

Climate Period. Punctuation as Infrastructure

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I begin at a crossroads. I was recently getting a routine bone X-ray at a clinic that gave me the option of being called on my cell phone instead of staying in the waiting room. I walked outside and found myself on a busy street corner at a stoplight. On the horizon, sun caught the steel of cross-hatched cranes etched against the sky. Beside me, an inflatable tube man advertising a car dealership flapped in different directions, his motor and the rushing air drowning out the sound of passing traffic. All of these material things—the cranes, the road, the stoplights, my phone, and the X-ray itself—are part of twenty-first-century infrastructures. What they share, in addition to the fact that they are part of a carbon economy, is that they are often unnoticed. Or rather, they are unnoticed until they break.

In this essay, I consider this infrastructure of material things alongside a very different infrastructure: the punctuation marks that dictate the cadence of sentences rather than the movements of cars and construction. I take my lead from Theodor Adorno, who calls punctuation marks the “traffic signals” of language.¹ What if I focus on only one of these traffic signals—the period—and ask how it, capaciously defined, may bear not only on the cars and cranes above but also on climate action? Many argue that climate change defies understanding because it is so large and inchoate. My wager is that if I reduce a small signifying unit (the sentence) to its smallest component (punctuation infrastructure) I may gain a better handle on how infrastructure, and especially fossil fuel infrastructure, works in larger contexts too. That is, I seek to develop the skills of close reading in such a way that they relate to, on one extreme, punctuation infrastructure and, on the other, the built infrastructure of the carbon economy.

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In punctuation, a period is the “single point used to mark the end of a sentence” (*OED*). Despite its stop-here decisiveness, *period* travels via Latin to the Greek *periodos*, which means to orbit, recur, follow a path. Not following it in a from-here-to-there way, but rather to *peri*, to go around, the *hodos*. Which invites the question: if the *hodos* is a path, does *period* then mean the traveling or the stopping? And what can be learned from following the period’s path back to the nineteenth century and forward again to our own period of climate precarity?

Period also means a “portion of time.” I am a nineteenth-century scholar, for example, and in this context my period of study is defined by the temporal markers of the century. My main area of study, however, is the Victorian period. It begins when Queen Victoria is crowned in 1837 and ends when she dies in 1901. Both the nineteenth century and the Victorian period define portions of time with clearly demarcated beginning and endings. The temporal markers of the Romantic period, by contrast, are less distinct, and yet it, too, signals a “portion of time.”

And so two definitions of period: the punctuation mark that, in North American terminology, indicates the end of the sentence and the demarcation of a portion of time. The period is, graphically, the smallest of punctuation marks. The portion of time, by contrast, varies. It can be as large as the Holocene (or the Quaternary of which the Holocene is a part) or as small (or, indeed, large) as the personal period in which I mourn the death of a loved one.

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Before turning to the nineteenth century, I consider two twentieth-century examples of the period as punctuation mark. In her memoir *Dictée*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha writes:

Open paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far
 period tonight at dinner comma the families would ask comma open
 quotation marks How was the first day interrogation mark close quota-
 tion marks²

The periods are words. They are hypervisible, taking up space in the sentence. The meaning shifts. When I see “period,” I try to read it as a word *and* as a punctuation mark. It is hard to do.

My second example moves to the opposite pole. In the period’s smallest form, it is invisible. Consider “Penelope,” the last chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In my edition, this chapter consists of thirty-six

pages and eight periods. It is often understood as an ur-example of stream-of-consciousness narration: representation coming as close as it can to the human mind thinking without constraint, direction, or guardrails. In this chapter, Molly's musings range from sex to seedcakes while she waits for Bloom to return from a night of wandering and carousing.

How is the period noticed and not noticed here? Readings of "Penelope" are often breathless; it can be hard to detect the pauses, but, as Adorno notes in relation to all spoken language, we register them nevertheless. I have tried to read this chapter as if there are no periods, but the norms of language override my efforts. I fail to read language as one unbroken stream. Instead, it is studded by rocks and eddies, leaves and sticks, my mind inserting small pauses dictated by the cadence of the sentence.

Cha and Joyce offer two very different examples of punctuation breakdown. In Cha, the punctuation infrastructure is hypervisible and forces an articulation of infrastructure that typically remains silent. In Joyce, the infrastructure is made invisible, and that very invisibility draws attention to what is missing. Both examples invite the period to work and not work at once.

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Punctuation, derived from *punctum*, pins things down; the *peri* keeps them moving. Both punctuation and periods of time are at once pinned down and on the move. Until around 1844 (with the publication of John Wilson's *A Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation*), punctuation was used to indicate both how to speak and breathe (rhetoric) and how to comprehend written text (grammar).³ There was a growing sense, however, that these usages had to be distinguished and normalized—that is, pinned down. By the latter half of the century, punctuation grammar eclipsed punctuation rhetoric. Or, to put it another way, writing eclipsed speech. Still, in Cha and Joyce both inflections of the period continue to obtain; the meanings overlap. In other words, the punctuation infrastructure of the sentence can, in certain instances, drive in two directions at once.

