In the final pages of Frances Anne Kemble’s *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839*, in a chapter entitled “The Wreck of the Pulaski,” the author recounts the story of a shipwreck told to her by her neighbor, Mr. Couper. The steamship *Pulaski* sank June 14, 1838, about 150 miles off the coast of South Carolina. Very briefly, Kemble writes that at the first sound of the boiler exploding, Couper moved the two women and small boy for whom he was responsible into one of the lifeboats and then took charge of the boat, encouraging the men to continue rowing even when they were exhausted. As they began the difficult task of turning the lifeboat toward the coast and making their way to shore, Couper assigned each of the women, including a black woman, to an individual man who would be responsible for her safety. The boat then capsized as it made its way through the rough waters near shore, and everyone was thrown into the water. Kemble narrates that the man responsible for the safety of the black woman made it to shore having left her in the water. Couper, Kemble admiringly notes, even with the burden of saving Mrs. Nightingale, “had power of command enough left to drive the fellow back to seek her, which he did, and brought her safe to land” (Kemble, 340).

In John A. Scott’s edition of the *Journal*, Scott notes that Kemble’s account in general agrees with Couper’s, as documented in a letter Couper wrote to his father immediately after the incident, in all but a few minor details. However, it is in the most significant of the minor changes, I would argue, that we see evidence of Kemble’s frustration and sense of futility with her ability to effect any change in the slave system: the events leading to the rescue of the unnamed black woman. In a footnote, we learn
not only that the incident had not occurred as rendered in Kemble’s *Journal*, but also that in fact the slave woman had not even been in that particular lifeboat. Scott writes, “There is no mention, in Couper’s original version, of this interesting detail about the Negro woman; as a matter of fact she had been transferred to the other lifeboat earlier in the day” (340, fn 5). There are two possible explanations for this change: either Couper told Kemble a different version of the events, or Kemble rewrote the incident to create a narrative in which a brave white man pressures another to honor his responsibility to a black woman.

Thus, Kemble either latched onto the story because of its reflection of a state of benevolent masculine paternalism she hoped to, but ultimately did not, find in Georgia, or she herself revised the tale to reflect that vision. In either case, the version of the shipwreck found in the *Journal* brings into reality a social dynamic she saw infrequently at best in her daily experience and that she hoped, as she expressed early in the *Journal*, to find more prevalent: “Nevertheless, I go prepared to find many mitigations in the practice to the general injustice and cruelty of the system” (11). These “mitigations” she never found. Instead, she creates or recreates a scene in which a brave white man turns a cowardly white man back into the water to save a black woman from death. This narrative adjustment allows Kemble to render the kinds of relationships between races and individuals that she is unable to achieve or discern in her daily confrontation with the slave system. Kemble uses the tale to compensate for her frustration and horror with the slave system and, increasingly over the narrative, with her husband’s role in propagating that system, to create the racial dynamic that she hoped to be able to bring into being.

Kemble’s rendering of this rescue occurs at the end of a narrative in which she is increasingly aware of the suffering of the slaves on the Butler properties, her husband’s complicity with this exploitative system, and her own powerlessness to effect any real change for these people. At the beginning of the journal, in anticipation of her trip south, she famously declares her abhorrence for the system of slavery: “[a]ssuredly I am prejudiced against slavery, for I am an Englishwoman, in whom the absence of such a prejudice would be disgraceful” (11, original italics). By the end of the text, after endless entreaties by slaves for food, clothing, relief from work, and extended rest after childbirth, to name just a few of the issues she hears about on a regular basis, Kemble finds herself angry, frustrated, and powerless. She is critically aware enough to be able to connect her own powerless position as a married woman in a situation of moral chaos with the slaves’ inability to effect their own emancipation. And throughout the
journal, she repeatedly attempts to effect change in the material conditions of the slaves on the property. By the end of her visit, however, Kemble appears to become overwhelmed with the vast amount of suffering with which she is confronted on an hourly basis and with her inability to alleviate any of it.

