another written by a different group of students, demanding a “curriculum that acknowledges students’ needs.”² Both letters circulated widely and captured the attention of upper administration and national media.

With these actions, Lehman’s students questioned the anglocentric foundation of English studies and prompted my department to embark on a process of disciplinary and pedagogical reflection that continues today. Our students’ expectation was for Lehman, a public, Hispanic-Serving Institution in the Bronx where 80.8 percent of the students identify as Black or Latinx and about 90 percent as people of color, to “break the chain of white-washing cannons [*sic*].” As some expressed to *Latino Rebels*, a nonprofit media organization that reported on their story, “We believe that teaching one or two people of color in your curriculum is not enough to make up for academia’s history of removing colonized and minority groups from the cannon [*sic*]. People of color and minority groups are not meant to only be electives on a major sheet.”³ These students rightly called out the English department’s feeble attempt to diversify the major in the past when faculty created what was essentially an ethnic literatures elective, which students fulfilled by choosing from a set of courses, including Latinx, African American,

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Asian American, and postcolonial literature. While well intentioned, this elective turned demands for a representative education into a quota to meet. Moreover, it forced undergraduates to decide which nonwhite literature to study to “supplement” their knowledge of canonical British and American texts. If they wanted to learn about Asian American culture in addition to Latinx writers, it would have been at their own expense; they would have had to pay for an extra course that would not have counted toward their major. The students understood this gesture for what it was: a flimsy appeasement that turned their intellectual curiosity into a false dilemma. By exposing its inadequacy, students challenged the primarily white faculty to implement an ethical and politically responsible English studies for Lehman’s population.

I was barely getting settled in my position as a new assistant professor when these events compelled me and my colleagues to take seriously the limits of our now-former curriculum and to confront the uncomfortable truth of how, despite hiring three women of color in the previous year (me included), we were still upholding the white-supremacist and colonial underpinnings of our discipline’s history.⁴ It was through this student-led revision that I began to see more clearly how curriculum has operated as an infrastructure of whiteness in my department, English studies at large, and the subfield I know best, Victorian literary studies. Though many British literary subfields have seen a renewed interest in the study of race and racism, such interrogations have mostly remained within the subfields themselves, inspiring deep reflection among practitioners but retaining the disciplinary silos that have maintained and resulted from white hegemonic thinking.⁵ Discussions about curriculum at the department level, however, have led me to reflect on the relationships, or lack thereof, among literary studies’ specialties, alongside the implicit hierarchies my department had been enforcing by requiring certain knowledges and labeling others as merely optional. Such discussions have also spurred me to rethink the infrastructures of Victorian studies and to reimagine this subfield for students and myself.

The infrastructures upon which I have been trying to rebuild my teaching and scholarship are those that enabled the City University of New York (CUNY), the university system to which Lehman belongs, to serve as the people’s university in the past and that undergird the Bronx’s rich and complex layers of ethnic and cultural mixing. In referring to Lehman’s revised curriculum and the historical assemblages of slavery, racialization, and migration embedded in the Bronx and the

larger New York area as infrastructures, I am highlighting the connections these structures have allowed me to make across literary traditions, geographies, and temporalities that have usually been kept separate within the university. As the anthropologist Brian Larkin explains, identifying something as an infrastructure is a “categorical act” because “infrastructures operate on differing levels simultaneously, generating multiple forms of address. . . . [A]ny particular set of intellectual questions will have to select which of these levels to examine.” Infrastructures, in other words, are “conceptually unruly.”⁶ What might seem like an elemental system (e.g., the internet) is constructed on another (e.g., the system of fiber-optic cables and telephone wires) and relies on many others (e.g., networks of computers, servers, and routers), which themselves rely on even more. Hence, Larkin concludes: “The act of defining an infrastructure is a categorizing moment. Taken thoughtfully, it comprises a cultural analytic that highlights the epistemological and political commitments involved in selecting what one sees as infrastructural (and thus causal) and what one leaves out.” By calling curriculum and the persisting structures of race and migration infrastructures, I recognize these forms as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas.”⁷ The intellectual flows that Lehman’s students and new curriculum have opened for me have transformed not only my pedagogy and research but also my understanding of the future of Victorian studies. The rest of this essay considers some of these impacts.

My department’s curricular overhaul, for example, has altered my assumptions about the knowledges on which Victorian studies builds. Many of the courses I teach, like the modern British literature survey, are no longer compulsory under this revision; they are now electives that support the reimaged core. This switch required faculty members who specialize in canonical fields to cede curricular territory and to let go of conventional ways of ordering literary knowledge. I’ll admit it took a moment for me to wrap my head around this change, as my training presupposed a white Anglo-American foundation. Furthermore, I worried that students wouldn’t take my classes if they didn’t have to. I quickly realized, though, that my concerns were more about my own insecurities as an early-career academic than about my students’ needs for an education that honored their cultures and helped them make sense of their experiences. Making the cultural and intellectual traditions of Black and brown peoples the basis of the English curriculum was key to providing this education at Lehman. This modification also challenged me to reconceptualize Victorian literature for students who

would, more likely than not, be coming to my courses with anticolonial writers of color like José Martí or Harriet Jacobs as reference points rather than John Milton or William Wordsworth. This reframing has fundamentally shifted my teaching, resulting in courses that aspire to embody the ethos of what Kandice Chuh calls the “illiberal humanities”—a humanities that is “oriented toward the ends of generating and proliferating imaginaries disidentified from the ideologies and logics of liberalism and derived instead from attention to the entangled histories of and ongoing connection among the impoverishment of peoples and worlds, enslaved and gendered labor, Indigenous dispossession, developmentalism, and knowledge work.”⁸

