CrossMark

DEFAMILIARIZATION

Do Queer Theory and Victorian Studies Still Have Anything to Learn from Each Other?

DUSTIN FRIEDMAN

IN a recent essay that has galvanized the field, Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy Wong have called for us to begin "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" (2020). Doing so will entail grappling with how the field has been and continues to be grounded in unexamined notions of "whiteness, universalism, and liberalism," and how it has accordingly sought "to contain and manage away" issues of race to maintain the fiction that most Victorian writing is somehow "race-neutral." This is despite the fact that one of the major projects of nineteenth-century Western culture was the ongoing production and elevation of whiteness as the universal human standard. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong call attention to "two rich scholarly interventions" that have become *de rigueur* in Victorian studies—postcolonial studies and feminist and queer theory— "whose critical energies around race have been significantly downgraded in the current instantiation of the field," which "has used strategies of liberal management to invisibilize interventions that *could have been* central to the field" if it had been willing to give up the fantasy of Victorian race neutrality.[1]

Regarding queer theory specifically, they acknowledge that "Victorian studies has . . . served as a primary site for the formation of queer theory and sexuality studies, especially in the pioneering work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick."[2] Yet they also admit that they "are struck . . . by the wide availability in key scholarship from the last thirty years of

Dustin Friedman is an associate professor in the Department of Literature at American University and the author of *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). He is also co-editor with Kristin Mahoney of *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). His recent essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Modernism/modernity, Victorian Studies, Pedagogy, Feminist Modernist Studies,* and elsewhere.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 1, pp. 141–156.
© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press.
doi:10.1017/S1060150322000110

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more rigorous conceptualizations of race, sexuality, and gender" that nevertheless "seems neither to have altered nor fundamentally reshaped the norms of the field."[3] In other words, Victorian studies remains grounded in an epistemology that systematically hides its ongoing participation in the production of white supremacy through a kind of collusion with its own objects of study. This otherwise concealed process can only be brought to light, they suggest, through critical investigations that begin from an explicitly antiracist and anticolonial standpoint.

In the current essay, I seek to continue this line of thinking. What I claim here, however, is that if Victorian studies wants to disrupt the liberal system of management that renders invisible the field's entanglement with white supremacy, it must be open to a rapprochement with the concept of universalism. The universalism I have in mind is not the imperialist version rightly critiqued by Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong for its associations with whiteness and liberalism. Instead, the version I seek to describe here resonates with recent work in postcolonial studies on the topic of comparison, but finds perhaps its most powerful articulation in an underexamined aspect of one of Victorian studies' most famous and influential critical texts: Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

My turn to this earlier work by Sedgwick for antiracist and anticolonialist ends, rather than her later writings on "reparative reading," may strike some readers as surprising. Kadji Amin has recently stated that *Epistemology* is "[f]or many queer scholars today . . . a negative reminder of the white and cisgender gay male, as well as canonical and literary origins of queer theory," while by contrast the "unsystematizable complexity" of her later writings has been "carried forward" by "an entire cadre of queer and queer of color critics interested in . . . world-making, reparation, and alternatives. Sedgwick appeals to the desire to bypass or supplement strong theories with vast diagnostic power in favor of a multitude of 'weak theories,' including affect theory, that stay close to the textures of the everyday."[4] While acknowledging how intellectually generative and politically powerful the later, reparative Sedgwick has been for some queer of color critics, I maintain that the epistemologically "strong" or, in other words, *universalizing* claims found in Sedgwick's earlier works, including *Epistemology*, will ultimately be more helpful for developing an antiracist and anticolonial Victorian studies.[5] It is the very strength of those knowledge claims, when they are reread in light of postcolonial and critical race theory, that can help unsettle the field's status quo by calling attention to nineteenth-century imperial culture's *systematic* production of an illusory race neutrality that is inextricable

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from its normalization of heterosexuality, a process that the field's traditional methods render invisible. The problem, in other words, is not that Sedgwick's early works make universalizing claims but rather that such epistemologically strong knowledge claims about Western culture must also account for the pervasive colonial power relations within which both Victorian and contemporary sexual identities were and continued to be articulated.