As her sense of hopelessness grows, the narrative takes on an increasingly dreamlike quality. She takes more trips away from the grounds with her slave companion, Jack, and increasingly describes the environment as a blend of fictional and nonfictional elements:

I stopped for some time before a thicket of glittering evergreens, over which hung, in every direction, streaming garlands of these fragrant golden cups, fit for Oberon’s banqueting service. These beautiful shrubberies were resounding with the songs of mocking-birds. I sat there on my horse in a sort of dream of enchantment, looking, listening, and inhaling the delicious atmosphere of those flowers; and suddenly my eyes opened, as if I had been asleep, on some bright red bunches of spring leaves on one of the winter-stripped trees, and I as suddenly thought of the cold Northern skies and earth, where the winter was still inflexibly tyrannizing over you all, and, in spite of the loveliness of all that was present, and the harshness of all that I seemed to see at that moment, no first tokens of the spring’s return were ever more welcome to me than those bright leaves that reminded me how soon I should leave this scene of material beauty and moral degradation, where the beauty itself is of an appropriate character to the human existence it surrounds: above all, loveliness, brightness, and fragrance; but below! it gives one a sort of Melusina feeling of horror—all swamp and poisonous stagnation, which the heat will presently make alive with venomous reptiles. (226)

This fascinating passage vividly displays the ways in which Kemble’s confrontation with the realities of slavery, and with her failure to carry out the changes she planned on the trip down to Georgia, precipitate a turn to fiction. Kemble, one of the foremost actresses of her time, blends Shakespearian allusions, with which she was so intimately familiar, with descriptions of the lush natural environment of Georgia and thoughts of the harsher Northeastern countryside in which resides Elizabeth Dwight Sedgewick, the addressee of the letters that constitute the journal. The performative rhetoric, evident throughout Kemble’s writings, begins to break down as she yokes together a range of images to try to describe her state of mind. Kemble finds herself in a sentimentalized moment of
“enchantment,” reminiscent of her famous description of her first ride on the new railway so frequently anthologized. However, here the momentary static state of “enchantment” leads to Kemble’s expression of being caught between conflicting experiences of horror and beauty, even as she lives in a moment in which different geographies of north and south, representative of her horror and repulsion at the slave system, blend in her mind. Her thoughts drift to a time when she will leave the plantation and the moral, familial, and emotional chaos it has produced.

In other words, as Kemble becomes increasingly aware of the complexity of slave psychology, and of her position within the hierarchy as the mistress of the plantation and thus the target of incessant pleading, she begins to aestheticize her reality, both as an escape from the horrors of the plantation and as a palette with which to express her ideals. As Kemble’s faith in her ability to effect change on the plantation falters, she turns to the aesthetic in order to assuage a sense of anxiety produced by a confrontation with racial otherness and systemic oppression. This narrative method reveals a state of white bourgeois anxiety—where Kemble confronts her inability to bring into reality her goals for social transformation and, at the same time, becomes aware of and overwhelmed by the interlacing of gender, class, sexual, and racial oppressions. Her naïve belief that she would be able to use her position as benevolent slave mistress to dismantle the structures of oppression erodes even as she becomes the target of pleadings and requests throughout each day. Thus she finds herself slowly extricating herself from the realities of oppression and suffering on the plantation as she more frequently rambles about the estate with Jack.

This book explores five texts in which a white English author or character turns to the aesthetic in order to assuage a sense of anxiety produced by a confrontation with racial otherness. These moments reveal an anxiety of indeterminacy—where white characters or narrators confront the limitations of preconceived ideologies or the interlacing of oppressions, and subsequently falter. This is not a psychoanalytic study, but instead a narrative exploration—looking at the ways white anxiety, when confronted with racial otherness, manifests itself in narrative. Although I do refer to psychoanalytic concepts, especially in my discussion of fetishism, in general I agree with Judith Halberstam that “[w]ithin modern Western culture, we are disciplined through a variety of social and political mechanisms into psychoanalytic relations and then psychoanalytic explanations are deployed to totalize our submission” (Halberstam, 9). Rather than follow this route, I am more interested in unpacking the ways in which the narrative turn to the aesthetic in writings by white English individuals reveals
instability in the cultural understanding of race at mid-century. I am interested in continuing the project pointed to by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*: “But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (Morrison, 12). In the texts I discuss, white writers confront the complexity, indeterminacy, and irrationality of both racial difference and the systems put in place to understand that difference.

