Assignment for ENGL 877 (Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities: Digital Project Development). Reading response to Neumann, Birgit, and Gabriele Rippl. “Anglophone World Literatures: Introduction” and Chatterjee, Ronjaunee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong. “Undisciplining Victorian Studies”.

Response 3

The two readings this week discuss the universalizing aspect of "English" literature. As brought up in class discussion on world literature, it places English literature as the core, the standard which other traditions are compared to and adhere to be included in the canon. Literature produced in other languages must at least have the forms that English literature recognizes like novels and poems. This silent gatekeeping excludes stories passed on by oral tradition. For oral tradition stories to enter the canon, the recited story must be put into words and be possible to translate into English or a recognized European language. This quality of literature is also baked into the definition of the word, which is why whenever I think of "literature", my mind immediately conjures up poetry and "classical novels".

On the point of "classical novels", I want to add that popular novels of today are no less works of literature than the ones inducted into the Victorian Studies canon. This thought is not groundbreaking and seems obvious once said out loud, but it shows the totalizing power of Victorian literature. The novels within Victorian Studies canon were no doubt commercial successes of their time, which facilitated their wide reading and influence on culture. However, whenever I think of "literature", popular novels today somehow do not appear in my mind. I see popular novels today as simply "fiction", which does not hold the same gravitas as "literature". With that said, poetry of any sort and time period, is immediately associated with literature to me.

The second article's discussion of Victorian Studies is an interesting way to be introduced to the field. I have little experience with Victorian literature, the closest I have come was an undergraduate class on Romantic writers. The article goes straight into criticizing the field's tremendous whiteness and urged their colleagues to center marginalized peoples within their scholarships. During the breakout session, Jeff mentioned that whenever a non-white character appears in Victorian literature, it is to conjure exoticism. I think that a literary project where the Victorian Studies canon is sieved for non-white characters and then analyze their roles in the respective works would be a good first step in addressing the "racism that undergirds Victorian Studies." (Undisciplining Victorian Studies, 2010)

To connect the readings and class discussions to my study of history, this week's content is another stark reminder of the invisibility of marginalized actors within written records. If erasure happens in literature, surely it is more pronounced in archived documents. It is also a reminder that words we use have intrinsic biases and have to be critically assessed because we are shaped by the language we have. I am still thinking as to how this week's insights can be applied specifically to my field of interest of postwar Japanese history. The need to lift marginalized voices has been a trend within Japanese history, be it through gender, class, or ethnicity/race. The aspect of ethnicity appeals to me because it challenges the view of Japan as an ethnically homogenous state, which it certainly was not as all empires were not ethnically homogenous.