I maintain that queer theory and Victorian studies still have much to learn from each other but that a productive dialogue between them may only be possible by going against the grain of certain recent methodological trends in queer studies, ones that replay an age-old philosophical question of the relationship between universals and particulars (or "realism" versus "nominalism": the question of whether universals have some sort of metaphysical reality, or if they are just the names we pragmatically apply to congeries of particulars). The most recent version of this debate can be found among various schools of thought that Rebekah Sheldon has recently grouped together under the label "the new queer particularism."[6] These methods, which include affect theory, weak theory, new materialism, and speculative realism, among others, shy away from making strong epistemological claims *about* the world in favor of exploring the singular, sensuous materiality of physical objects *in* the world. They collectively embody a critical stance aptly summarized by the "rallying cry . . . touch feeling, don't know it," and trace their origins more or less directly to Sedgwick's influential late writings, especially the essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (2003).[7] It is here that she famously repudiates "paranoid" methods, including the universalizing epistemological claims of her own earlier works, for being painfully hypervigilant and suspicious, and instead advocates for more modest and ameliorative "reparative" interpretive practices.[8] Sedgwick's turn to the reparative has also been hugely influential beyond the new queer particularism (as well as beyond Victorian studies), serving as "the origin point for our current method conversations" in literary studies more generally, as David Kurnick has stated.[9]

Sedgwick here critiques a paranoid style of theorizing that "rigidifies the difference between self and other and so makes it more difficult to fit the other into the partial, multiple, contradictory worlds we inhabit." Yet Sheldon notes that "the same . . . is true for the divisions between the paranoid and the reparative, the universalist and the particularist, the epistemological and the affective, the righteous and the joyful" that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proliferate throughout the essay ("Queer Universal"). As a result, Sedgwick has bequeathed to the new queer particularisms a rather inflexible, nondialectical anti-universalism, what Sheldon describes as (quoting Dana Luciano and Mel Chen) a method that seeks to "read up from particular situations, not proclaim . . . from above" and advocates for (quoting Karen Barad) "the undoing of universality, the importance of the radical specificity of materiality."[10] Yet Sheldon notes that such particularized studies of "[l]ightning, atoms, jellyfish, and fetuses . . . HeLa cells, extinct aurouchs, wooly coral reefs, sacred pipestone, indigenous cosmologies, toxic dumps, and transgender frogs" have actually "enabled surprisingly robust claims about what theory can do" and "suggest an underlying conviction about forms of causation whose thrust is, yes, universal even if it explicitly orients to the particular," despite these authors "emphatically and explicitly . . . refusing the impulse to abstract general principles or subtending structures from particular lives and objects." Such an approach assumes "the causal efficacy of the speech acts whose universalizing implications it also and at the same moment disavows." This insight into the inability to separate the particular from the universal, the affective from the epistemological, is indeed better aligned with Sedgwick's career-long emphasis on the "absence of grounding sufficient to either adjudicate or frankly to recognize the difference between the two sides of any closely entwined binary" than the somewhat static applications of the reparative/paranoid binary in the new queer particularisms have been ("Queer Universal").

Accordingly, I suggest that a productive avenue of inquiry within Victorian studies would be to bring Sedgwick's insight into the inextricability of the universal and the particular to bear on what Walter Mignolo describes as the "sites of entanglement . . . articulated by the '/' of modernity/coloniality," by which he means "the mechanisms and strategies that, within the colonial matrix of power, create similarities and differences and maintain relations and hierarchies between entities, regions, languages, religions, 'literatures,' people, knowledges, economies, and the like."[11] Doing so will entail rereading what is perhaps the most astonishingly universalizing knowledge claim Sedgwick ever made in her career in light of recent theories of comparison articulated within postcolonial studies (the other school of thought that Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong argue has been "de-racialized" in Victorian studies). In the opening lines of *Epistemology*, Sedgwick states "that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" and that "an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition."[12] So too is it damaged, I would add, if it does not account for the entanglements between the late Victorian epistemological transformation Sedgwick identifies and the colonial matrix of power, which would prefer that we understand sexuality and coloniality to be two separate domains.

