

Undisciplining The Victorian Classroom

Peer-Reviewed Syllabus

Peer Reviewer: Patricia A. Matthew

Date: 2021

License: [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

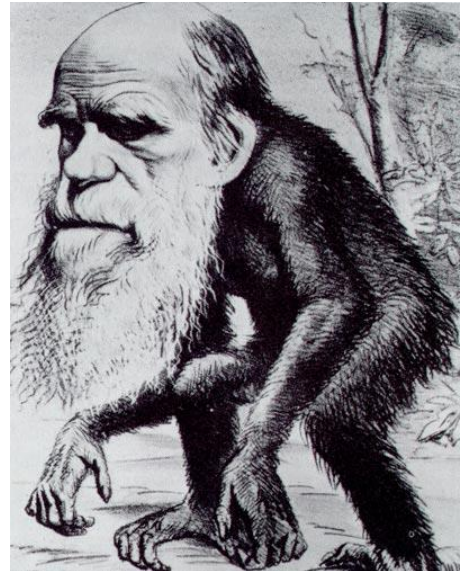
The Victorian and the Human

[Ava K. Bindas](#)

akbindas@ucdavis.edu | [she/her](#)

University of California Davis

Image: “A Venerable Orang-outang”, published in *The Hornet* in 1871 lampooning Charles Darwin after the publication of *The Descent of Man*.



Course Description:

“The Victorian and the Human” will familiarize students with Victorian literature and the ways in which race shapes and emerges from these texts. The class will equip students to answer the questions: what legacies and practices of white supremacy underpin the label “Victorian,” and how might we rethink the nineteenth-century British subject otherwise? To do so, we will read critical theory texts from the fields of Black Studies, postcolonial theory, and Black feminism to scrutinize what we, and nineteenth-century writers, mean when we invoke the terms “human” and the “Victorian.” This course is predicated on the conviction that studying race *and* Victorian literature is more pressing than studying race *in* Victorian literature. Consequently, we will learn to notice and critique the ongoing, underlying influences that racialize bodies such as science, kinship, and the law to better understand how texts that may not be “about” race are always participating in making race. Students will hone their critical thinking, reading, and writing skills by careful reading of diverse texts, consistent class participation, and the production of both reflective and argumentative writing throughout the term.

Course Objectives

What will you learn and do in this class? What portable skills and knowledge will this class impart? If you complete the work for this course, you will successfully complete the following objectives with help from your instructor and your classmates:

- Students will be familiarized with an array of nineteenth-century British literature and texts, written both in Britain and in British colonies.
- Students will develop critical reading abilities to parse and interpret difficult texts, namely poetry, literature, and critical theory.
- Students will learn key topics and arguments from the fields of Black studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist theory.

- Students will produce writing in multiple genres, including reflective and argumentative essays.
- Students will pose routine, rigorous, and good-faith questions about assigned texts and their key concepts.
- Students will gain an awareness of citation politics and learn ways to produce more ethical scholarship in literary studies as well as other academic fields.
- Students will develop resiliency as they make mistakes and, in doing so, will contribute to a safe classroom community by supporting other students when they, too, make mistakes.

Course Texts

Primary Texts:

Texts with an asterisk* will be available on our course website. Students are responsible for securing all other primary texts; any edition will suffice, and all are available for free online. Some of these texts are also available as free audiobooks at <https://librivox.org/>

- *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins
- *On Liberty* and *Autobiography* by John Stewart Mill*
- *Wuthering Heights* by Charlotte Bronte
- Selected poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning*
- “Sultana’s Dream” by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*
- Selected poems by Toru Dutt*
- *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* by Mary Seacole
- *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin*
- *Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I Saw* by Ann Pratt*

Secondary Texts:

All secondary texts will be excerpted and made available as PDFs on our course webpage. Students do not need to purchase or seek out any secondary texts.

