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Dickerson, Vanessa D. *Dark Victorians*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 163 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

VANESSA DICKERSON'S *DARK VICTORIANS* IS A SHORT BOOK THAT makes a big argument. Dickerson's purpose is plain enough, "to study the relations of the African American to Victorian Britain" (10), and in spite of the immense complexity of the subject, she handles it with an admirable deftness. Dickerson recognizes a certain danger in her work—the danger of reading nineteenth-century African Americans as secondary Victorians. She nevertheless presents a convincing case that Victorian culture exerted a powerful and important influence on black culture. That influence, far from being a one-way street, was reciprocal in nature, and Dickerson accordingly seeks to demonstrate "a mutuality of influence between black Americans and white Britons" (11). Although the book is not without its problems, it succeeds as a whole.

Dickerson divides the book into two sections. The first explores the (usually) literal crossing of the Atlantic by Victorian Britons and by African Americans. In Chapter One, Dickerson recounts the journeys to the United States by prominent Victorians such as Harriet Martineau, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Rudyard Kipling, among others. Above all, she finds in these writers a deep ambivalence. Slavery had ended in Britain by 1772, and although they were sympathetic towards blacks in the United States, they also sought to preserve distinctions between the races, a tendency that became increasingly pronounced as Britain moved into the era of imperialism. Although ambivalent about race, as Dickerson argues, the body of travel writing by these Britons resulted in

three important accomplishments. First, because they were widely read in the United States, the sympathies of British novelists and travel writers shaped American public opinion about blacks. Second, observing slavery in the United States afforded British writers the opportunity to reflect on their own nation's attitudes towards slavery and blackness. Finally, these writers made the plight of African Americans a part of British consciousness. Dickerson closes this chapter with an analysis of "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim Point," arguing that even though Elizabeth Barrett Browning never crossed the Atlantic herself, her imaginative crossing also stirred awareness and "[agitated] the race-infested waters of the Atlantic" (43).

The second chapter of *Dark Victorians* turns the tables, analyzing the works of comparatively lesser-known black Americans who approached England as a "social and cultural mecca" (56). Although Dickerson discusses several writers who should be familiar to most readers, she devotes attention as well to writers whose names are non-canonical: Ida B. Wells, David Walker, Sarah Remond, Alexander Crummell, and others. For these African Americans, in contrast to their white Victorian counterparts, crossing the Atlantic simultaneously troubled black identity and resolved conflicts that could not be healed in the United States. For many blacks both before and after the Civil War, to cross the Atlantic meant to struggle—to struggle for means to travel, to struggle to retain some sense of fiscal autonomy once in England, and to struggle with the fact that there was no real "home" to which they could return. As such, the nineteenth-century black travel experience was characterized by a much wider array of emotions and experiences than we see in the travelogues of whites: "Black nineteenth-century travelers sailed with their double-consciousness intact" (51). Even as travel disrupted identity, however, black travelers recognized in England a cultural heritage that could be used to exert pressure for reform in the United States; moreover, by disrupting British stereotypes of blacks by lecturing and by engaging with the aristocracy, black travelers could heighten the sense of international pressure. If to visit England was to reenact a troubled Atlantic passage, it also was to attain an authority impossible in the United States: "To visit or to invoke Britain was to wield formidable international and cultural leverage" (71). Travel

to England, according to Dickerson, became one of the most important ways in which black Americans could shape public perception of racism and slavery both at home and abroad.

In the second half of the book, Dickerson turns her attention to Thomas Carlyle and to W. E. B. DuBois, reading their lives and work as case studies that serve the purpose defined in the introduction of “[underscoring] the study’s major premise—that the transatlantic travel, if not drift of bodies and discourse, ensured that the disparate worlds of the African American and the British Victorian did not, after all, lie so terribly apart” (11). Given this ostensible goal, Dickerson’s handling of Carlyle seemed odd to me as I first read the book’s third chapter, a discussion of Carlyle’s “An Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,” for Dickerson’s treatment of this text underscores Carlyle’s racism. Dickerson demonstrates in detail Carlyle’s treatment of slaves as animals and of slavery as an institution in need of reform rather than of abolition. She turns then to Carlyle’s treatment of the Irish in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* to show that his ability to identify with the white Irish and his inability to identify with the black slave further reinforced the binary logic of black/white. Far from showing the proximity of the African American and the British Victorian, this chapter illustrates their distance, even though a belated acknowledgement at the end of the chapter admits that some black writers like William Wells Brown and Alexander Crummell “did not peremptorily dismiss Carlyle” (89). Still, this nod does not remove the sensation that the third chapter seems out of step with the rest of the book.