By examining how, in *Epistemology*, Sedgwick self-reflexively acknowledges her own subject position and situates her claim about the Victorians within her own historical context, we can understand her to be making a universalizing epistemological claim that is actually very different from the paranoid interpretations she would come to criticize in her later work. In accounting for the knowledge producer's own entanglements with their objects of study, she offers a view from below of the subtending grounds and conditions of the emergence of the modern subject, rather than an imperiously transcendent view from the top. In this way, she enacts many of the practices prescribed by recent accounts of methods of comparison in postcolonial studies, the subfield that has most robustly theorized this return to the universal, and which can help us understand the place Sedgwick might occupy within a distinctly Victorian version of what Sheldon calls "*queer* universalism" ("Queer Universal").

Both Kurnick and Sheldon refer to the opening lines of *Epistemology* (quoted above) and make note of, in Kurnick's words, their "breathtaking scale" and "totalizing chutzpah," while Sheldon admiringly remarks, "*Here* is a universal!"[13] I propose that Sedgwick's universalizing critical practice here is surprisingly compatible with the "decolonial methodology" of comparison articulated by Mignolo and others, insofar as they both account for the critic's own historically situated subjectivity and the extent to which the critic's position is always located within and, to some extent, determined by the larger structures of power they also attempt to analyze ("On Comparison," 101).[14] There is a long-standing tendency in postcolonial studies of being (rightfully) suspicious of notions of universal human subjectivity or so-called human nature. Given the persistence of an uneven power dynamic between the West and the rest of the world, as well as the ongoing realities of colonialism and globalization, qualities that are deemed universal are often, in actuality, specific only to Euro-American culture. Their elevation to a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spuriously objective human ideal is a tool of imperial domination, a way of maintaining long-standing hierarchies between people and groups without obviously appearing to be doing so, by concealing universalism's foundation in the particularities of Western culture.

Yet, in recent years, there has been a new willingness to entertain the notion that universalism might not always be colonialism by another name but may in fact be a necessary element of decolonial politics. Souleymane Bachir Diagne has stated that rather than deeming "the postcolonial" to be inherently "antiuniversal," we should "rather say that only in a postcolonial world can the question of the universal truly be posed."[15] Édouard Glissant has made the important distinction that "[i]mperialism (the thought as well as the reality of empire) does not conceive of anything universal but in every instance is a substitute for it"; more recently, Dipesh Chakrabarty has asked in the context of the need for collective human action in the face of climate change, "How do we relate to a universal history of life—to universal thought, that is—while retaining what is of obvious value in our postcolonial suspicion of the universal?"[16] Kandice Chuh has similarly inquired, "How can particularity, specificity, continue to be acknowledged and valued—surely an important political task in the face of the homogenizing forces that globalization names and the long-lived efforts to eradicate difference to which colonialism refers—without recourse to cultural relativism and the tacit essentialism and positivism that gives it purchase?" Chuh responds to her question by encouraging us to "turn to consideration of comparison's history and analytic function."[17]

Comparison concentrates both the problems and promises of universalism in a world made uneven by colonialism and its aftermath. Regardless of whether we are talking about the formal, institutionalized practices of the discipline of comparative literature or informal conversations about the differences between traffic in the United States and India, the act of comparing forces one to consider a host of thorny geopolitical and epistemological issues.[18] As Shu-mei Shih explains, "when we put two texts or entities side by side, we tend to privilege one over the other. The grounds are never level. A presumed or latent standard operates in any such act of comparison, and it is the more powerful entity that implicitly serves as the standard." Even if the positions are switched and the less powerful entity serves as the standard, the fact remains that the act of comparison does not give us improved knowledge of the world but merely provides an opportunity to affirm the predetermined superiority of one or the other entity being compared. Consequently, "the most