- Brown, Adrienne Marie. “Additional Recommendations for Us Right Now from a Future.” Center for Humans and Nature. October 23, 2020.
<https://www.humansandnature.org/additional-recommendations-for-us-right-now-from-a-future>
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007.
- Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2, 2008, p. 1-14. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.
- Lowe, Lisa. “The Intimacies of Four Continents.” *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy In North American History*, edited by Ann Laura Stoler. Duke University Press, 2006, 191-212.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- Sharpe, Christina. “Lose Your Kin.” *The New Inquiry*. November 16, 2016.
<https://thenewinquiry.com/lose-your-kin/>
- Wynter, Sylvia. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, coloniality’s persistence, pp. 257-337. Michigan State University Press. 2003.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949874>
- Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Assignments:

Class participation: Active, sustained engagement in the classroom is a requirement for this course. This engagement will look differently for each student and will hopefully be an organic product of reading interesting texts and getting together twice a week with other people to engage with them. Participation includes actions like asking questions, participating in in-class activities, offering answers to other students' questions, and actively listening. For many, though not all, class sessions I've included "guiding questions" that I'd like you to consider while completing that day's assignment. By no means are you limited to these questions and the topics they focus on but preparing and sharing an answer to one of these questions is a great way to participate in class if you find more structure to be helpful.

Midterm Exam: This exam will ask you a series of short-answer (1-3 sentence) questions that demonstrate basic knowledge about the literary texts we've covered in Weeks 1-5 of the course — knowledge of things such as plot, genre, and key themes. In addition, the exam will ask students to answer three long-answer (5+ sentences) questions, chosen from the Guiding Questions from Weeks 1-5. Students will have five options but will only answer three for the exam. The exam will not include any guiding questions from Week 1, Day 1.

Genre Reports: During the quarter, each student is responsible for submitting two "Genre Reports." These are 500-word essays (give or take 50 words) that pose an extended answer to one of the guiding questions, discuss a specific connection of your choice between a primary text and a secondary scholarly source, or explains how a primary text articulates a specific genre of the human (your report should name which genre) as Wynter defines it. These essays do not need to be as polished as the final project, but I expect them to be in complete prose and focused on one topic. They should not include any additional sources beyond those on the syllabus and instead should only rely on carefully selected evidence from the texts we read together and your own thinking. One report must be submitted any time before the end of Week 5 and the other must be anytime submitted after Week 5 and before the final day we meet as a class. These may serve as a springboard or brainstorming opportunity for your final project.

Final Project: Your final project will be an 1800–2200-word piece of writing. You may opt to write an argumentative research essay (the standard for most literature courses) or you can propose to write in a different genre such as literary nonfiction, creative writing, or a mix of multiple genres. If you want to write in a genre other than the research essay, you must get my approval via the project proposal.

Your project will make a unique argument responding to one of the following prompts, extending one of your Genre Reports, or commenting on a topic of your creation (and approved by the instructor):

- 1) How does a primary text we read construe a "Victorian" (as an individual, collective, or culture) both in what the text specifies and what it leaves unsaid, and how is this project related to race?
- 2) How does a primary text we read construe "Human" by way of dehumanization? Put another way, argue for an instance or pattern in which what is human emerges from the construction of an *individual* as inhuman or subhuman.

- 3) What is one way that a text written by a person of color subverts one specific practice of colonization or white supremacy? Your essay might also explore what, precisely, the author proffers or imagines instead.
- 4) Pick two topics/genres we covered (from the weekly headings, i.e. “The Victorian,” “The Woman”) and make an argument about how one topic/genre teaches us about the other, grounding your argument in a primary text. In other words, what is one way that Topic A changes the way you understand Topic B in a given text, and why is this intervention important?

Your final project must draw from at least one primary text, at least one secondary source other than Wynter’s or Weheliye’s writings, and one piece of Wynter’s or Weheliye’s writing. You do not need to refer to these three pieces to equal extents, but you must enlist all three in ways that demonstrate to me that you understand their content. You do not need to conduct additional research for the final project, but you may if it serves your chosen topic/argument. You must properly cite your sources; you are writing an argumentative research essay, please use MLA citation style.

Final Project Proposal: In Week 8, students will submit a 300–400-word proposal that answers the following questions about your final project and also asks any questions you may have about the final project:

- What will your final project argue?
- What genre will you be writing in? Why does this genre help you address your argument?
- What is your archive? In other words, which texts from the class will you use to address your argument?
- Will you conduct additional research? Why or why not? If yes, what sorts of sources will you seek out?