The connection between Chapter Three and the rest of the book becomes clear only in Chapter Four, where Dickerson turns her attention to W. E. B. DuBois. According to her, DuBois found an authority for his work and his vision in the writings of Carlyle. He turns to Carlyle as he develops many of his key ideas, most notably his belief in the need for heroes and his sense of work ethic. More surprisingly, perhaps, DuBois finds in Carlyle a voice that could be used to oppose segregation. Carlyle’s turn in *Sartor Resartus* from negation to affirmation becomes in DuBois’s hands a call to his fellow Americans to abandon segregationist policies; similarly, Carlyle’s understanding of the materialism of modern economics contributes

to DuBois's desire to humanize labor in the South. DuBois would abandon some of Carlyle's principles—his suspicion of democracy, for instance—as he moved towards a Pan-African socialism. Dickerson argues that Carlyle nevertheless represented to DuBois the embodiment of a British culture that could be used as a barometer against which to measure African American achievements. To illustrate this important point, she turns her attention finally to the pairing of African American folk song and European poetry at the beginning of each chapter of DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Through this pairing, Dickerson argues, DuBois simultaneously demonstrates the cultural value of African American folk songs and expresses the single quality that most thoroughly joined together white Victorians and black Americans: "soul" (123), the value of which also permeates Carlyle's work. This unlikely pairing of DuBois and Carlyle works well, for it allows Dickerson to flesh out the argument made in the first half of *Dark Victorians* and to explore fully the complexities of the relationship between the African American and the white Victorian.

Although *Dark Victorians* succeeds admirably in most of its goals, the book is not without weaknesses. The chapter on Carlyle seems out of place until the reader gets to the chapter on DuBois. It would have been helpful had Dickerson established earlier in the book that Carlyle is important in this study not because of his racism but because DuBois finds in him a fertile source of cultural authority, notwithstanding his racism. More problematic is one of the premises upon which *Dark Victorians* rests. Early in the book, Dickerson establishes a division between Victorian England and black America that governs the rest of the study. She argues that black Americans experienced "the worst of times" in the nineteenth century because they either were enslaved or lacked education, wealth, and power after having been freed, and certainly no one would dispute this claim. In contrast, Dickerson argues that "the white nineteenth-century Victorian was part of a nation, an empire, and a group that felt itself to be approaching a pinnacle, an intellectual and cultural apotheosis" (8). Although she qualifies this claim, noting that there were tensions that belied this attitude, this teleological perspective requires Dickerson to set aside many of the anxieties characteristic of the period,

especially in its first three decades. Finally, I found myself wondering about the selection of texts, especially in the first chapter of the book. Dickerson later acknowledges the comparative scarcity of travel narratives by black Americans. But the fact of being black in the nineteenth-century surely involved a lack of education and of wealth that simply made it less likely for black Americans to travel and to write about travel. In contrast, the English travelers Dickerson analyzes seem like a litany of privileged Victorians: Dickens, Thackeray, Martineau, and so on. I could not help but wonder if Dickerson's conclusions might have been different had she sought out less privileged (and consequently less recognized) travelers to the United States.

The concept and the thesis of *Dark Victorians* quickly overshadow these relatively minor problems. While I might have wished for a more diverse selection of British writers, Dickerson's careful analysis amply confirms her point that despite—and indeed perhaps because of—the disparity between the two groups, black Americans could tap the cultural authority of the Victorians to unsettle notions of race both in England and in the United States. Indeed, “unsettling” may be the best word to describe the book, for in three important ways, *Dark Victorians* disrupts and troubles. First, the book illustrates the complex relationship of African Americans to a white, European cultural tradition. Particularly in her astute analysis of the pairing of song and text in *The Souls of Black Folks*, Dickerson demonstrates how black Americans simultaneously embraced their own cultural tradition while using the literature of Victorian England to validate that tradition for themselves and for their readers. Second, the book unsettles any easy division between English and American literature, using the Atlantic both literally and figuratively as a fluid boundary across which ideas were exchanged. The experience of America thus becomes a part of an English rethinking of race; more importantly, the black experience of England becomes a way to rethink the meaning of black culture. Finally, *Dark Victorians* resists any easy categorization of racist or imperialist discourse. This, I think, may be the greatest strength of the book. By pairing Victorian writers with African American writers—Carlyle with DuBois, for example—Dickerson illustrates that even the most destructive discourse could be used to advance the cause of

an emergent black literary culture. *Dark Victorians* thus makes a cogent, important argument that invites readers to consider the complexities and the possibilities that arise in the transatlantic exchange of ideas and texts between black Americans and their Victorian counterparts.

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