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

likely conclusion to these comparisons is further pronouncement of differences and incommensurabilities between the entities, precisely due to an ethical concern over the latent operation of the presumed, usually Eurocentric, standard. Comparing two entities at their intimate juxtaposition therefore paradoxically produces further distances between them."[19] Both comparing *and* not comparing thus fail to produce a genuinely new understanding of the world because there is no neutral conceptual space in which to conduct the comparison—that is to say, no genuine universal standard exists outside of colonial relations of power. We would thus appear to be stuck with either reproducing uneven power dynamics or falling back into a stagnant, limply relativistic essentialism.

Mignolo ascribes this double-bind to the fact that comparative methodologies were invented in response to the needs of European imperialism, ultimately tracing their origins to the rise of "comparative ethnology" out of sixteenth-century debates regarding the "humanity" of "New World Indians"("On Comparison," 99). The way out of this double-bind is for the person doing the comparing to include in their analysis an awareness of their own subjectivity and how it has been historically determined by the history of colonialism, a history that also includes the objects being compared. This entails rejecting what he calls the "zero-point epistemology" of traditional Western comparative studies that have developed out of imperialism. For Mignolo, zero-point epistemology "presupposes a detached observer comparing two independent entities and looking for similarities and differences," one who is "objective, neutral" as well as being "detached from both entities being compared" (116, 100, 101). This fiction of an ahistorical, transcendent, departicularized subject position is precisely the imperialist universalism that postcolonialism has long critiqued. By effectively deracinating the subject who does the comparing, it renders their particular qualities and investments (political and otherwise) invisible, creating the conditions for the double-bind identified by Shih. Even if the comparing is being done by a minoritized subject, the zero point still forces them into a colonial epistemological structure, where the only options are either ranking the two objects being compared against some predetermined standard or insisting on their absolute incommensurability.

Instead, Mignolo says, we must embrace "the border epistemology" of "decolonial thinking" (101).[20] This involves "not just studying border cultures but also dwelling in them," that is, not viewing oneself as detached from the field one is observing (101). This method entails

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"uncovering hidden connections and relations between events, processes, and entities in the colonial matrix of power"—that is to say, making visible the relations that need to be invisible for colonial power systems to work, such as calling attention to how Victorian novels contribute to the naturalization of white supremacy by appearing to be race neutral (113–14).[21] This decolonial thinker must, at the same time, remain aware that "[t]he matrix cannot be observed from outside because the knower and the known are . . . both constituted in and by the colonial matrix" (114). Rather than treating themselves and the objects they study as if they were each "autonomous entities" preexisting the act of comparison, the decolonial critic instead looks "to understand the entanglement, in which we, as scholars, are also intellectually implicated" (115). In their analysis, one must "embrace the history and the genealogy of thoughts of your own assumed living experiences, instead of assuming a genealogy of thought that is not embedded in your own living and assumed experience" (116). This means examining "first and foremost the location of modern/colonial entanglements defined by colonial and imperial epistemic/ontological differences, a location which the knowing subject cannot escape" (117).

In other words, the decolonial thinker takes as their proper object of study the liberal, imperial system of management that Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong have shown also includes the field of Victorian studies. This system insists on the critic's *separation* from their objects of study as well as on the separateness of the objects under comparison from each other. The decolonial critic thus seeks to uncover how such insistences serve hegemonic interests, and how the act of uncovering entanglements between the critic and their objects of study, connections that the colonial matrix of power seeks to make invisible, can help disrupt the processes of imperial domination.