Course Schedule:

Please note that assignments and readings are due on the day they are listed. Assignments should be submitted by midnight on the day they are due. Although most class sessions will include a lecture or contextualizing presentation, some portion of our classroom time will be spent discussing the assigned texts in small and large groups, practicing close-reading, or participating in ungraded activities.

Week 1: The Victorian

Day 1: Introductions; explain grading contract; course content overview and warnings; read and [listen to](#) “Sonny’s Lettah” by Linton Kwesi Johnson and [read Vagrancy Act of 1824](#).

Guiding question(s): What do I and other literary scholars mean when we say “Victorian”? How has this label changed? What are some of the racial legacies and afterlives of Victorian literature and culture?

Day 2: “Chapter 1” from *On Liberty*, by John Stuart Mill; “Introduction” from *Golden Gulag* by Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Guiding questions: What does Mill believe is the ideal relationship between an individual and the public? How does Mill define the individual and collective, and who might be left out by these definitions? What is the role of liberty in the prison industrial complex that Gilmore describes? How can we understand the relationship between liberty and incarceration?

Week 2: The Human

Day 1: [“Some Notes On How To Ask A Good Question About Theory”](#) by Kyla Wazana Tompkins; pp. 17-30 from “Blackness: The Human” from *Habeas Viscus* by Alexander Weheiliye; pp. 257-262 from “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” by Sylvia Wynter.

Guiding question(s): How does Wynter distinguish Human from Man? In the first sentence of our reading, Wynter asserts that “the conception of the human [...] overrepresents itself” — what might Wynter mean by “overrepresent”? Why might Wynter rely on so much historical knowledge to make an argument about the future “struggle of our new millennium”?

Day 2: “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle” by Kathrine McKittrick [skim/skip “The Essays” subsection] from *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*; “Introduction” and excerpt from “Chapter 7: On the Races of Man” from *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin.

Guiding question(s): In what ways is Darwin describing or accounting for Man as Wynter describes him? Darwin claims his intention is not to “describe” the races of man as he sees them and instead distinguish their classifications; how are these processes different from each other, or what do they have in common, especially when describing the human race?

Week 3: The Colonizer & Colonial Subject

Day 1: *The Moonstone*, First Period chapters 1-15.

Guiding question(s): What aspects of colonialism are evident in *The Moonstone*? Where is race — including whiteness — explicitly mentioned in the text and where it is implicit but present?

Day 2: *The Moonstone*, First Period chapters 16-23; “The Intimacies of Four Continents” by Lisa Lowe.

Guiding question(s): How would you rephrase Lowe’s definition of “modern humanism” (on page 192)? How does her definition connect humanity and commodity and where do you see this connection (or another between humanity and commodity) in *The Moonstone*?

Week 4: The Colonizer & Colonial Subject

Day 1: *The Moonstone*, Second Period, Narratives 1-3

Guiding question(s): What forms does *The Moonstone* use and what genres might we apply to this text? What politics and ideologies (in other words, whose interests and what sources of power) might these forms and genres connect to?

Day 2: *The Moonstone* Second Period, Narratives 3-end; Ann Pratt’s *Seven Months in the Kingston Lunatic Asylum, and What I Saw*, pp. 5-20.

Guiding question(s): Who are the authorities in both *The Moonstone* and Pratt’s nonfiction account? How do you know? How are the trustworthy and untrustworthy distinguished and described in both texts (and genres)?

Week 5: The Woman

Day 1: Elizabeth Barrett Browning poetry [“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” and “Mother and Poet”]; “Venus in Two Acts” by Saidiya Hartman

Guiding question(s): How does Barrett Browning portray women similarly and differently in these two poems? Why is representing enslaved lives (especially that furnished by archives) so difficult if not impossible according to Hartman? What does she offer as a potential way of redress for this loss?

Day 2: “Sultana’s Dream”; review for midterm.

Guiding question(s): What does the society Sakhawat Hossain sketches value, and how do you know? How does the setting influence characters in the story?

Reminder: first Genre Report due by today!