Similarly, Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859) defies periodization. In addition to applauding industrial modernity and its investment in progress, it introduces ideas that now circulate in everyday discussion as if they have always been there. Like many books, both the ideas and the language carry over into later periods. Self-help, itself, took hold and shape-shifted through the generations to now underpin a form of thinking that emphasizes individual self-help over collective action.

But perhaps the most frequently cited example of period instability with respect to Victorian studies is the Anthropocene itself. The origin of this period is much debated with respect to its geological marker. What is not debated, however, is that carbon emissions released into the atmosphere accumulate through the centuries such that no precise period demarcation holds. What happened in the Victorian period (and earlier periods) flows into current conditions. Like the period that we notice and don't notice, portions of time are also interlaced: the carbon emissions released in the year Smiles published his book impact me now just as reading his book shapes my thinking now.

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In 1885 Lucy Clifford published a now largely forgotten novel entitled *Mrs. Keith's Crime*. In the last chapter, Mrs. Keith, a widow, is dying and her small daughter, Molly, is sick with consumption. When it becomes clear that Mrs. Keith will die before Molly (who will die weeks or days later), she elects to kill her daughter to ensure she won't die without her mother at her side.

The final chapter is a quasi-stream-of-consciousness narration in real time as Mrs. Keith at once says goodbye to her daughter and commits infanticide. It combines narration, direct address to Molly, and dialogue. In this chapter the periods are all over the place:

I love you, sweet—because I love you so . . . I will take you with me in my arms; you are not afraid? . . .

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[. . .] . . . it is nothing, . . . nothing . . . only a cold wind that wandered around the empty room and swept out towards the sea . . . alone . . . the . . . the darkness is coming [. . .]⁴

In the face of death, the sentence gives way. So distraught by ending her daughter's life, Mrs. Keith cannot end her sentences. The novel itself trails off with Mrs. Keith speaking to Molly so as not to let her go. But perhaps she returns. I don't know if Joyce read this novel. But I like the idea of him reviving Clifford's Molly as Molly Bloom, now married to Leopold and living in Ireland, affirming life ("yes I said yes I will Yes" [18:1608–09]) and all but dispensing with endings, with periods.⁵

Up to this point, I've held infrastructure and climate change in abeyance. Now I want to bring them forward. Consider this the crossroads. We're at the red light, stopped by periods that hold and do not hold.

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The word “crossroads” refers to both a physical intersection and, figuratively, a moment of decision. For Cha, Joyce, and Clifford, bringing punctuation infrastructure into view was a way to register how the period worked and how it could work differently. At the same time, in each of these cases, the authors gesture toward the failures of wider social conditions. Just as the periods are all over the place in the last chapter of *Mrs. Keith's Crime*, so, too, do temporal periods like the nineteenth century both obtain and dissolve at once. Infrastructure introduced to advance industrial modernity in the Victorian period continues to shape current conditions both through its material forms and its knowledge-producing pathways. This point has been much noted.⁶ In this essay, I have turned to punctuation infrastructure as another way to hone our capacity for noticing infrastructure *and* for acting in ways that depart from established norms.

In *The Climate of History*, Dipesh Chakrabarty offers an example of a boy playing with a truck in a sandbox to illustrate, among other things, the ubiquity of fossil fuel infrastructure.⁷ His example reminded me of Fred Moten's reflections on the toolbox and the toybox in relation to how terms are used.⁸ The things in the toybox get used—played with—in ways not always intended by the toy itself. The boy playing with the truck, for example, might have crafted it into a table or imagined it as an animal. As Moten illustrates, terms can be “put in play” in this way too.⁹ So too, I believe, short essays. This essay, for example, while relatively conventional, does not conform to the boundaries of the Victorian period because part of its point is to suggest that our climate period invites, if not demands, new approaches to scholarly work. Cha, Joyce, and Clifford treat the period as if it's in a toybox rather than a toolbox; they make it work in new ways, honing the reader's skills in noticing what I have called punctuation infrastructure here.

As I waited at the red light and looked around, I was seeing infrastructure underpinned by our fossil fuel economy. We rely on traffic infrastructure; it tells us when to stop and when to go. I rely on punctuation—and the period—to write this essay. But what might it mean to see it, to pause and think about it? What are the implications of seeing the oil that powers the traffic lights, fills the dancing tube

men with air, and makes possible the sentences, like this one, that I write? The periods are all over the place, infanticide is happening apace, admittedly in rooms quite distant from most readers of this essay, and fossil fuel infrastructure continues to be built. We stand at a crossroads.

NOTES

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1. Adorno, "Punctuation Marks," 300.
2. Cha, *Dictée*, n.p.
3. Ford, "Punctuating History," 91–92.
4. Clifford, *Mrs. Keith's Crime*, 267, 290.
5. Molly Bloom's affirmation is in sharp contrast to Mrs. Keith's concluding words: "but no . . . but no [. . .] nothing, . . . nothing" (289–90).
6. See Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, and Taiwo, *Reconsidering Reparations*, among others.
7. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 10–11.
8. Moten, "The General Antagonism," 105–6.
9. Moten, "The General Antagonism," 106.

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