Many of the qualities Mignolo ascribes to the decolonial critic can be found in abundance in Sedgwick's *Epistemology*, a historical inquiry that is devoted above all else to dismantling the conceptual structures underlying homophobia and heteronormativity. Although attention to the overall colonial context is crucially missing from this study, Sedgwick's self-reflexivity, awareness of her own historical situatedness, commitment to uncovering deliberately invisibilized relations, and refusal of political neutrality and stultifying disciplinary norms make *Epistemology* much closer to the methods described by Mignolo than it might appear at first glance. After Sedgwick makes the claim that "any aspect of Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition," she clarifies that she "will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory" (1). Queerness, in other words, is a kind of border culture. I believe that there is a structural homology between Sedgwick's assertion and Mignolo's that "[i]n Europe, only modernity was visible, not coloniality. That is why the colonial matrix of power was made visible not by Europeans but by non-European decolonial leaders and scholars-intellectuals-activists" ("On Comparison," 114). In both instances, hegemonic structures of knowledge—the homo/heterosexual binary, in the former case, and the modernity/coloniality binary, in the latter—insist on the absolute *difference* between two elements of a binary that are deeply entangled and, in the final analysis, actually impossible to differentiate from each other. While the dominant culture attempts to render those connections invisible so that the system of power/knowledge can keep functioning, it is those who are *marginalized* by that system ("decentered," to use Sedgwick's term, "borderline," to use Mignolo's) who are able to see the network of connections that are successfully made invisible to those in the center, as well as to understand whose interests are served by that invisibility.

Queers and colonial subjects can see these hidden connections, not because they inhabit a zero-point position of detached neutrality, but precisely because their lives depend on being hyperaware of their position within the uneven field of power that is also their object of study, and because they are personally invested in the political stakes of their investigations above and beyond disciplinary norms. Sedgwick writes of the skepticism with which her work might be greeted as a woman writing on "[i]ssues of male homosexuality," that "the grounds on which a book like this one might be persuasive or compelling to you . . . are unlikely to be its appeal to some *bienpensant*, evenly valenced lambency of your disinterested attention. Realistically, it takes deeply rooted, durable, and often somewhat opaque energies to write a book; it can take them, indeed, to read it. It takes them, as well, to make any political commitment that can be worth anything to anyone" (*Epistemology*, 115). I take the commitment she refers to here as not only to antihomophobic politics generally, but more specifically to an attempt to disable the system of power/knowledge underlying the virulent, death-dealing antipathies of American government and culture during the height of the AIDS crisis. Far from being a "disinterested" zero-point study, Sedgwick's historical

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inquiry is self-consciously conducted on behalf of the urgent and specific political concerns of her own moment, conducted for the benefit of a constituency that she does not belong to, but toward which she nevertheless feels a deep affinity and allegiance.

Mignolo similarly speaks of a hypothetical decolonial anthropologist "of Euro-American descent" who is "really for and concerned with the mistreatment of Maoris." This person will not necessarily or essentially have either more or fewer "epistemic privileges" than an ethnically Maori anthropologist on this issue, but they also must acknowledge that they have no right to guide that population on "what is good or bad for them": "A politics of identity is different from identity politics," he explains; "the former is open to whoever wants to join, while the latter tends to be bounded by the definition of a given identity."[22] In both Sedgwick's and Mignolo's accounts, scholarship must proceed first and foremost from one's political commitments, through a dedication to disabling hegemonic systems of power that create uneven power relations. This is done by uncovering networks of relation that the dominant system of power trains us not to see, and subsequently determining whose interests that invisibility serves. Although one does not necessarily need to belong to the group this work is being conducted on behalf of, it must proceed from a politically interested perspective: it is only from such a position that entanglements between the center and the margins can be seen. Such practices of interpretation are not paranoid, despite Sedgwick's later protestations to the contrary: one does not compulsively seek to unearth hidden conspiracies or secreted truths, but rather one calls attention to what is *hidden in plain sight*—those connections that are plainly evident but which the dominant system of power/knowledge have trained us not to see. An unsystematic interpretive method cannot respond adequately to the relentless and omnipresent processes of invisibilization that enable the system of imperialist and heteronormative knowledge production to continue functioning. As critical race theorist Sylvia Wynter has stated, "the Black situation and the homosexual situation are parallel. . . . We want to buy into 'normalcy,' as 'normalcy' is considered within the very terms of the very order of 'knowledge' which has made us 'deviant!'"[23]