Week 6: The Woman

Day 1: In-class midterm exam

Day 2: *The Wonderful Adventures* chapters 1-5, 8-9, 13-14, 29-conclusion.

Guiding question(s): How do race and gender work together to influence Seacole’s experiences? How does Seacole treat her own gender and race, and how do these treatments compare to the way other individuals treat her on account of her gender and race?

Week 7: The Body

Day 1: *Wuthering Heights* chapters 1-10; presentation on ethical research practices and citation politics.

Day 2: *Wuthering Heights* chapters 11-15.

Guiding question(s): What are the effects and purposes of violence in the novel? Who perpetrates and who suffers violence and what might this suggest about certain characters? Whose bodies get described in the novel and how?

Week 8: Kin

Day 1: *Wuthering Heights* chapters 16-26; [“Lose Your Kin” by Christina Sharpe](#)

Guiding question(s): What people or forces form and destroy kinship in *Wuthering Heights*? What are the uses of family in the novel, or what does kinship enable? Besides contributing to his dark appearance, how does Heathcliff’s lineage racialize him?

Day 2: *Wuthering Heights* chapters 27-31

Final project proposal due!

Week 9: The Environment

Day 1: *Wuthering Heights* chapters 32-end; “The Fabulations of Beginnings,” “Material Markers or What and Who Get Marked in Anthropocene Origin Stories,” and “1800” from *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* by Kathryn Yusoff.

Guiding question(s): How, according to Yusoff’s history, are slavery (emancipation) and industrialization connected? How do the various characters in *Wuthering Heights* relate to the environment/natural world differently, or how does it interact with them differently?

Day 2: Toru Dutt poetry [“The Sower,” “The Young Captive,” “Sonnet”]

Guiding question(s): How do Dutt’s poems describe the relationship between people and the natural world?

Week 10: The Class(room)

Day 1: “Chapter 3: Last Stage of Education and First of Self-Education” from *Autobiography* by John Stuart Mill; pp. 119-132 from “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter” by David Scott.

Guiding question(s): How do these two accounts of schooling compare? What do they share? What is the use of education for each of these writers?

Day 2: “Additional Recommendations for Us Right Now from a Future” by Adrienne Marie Brown; reflection activity.

Guiding question(s): What actions do we take from here to become a student of belonging? What might be our praxis in future classrooms and outside of them?

Reminder: second Genre Report due by today!

Finals Week

Final Project due!

Grading Contract

Grades are a poor way to motivate and evaluate students, but I understand that you’re being measured with grades, and that you need good grades to accomplish your goals. I take my responsibility to grade you accurately and fairly very seriously. With this in mind, I use contract grading because I do need to give you a final grade, but I also want grades to be fair, transparent, and based more on your labor than my judgments about the quality of your work or rewarding you for being “right.” Contract grading takes away some of the subjectivity of grading and encourages students to take risks because the grading contract focuses students more on working hard rather than trying to give the teacher what they want. In traditional grading you’re judged solely based on the teacher’s assessment of the quality of your final drafts, and in contract grading you’re rewarded for your labor and hard work (or not rewarded if you don’t work hard).

You can always check in with me if you want to see how you’re doing in the class. I’m happy to answer questions about contract grading, though students may also find this article useful:

<https://writingcommons.org/article/so-your-instructor-is-using-contract-grading/>

Below is the grading contract for this class:

