

8. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
9. Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Tanya Agathocleous, “‘The Coming Clash of East and West’: Syncretism, Cosmopolitanism, and Disaffection in the Colonial Public Sphere,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 4 (2017): 661–85; Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Deirdre David, *Rule Britannia: Women, Empire, and Victorian Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).



Enclosure

ZACH FRUIT

FROM the right angle, land enclosure takes on the aspect of the root of capitalist accumulation. Marx, while suspicious of origin stories, famously identifies land enclosure, and the nascent statist tactics of “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force” that accompany it, as the “original sin” of “so-called primitive accumulation.”¹ Many historians have identified British land enclosure as a crucial aspect of the eighteenth-century rise of industrial capitalism, while differently theorizing the relationship between the productive dynamics of English agriculture and the multinational circulation of capital.² J. M. Neeson has given the most textured account of the enclosure of the commons as a decentralized process of expropriation that occasioned a complex array of resistance, ambivalence, and compromise.³ The agricultural “improvements” that accompanied enclosure also seem to be imbricated in the enforced migration of agricultural laborers into urban centers and the increasing rate of mechanization that led to the industrial revolution.⁴ Perhaps undertheorized, however, are the visual and aesthetic effects of enclosure, and the innovative literary methodologies that metabolized and disrupted these material transformations. Approaching enclosure as an aesthetic phenomenon rather than an economic process allows for a

more supple account of the articulation between local English histories and their echoes across the stage of Empire.

The reign of Queen Victoria may seem a strange period in which to locate an analysis of enclosure. The majority of the land consumed by the informal process of “piecemeal enclosure” was accomplished during the eighteenth century, and the most significant parliamentary contribution to legal forms was authorized by the Inclosure Act of 1773. By the mid-nineteenth century, the process of English enclosure had largely come to a close. Neeson argues that “most commoning economies were extinguished by enclosure at some point between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The pace of this change was uneven. Much of England was still open in 1700; but most of it was enclosed by 1840.”⁵ While thinkers of the eighteenth century produced a diverse range of anti-enclosure writing, it was the Victorians who inherited the landscaped world of an enclosed England. Not only did enclosure reinforce particular modes of engaging the land as an aesthetic object, its logics of expropriation and counterinsurgency mutated and calcified into the increasingly institutional apparatus of British imperialism.⁶

Literature of the nineteenth century makes the history of land enclosure visible through descriptions of landscape that have come to be understood as genre conventions. From the idealizing traditions of the country house poem and its transmutations into the experiments of Jane Austen’s novels, to the geographical fantasia of Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, the ordering and control of landscapes is an unavoidable trope of the Victorian text. Characteristic passages from realist novels are oriented around the vistas of the prospect poem, and emphasize the anti-nomic pleasure of taxonomizing traits of a landscape that combine to exceed the limits of vision. These passages are difficult to constellate in a short paper because they are characteristically lengthy. Most readers will be familiar with passages like Margaret Hale’s sighs for the “old picturesque” of Helstone’s “grassy wayside”;⁷ the nostalgic description of the hills around Hayslope Green in *Adam Bede* in which the motion of sheep are “revealed by memory”;⁸ the fading “little prettinesses” of the Carbury Estate in *The Way We Live Now*;⁹ and the “peculiarly English picture” of Gardencourt that opens *Portrait of a Lady*.¹⁰ The energies that motivate these descriptions range widely: Gaskell’s comparison amplifies the disjuncture between agricultural stagnancy and industrial progress; Eliot’s Wordsworthian paean affirms the relationship between memory and ethics; Trollope disparages the economic instability of the luxury estate; and James orchestrates a magisterial psychological theory of self-cultivation.

All, however, rely on the history of enclosure as the historico-material process by which these landscapes became available. Further, enclosure sustains a symbolic resonance through which the critique, nostalgia, satire, and self-consciousness of these passages are enabled. Margaret Hale mourns the changes of a “trimmed and narrowed road” whose “green straggling pathway” has been “enclosed and cultivated.”¹¹ The woods that Eliot describes as “divided by bright patches of pasture or furrowed crops” are figuratively “hurried together” so that they “might take better care of the tall mansion” which derives its material support from the very pastoral enclosures which surround it.¹² Trollope explicitly states that the “prettiness” of Roger Carbury’s lifestyle is predicated on the raised rents and extended acreage afforded by the “enclosure of the commons.”¹³ James tells his readers that Mr. Touchett would have “been delighted to tell you” the history of the land around his house which, following the Restoration, had been “much repaired and enlarged,” then “remodelled and disfigured,” and finally incorporated into a “real aesthetic passion” that is inextricable from the history of its dishonorable ownership.¹⁴ These passages submerge history in environment; the raw wounds of centuries of enclosure softened by the twin imperatives of the natural world: growth and decay.

Of course, there is a related structure that is also powered by the dialectical exchange between growth and decay. Capitalism is a system in which the decay of land, labor, and material are transformed into increasingly accumulated wealth. Marx concludes *Capital, Volume 1* with successive chapters on enclosure, the genesis of the capitalist farmer, the agricultural revolution, and finally the mechanics of colonization. The organization of this conclusion emphasizes the concomitance of rural English market development and colonial expansion. I want to speculate that the aesthetic manifestations of pastoral English history that I have gestured to in this essay can be analyzed as sites from which the linkages between the local and global mechanics of capital erupt. The slow legalization of the expropriation occasioned by enclosure is a fundamental metaphor for the mechanism of capitalist alienation. Without evacuating historical specificity, close attention to the texture of these local traces of enclosure focuses analytical accounts on the dynamic of capitalist expansion. Using the history of enclosure as a supplement to descriptions of landscape in nineteenth-century literature offers ways of understanding historical material that is constantly subject to the dual energies of both the natural world and the capitalist world-system. To better understand the coincidences and tensions between

these two dynamic states of being and the discourses in which they can be represented is to have a better language with which to describe our current environmentally compromised world.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1990), 874.
2. I am thinking here of Giovanni Arrighi, Eric Hobsbawm, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Andre Gunder Frank and Maxine Berg offer crucial correctives to the Eurocentrism of these historical accounts, which tend to exceptionalize the European development of capitalism in a world economic context largely impervious and oblivious to English Industrial Revolution.
3. J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
4. Neeson's account of the process enclosure emphasizes the ambivalence and diversity of responses to agricultural improvement. She argues that historical accounts of the process have mistakenly presumed that there was a distinctly positive impact of the "efficiency" of agricultural techniques, when in fact many of the changes seem to have had a neutral or negative effect.
5. Neeson, *Commoners*, 5.
6. The transition of the informal rule of the East India Company to the direct rule of British Parliament following the Government of India Act of 1858 can be understood in a metonymic relation to the transition from informal piecemeal enclosure to the Parliamentary intervention of the Inclosure Act.
7. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 356.
8. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 17.
9. Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 44.
10. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 1.
11. Gaskell, *North and South*, 356.
12. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 17.
13. Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, 44.
14. James, *Portrait*, 2.