I have thus far demonstrated that the methods which produced Sedgwick's strong knowledge claims in *Epistemology* share many similarities with the border epistemology Mignolo describes. The key difference between them, though, is that Sedgwick does not foreground the colonial matrix of power that Mignolo claims must be central to any investigation

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of modernity. What might a rereading of *Epistemology* within such a framework look like? How might one bring into visibility relations between Sedgwick's claims about late Victorian culture's incipient homo/heterosexual definition and what Mignolo refers to as "modernity/coloniality" (117)? Rather than providing exhaustive answers to these questions, I end by offering a very brief and hopefully suggestive reading of *Epistemology* that attempts to bring it into relation with Wynter.

Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong note that although the Victorian era "consolidated a modern idea of race," scholarship in the field "lacks a robust account of race and racialization."[24] They suggest that the writings of Wynter, who has interrogated the racial logic subtending Western notions of "Man," can help address this situation.[25] Wynter posits that "Enlightened" European concepts of human freedom from the fifteenth century onward developed alongside and depended upon the dehumanization of non-Europeans. Central to this project was the creation of racial categories, which allowed Europeans to engage in violent colonial conquest without violating their supposedly "universal" definitions of freedom by coding racial others as subhuman (this is also the context Mignolo identifies as the origin of Western comparative methods and zero-point epistemology). For Wynter, the Darwinian race sciences of the second half of the nineteenth century were a continuation of and innovation upon this project, providing scientific justification for imperialism on the grounds of unalterable biological inferiority. One way of understanding this historical trajectory is as the growing tyranny of the particular over the universal, what Wynter calls the "ethnoclass Man versus Human struggle": in other words, Europeans developed the narrow, racially encoded concept of "Man" as explicitly or implicitly white and falsely presented it as synonymous with the definition of "humanity" itself, thereby rendering all non-Europeans disqualified from supposedly universal human rights by defining those very concepts in such a way as to exclude nonwhite subjects.[26]

In this historical genealogy, queer theory's long-standing reliance on the binary of normativity/antinormativity would seem beside the point. Amin states that a racialized body construed as inadequately human definitionally "cannot be disciplined by normalizing power or counted among the statistical gradations of normative and nonnormative."[27] Yet Sedgwick actually moves beyond the concept of normativity when she calls our attention to the fact that what she refers to as the nineteenth-century "world-mapping" that gave every person in the West a sexual identity actually created opportunities for interrogating the category of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the human. Sedgwick ends her reading of *Billy Budd* in *Epistemology* by explaining that Herman Melville's novella "is a document from the very moment of the emergence of a modern homosexual identity. But already inscribed in that emergent identity seems to be . . . the fantasy trajectory toward a life *after the homosexual*," which "is finally inseparable from . . . imagining a time *after the human*" (127, 128). By this, she means that "the one-and-for-all eradication of gay populations, however potent and sustained as a project or fantasy of modern Western culture, is not possible short of the eradication of the whole human species" (130). While Sedgwick does not here take into account the longer racial history of the category of "the human," I would suggest that one way of reinterpreting this statement in light of Wynter's insights is that, from the nineteenth century onward, the incoherence of the concept of homosexuality, the fact that it cannot be understood as either limited to a particular subgroup or to all of humanity universally, means that Western homophobia highlights the fragility, the apocalyptic self-destructiveness inherent to whiteness when the "ethnoclass Man" overrepresents itself as "the human" *tout court*.