For me now, Victorian studies must fit this alternative schema that emphasizes the transimperial networks of oppression and resistance as well as the creative power of racialized and other minoritized peoples. This political and epistemological lineage has reinvigorated my pedagogy and scholarship. Crucially, it has encouraged me to learn about CUNY’s history to better situate my work at Lehman. I have been particularly inspired by the 1969 student protests at City College, CUNY’s Harlem campus, where members of the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community advocated the university to accept more students of color so its demographics would reflect that of the city and to revamp its academic programs to accord with these students’ needs and identities. I view Lehman students’ current activism as an extension of this history, which resulted in open admissions at CUNY in 1970.⁹ Though this policy has since ended, the desire among students for a radically inclusive education has not. I plan to support this desire by teaching archival materials from this era and linking them to histories of nineteenth-century colonial education. I also aim to contribute to this legacy through the work I undertake with my collaborators at *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, a digital humanities project that reconceives Victorianist pedagogy and community.

Another source of inspiration has been the history of Lehman’s surrounding area in the Bronx. While, like many others, I have been galvanized by Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong’s call for Victorianists to recognize themselves as “scholars of Atlantic slavery,” I didn’t realize how true that statement was until a colleague informed me of the enslaved African burial ground just minutes away from campus.¹⁰ This patch of consecrated ground is located in Van Cortlandt Park, a former plantation owned and operated by the Van Cortlandt family, and serves as the final resting place for the African

and Indigenous people enslaved there. I have much to learn about this local history and its national and global ties, but I am committed to finding out more and involving my students in the process. To this end, I am motivated by Lindsey N. Chappell, who has urged scholars to look beyond Victorian accounts of slavery that view it as a sin contained in the U.S. South.¹¹ Such accounts, Chappell argues, were attempts by Britons to conceal their imbrication in the practice even after the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Scholars have tended to support this assumption by focusing on Victorians' associations with northern abolitionists. Yet, as the ghosts of Van Cortlandt Park reveal, slavery existed in the North too, troubling the myth that Old and New England were and have always been liberal enclaves. This obscured history serves as evidence of the kinds of infrastructural definitions that earlier practitioners of Victorian studies were engaged in. In emphasizing parts of slavery's literary-historical network, they excluded others, resulting in a partial narrative that upholds white Anglo innocence and benevolence. Shifting the terms of Victorian studies to highlight these veiled connections necessitates reenvisioning our methodologies and rebuilding the epistemological and historical foundations on which our field stands.

With my students, I seek to explore what it means to engage in Victorian studies given the past literally buried in our backyards. This past continues to haunt my students and mold their realities as Black and brown peoples living and learning in this settler colony. Student activism and the curricular revision it inspired have amplified my responsibility to teach, write, and act with this knowledge in mind. They have convinced me that our work, collectively, as Victorianists must respond to these contexts, these infrastructures that "generate the ambient environment of everyday life."¹² In some ways, the ideas I have presented here represent my initial efforts to "ground" the humanities in my location "to the other humanities that exist . . . just outside [its] gates."¹³ The hope is that doing so can help reconstruct Victorian studies so it intertwines with these historically excluded communities, the descendants of those whose dispossession and backbreaking labor have made our field and places of study possible.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Latinx Student Alliance, letter to the dean.
2. Fall 2019 Senior Seminar Students, letter to Lehman.

3. Latino Rebels, “Lehman.” For the demographics of Lehman’s undergraduate population, see Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment, “Student Enrollment Snapshot.”
4. For the colonial history of literary study, see Viswanathan, *Masks*.
5. This focus on period boundaries seems more prevalent now than it did before. Early works in postcolonial studies, like Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, often crossed temporal and geographic borders. For the recent attention to race in British literary studies, see Mufti, “Hating,” 392–94. For the creation of disciplinary subfields to manage minority difference in the university, see Ferguson, *Reorder*.
6. Larkin, “Politics,” 330, 329.
7. Larkin, “Politics,” 330, 328.
8. Chuh, *Difference*, 5.
9. For the history of CUNY, see Fabricant and Brier, *Austerity Blues*.
10. Chatterjee et al., “Introduction,” 370.
11. Chappell, “Placing.”
12. Larkin, “Politics,” 328.
13. Guevara and Wong, “Grounding.”
14. For American higher education’s dependence on slavery and settler colonialism, see Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*; and Patel, *No Study*.

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