	A range	B range	C range	D to F range
<p>Participation in class activities, discussions, and assignments</p> <p>See “participation” description on the syllabus for a clearer picture of what constitutes participation in this class.</p>	<p>Routinely and thoughtfully participates in class activities and discussion.</p> <p>Contributions demonstrate close engagement with assigned texts.</p>	<p>More often than not participates in class activities and discussion.</p> <p>Contributions generally demonstrate engagement with assigned text.</p>	<p>Occasionally participates in class activities and discussion.</p> <p>Engagement with assigned texts is sparse or infrequently evident.</p>	<p>Almost never or never participates in class activities and discussions.</p> <p>Demonstrates extremely little or no engagement with assigned texts.</p>
<p>Attendance and classroom conduct</p>	<p>Always attends class, aside from excused absences, communicated to the instructor ahead of time.</p> <p>Classroom conduct is consistently respectful (of instructor <i>and</i> peers) and engaged.</p>	<p>Almost always attends class and generally communicates ahead of time about any absences.</p> <p>Classroom conduct is largely respectful and engaged.</p>	<p>Occasionally attends class and infrequently communicates about absences ahead of time.</p> <p>Classroom conduct is sometimes disrespectful and disengaged.</p>	<p>Almost never or never attends class and rarely or never communicates ahead of time about absences.</p> <p>Classroom conduct is routinely disrespectful and disengaged.</p>
<p>Genre Reports</p>	<p>Submits two Genre Reports (one before Week 5 and one after) that meet the formal assignment requirements, answer one of the prompts, and demonstrate precise engagement with texts as well as careful analysis and extrapolation.</p>	<p>Submits two Genre Reports (one before Week 5 and one after) that largely meet the formal assignment requirements, generally answers one of the prompts, and demonstrates an attempt at analysis or extrapolation.</p>	<p>Submits two Genre Reports that mostly meet formal assignment requirements. Submissions may be late, not precisely address a prompt, or not attempt analysis or extrapolation.</p>	<p>Submits one or no Genre Reports, and/or submissions do not come close to meeting formal requirements or addressing a prompt.</p>
<p>Midterm exam</p>	<p>Midterm exam is complete, demonstrates solid grasp of literary texts, and poses persuasive answers to analysis questions.</p>	<p>Midterm exam is complete, demonstrates some familiarity with literary texts and poses informed answers to analysis questions.</p>	<p>Midterm exam is mostly completely, demonstrates only partial familiarity with literary texts, and/or offers vague or incomplete answers to analysis questions.</p>	<p>Midterm is not or hardly complete, does not demonstrate any familiarity with literary texts, and/or offers no cogent answers to analysis questions.</p>

	A range	B range	C range	D to F range
Final Project Proposal	<p>Submits a complete project proposal that meets the formal assignment requirements and fully addresses each question outlined in the assignment description. The proposed project has an evident rationale.</p> <p>The proposal includes any questions the student may have about completing the Final Project.</p>	<p>Submits a project proposal that meets the formal assignment requirements and attempts to address each question outlined in the assignment or fully answers most, but not all, of the questions.</p> <p>The proposal includes any questions the student may have about completing the Final Project.</p>	<p>Submits a project proposal that approaches but does not meet the formal assignment requirements and attempts to answer some but not all of the questions outlined in the assignment.</p> <p>The proposal does not include any questions the student may have about completing the Final Project.</p>	<p>Does not submit a project proposal or submits a proposal that does not come close to meeting the formal assignment requirements or submits a proposal that does not attempt to answer the questions outlined in the assignment.</p> <p>The proposal does not include any questions the student may have about completing the Final Project.</p>
Final Project	<p>Submits a final project that meets all formal assignment requirements, including citation.</p> <p>Demonstrates fluent comprehension of selected course texts (both literary and theoretical).</p> <p>Makes a clear, novel argument and supports argument with salient evidence from research and/or course texts.</p>	<p>Submits a final project that meets all formal assignment requirements, including citation.</p> <p>Engages with selected course texts (both literary and theoretical) and demonstrates some comprehension.</p> <p>Makes an argument and generally supports argument with evidence from research and/or course texts.</p>	<p>Submits a final project that meets some but not all formal assignment requirements, including citation.</p> <p>Engages superficially and/or unevenly with selected course texts, or demonstrates miscomprehension.</p> <p>Does not make an argument or the argument is summary. Evidence is spotty and/or confusing.</p>	<p>Does not submit a final project or submits a final project that meets few or none of the formal assignment requirements.</p> <p>Submission does not (or hardly) engage with course texts, or textual engagement is extremely confused.</p> <p>Does not make an argument and/or does not use evidence from texts.</p>
<p><i>Meeting every criteria but one in a contract grade category will result in a “-” grade rather than a lower letter grade. Late submissions on written assignments, unless an extension is arranged before the due date, will lose one letter grade — so, for example, a late A-level project proposal would receive a B-level grade</i></p>				