By highlighting one possible entanglement between Wynter's and Sedgwick's understanding of the figure of "the human," I hope to be taking a tentative first step in a direction that others might follow. I do not wish to claim that Sedgwick's work is somehow damaged or incomplete by not accounting for the role the colonial matrix of power could have played in her analysis, any more than I would claim that Wynter's or Mignolo's work is incomplete without an account of the genealogy of modern sexual subjectivities. Instead, my purpose here has been to demonstrate, first, the continued relevance of Sedgwick's early, universalizing writings to an antiracist, anticolonialist, and antihomophobic Victorian studies; and second, how that relevance can only be brought to light by rereading Sedgwick from the perspective of a borderline epistemology, one that seeks to make visible the relations among nineteenth-century literature, queerness, and decolonial epistemologies that a "disciplined" Victorian studies had helped render invisible. Ultimately, I hope to have shown that even as contemporary queer theorists are constructing alternative genealogies for their methods, they need not for that reason also give up on epistemologically strong, even universalizing, knowledge claims for their presumed imperial hubris. If queer theory and Victorian studies still have anything to learn from each other, it might be this: that one of the most powerful things we can do as critics

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is to call attention to what those in power would rather we not see, and to bring together those whom we have been told should be kept apart.

Notes

Many thanks to Nathan Hensley and Amy Wong for their generous comments on earlier versions of this piece.

1. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, "Introduction," 373.
2. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, "Introduction," 374.
3. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, "Introduction," 374–75. Some of the more rigorous conceptualizers they mention are Jennifer DeVere Brody, Anne McClintock, Catherine Hall, and Ann Laura Stoler.
4. Amin, "Genealogies of Queer Theory," 20.
5. It is worth mentioning here that, to my mind, discussions of "weak theory" sometimes do not make a sufficiently rigorous distinction between "weakness" and "strength" in an epistemological as opposed to a dispositional sense. Philosophically, "weakness" describes a generalizing claim that applies to a relatively small number of instances of a phenomenon; "strength" describes the extent to which it can apply to many or almost all instances. One can, of course, present a weak claim in an imperious manner, just as one can modestly present a strong claim.
6. Sheldon, "Queer Universal." All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
7. Sheldon, "Queer Universal." Sheldon says that she had condensed this phrase from Wiegman, "Eve's Triangles." An earlier version of Sedgwick's essay appeared with a slightly different title in 1999. Patricia Stuelke has recently argued in her book *The Ruse of Repair* that the speed and eagerness with which art and criticism embraced Sedgwick's notion of the reparative speaks to that concept's easy compatibility with neoliberal imperialism.
8. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123–151.
9. Kurnick, "A Few Lies," 362.
10. Sheldon cites Luciano and Chen, "Introduction," 189; Barad, "Transmaterialities," 413.
11. Mignolo, "On Comparison," 114. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

12. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
13. Kurnick, "A Few Lies," 368; Sheldon, "Queer Universal."
14. I also believe there are parallels between these methods and the "total historicism" recently proposed by Benjamin Kunkel ("Critic, Historize Thyself!" 97). In a broadly Marxist response to Joseph North's much-discussed call to reject the "historicist/contextualist paradigm" in literary studies in favor of reconstructing "aesthetic thinking on a materialist basis," Kunkel suggests that scholars synthesize these two approaches by seeking to understand how historical factors affect not only the production of literary texts but also the subject formations of writers, readers, and literary critics (North, *Literary Criticism*, 127, 209). While total historicism and postcolonial comparison differ in their understanding of what "history" refers to (class conflict in the former, imperial conquest in the latter), they agree that critics must self-reflexively account for how their acts of critical judgment are determined by the same totalizing historical process they seek to describe.
15. Diagne, "On the Postcolonial and the Universal?" 7–8. Diagne traces this position back to the midcentury writings of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor.
16. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 117; Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 220.
17. Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 114.
18. I borrow the traffic example from Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?"
19. Shih, "Comparison as Relation," 79. Radhakrishnan similarly states that the "epistemology of comparison is willed into existence by a certain will to power/knowledge. Such a will is never innocent of history and its burden" ("Why Compare?" 16).
20. Mignolo borrows the concept of the "zero point" from Castro-Gómez, "The Missing Chapter of Empire."
21. Shih similarly states that "an ethical practice of comparison" is one where "the workings of power are not concealed but necessarily revealed" ("Comparison as Relation," 79).
22. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience," 172–73. It is here that Mignolo addresses the conjunction between universalism as what Sheldon calls "a matter of scope and scale" and universalism considered "in opposition of identity categories" ("Queer Universal"). Regarding the latter, political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Alain Badiou have both attempted to articulate a nonhegemonic concept of universal

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

human subjectivity; Badiou in particular has been influential to Madhavi Menon's understanding of the queerness of universal subjectivity, its "indifference to difference." I follow Mignolo, though, in understanding that an explicitly articulated self-awareness of the particularity of one's subject position, and especially how it has been determined by the history of colonialism, is necessary for one to make any universal knowledge claim about the modern world. In other words, it is not necessary to inhabit a universal subject position to make a strong knowledge claim because coloniality is itself the universal condition of modernity. Butler, Laclau, and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality,* 44–89; Badiou, *Saint Paul*; Menon, *Indifference to Difference.*

23. Wynter, "*Proud Flesh* Inter/Views," 3.
24. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, "Introduction," 370.
25. In "Buffer Zones," Aslami has similarly turned to Wynter to account for the complexly ambiguous racial status of the Afghani in Victorian culture.
26. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality," 260–61.
27. Amin, "Genealogies," 26.

Works Cited

Amin, Kadji. "Genealogies of Queer Theory." In *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies,* edited by Siobhan Somerville, 17–29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Aslami, Zarena. "Buffer Zones: Notes on Afghanistan, Race, and Empire." *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 433–45.

Badiou, Alain. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism.* Translated by Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Barad, Karen. "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings." *GLQ* 21, nos. 2–3 (2015): 387–422.

Berlant, Lauren, and Lee Edelman. *Sex, or the Unbearable.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Butler, Judith, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality.* New York: Verso, 2000.

Castro-Gómez, Santiago. "The Missing Chapter of Empire: Postmodern Reorganization of Coloniality and Post-Fordist Capitalism." *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 428–48.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222.

Chatterjee, Ronjaunee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy Wong. "Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies." *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 369–91.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chuh, Kandice. *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man."* Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. "On the Postcolonial and the Universal?" *Rue Descartes* 78, no. 2 (2013): 7–18.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Kunkel, Benjamin. "Critic, Historicize Thyself!" *New Left Review* 136 (2022): 83–97.

Kurnick, David. "A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas." *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 349–74.

Luciano, Dana, and Mel Y. Chen. "Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" *GLQ* 21, nos. 2–3 (2015): 183–207.

Menon, Madhavi. *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture and Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009): 159–81.

——— "On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?" In *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, 99–119. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

North, Joseph. *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Radhakrishnan, R. "Why Compare?" In *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, 15–33. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

———. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Sheldon, Rebekah. "Queer Universal." *e-flux Journal* 73 (2016), www.e-flux.com/journal/73/60456/queer-universal.

Shih, Shu-mei. "Comparison as Relation." In *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, 79–98. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

Stuelke, Patricia. *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Wiegman, Robyn. "Eve's Triangles, or Queer Studies Beside Itself." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (May 2015): 48–73.

———. "The Times We're In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative 'Turn.'" *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (2014): 4–25.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

———. "*Proud Flesh* Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter." *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* 4 (2006): 1–35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150322000110 Published online by Cambridge University Press