When I say that white authors and characters turn to the aesthetic, I use that term in a broader sense than is perhaps common. The term, in my study, refers to standards of form and genre, systems of social evaluation that contribute to producing the beautiful, and issues of desire and compatibility. The interrelationship between aesthetic ideologies and racial categories runs deep in the Enlightenment philosophies that underpin the Victorian social plan. Emmanual Chukwudi Eze argues, in the introduction to *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, that the concept of aesthetics was central to the creation of a racial hierarchy in Enlightenment thought (Eze, 98). There is a sense of prescriptiveness as well as judgment implied in the aesthetic that speaks to the relationship between aesthetic issues and structures of social stratification. So, for example, when Matthew Lewis describes the slave woman Mary Wiggins in *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (1834), he creates an explicit connection between race, objectification, and the realm of art: “I really think that her form and features were the most statue-like that I ever met with [. . .] Mary Wiggins and an old Cotton-tree are the most picturesque objects that I have seen for these twenty years” (Lewis, 46–47). Later, we will see Robert Knox, the notorious racial scientist, make the same connections while sitting in the British Museum gazing upon the Elgin marbles and musing upon his recollections of the *Venus Génitrix* viewed in the Jardin des Plantes.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton argues that the sense of flexibility in aesthetic criteria enhances its ability to function in relationship with social conflicts and structures of power:

But if the aesthetic returns with such persistence, it is partly because of a certain indeterminacy of definition which allows it to figure in a varied span of preoccupations: freedom and legality, spontaneity and necessity, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality, along with several others. My argument, broadly speaking, is that the category of the aesthetic assumes the importance it does in modern Europe because in speaking of art it speaks of these other matters too, which are at the heart of the middle class's struggle for political hegemony. The construction of
the modern notion of the aesthetic artifact is thus inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order. (Eagleton, 3)

Looking more specifically at the issue of race, Nancy Stepan argues that the evaluative criteria for beauty changed in relation to blackness as English culture became more invested in exploiting Africans for material gain: “Slowly blackness itself, which in the ancient world had often been associated with positive qualities such as physical or moral beauty, came to be associated negatively with the degraded condition of slavery. Eventually, a black skin was taken as a ‘natural’, outward sign of inward mental and moral inferiority. The association between blackness and inferiority produced by racial slavery was grafted onto an earlier, primarily literary tradition, in which blackness and whiteness comprised the terms of a binary opposition” (Stepan, xii).

Stepan outlines the ways in which the evaluative criteria contributing to a definition of the beautiful changed in order to suggest an inferiority that justified exploitation. Deciphering Race is concerned with the structural, political, and thematic dynamics evident in moments in which racial discourse comes into direct confrontation with aesthetic issues. Connections between the body, the beautiful, the political, and racial categorization are central to my analysis.

My study works from the premise that mid-Victorian racial discourse was often tropological. By this statement, I mean that a series of rhetorical figures developed, with which writers conveyed shorthand allusions to complex social negotiations taking place within the culture. These figures took a variety of forms, including symbols, narrative patterns, historical events, and geographical locations. In Rule of Darkness (1988), Patrick Brantlinger notes how the figure of Nana Sahib became synecdochical for the 1857 Indian Rebellion (202–3). I argue that this linguistic phenomenon was more widespread, and that its prevalence reveals how the term “race” became imbued with a constellation of meanings and controversies during the period. These tropes themselves became what Mary Louise Pratt terms “‘contact zones,’ social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4). Informing my argument is Hayden White’s work on the tropological nature of historical narratives, especially in Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (1975) and Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (1978).
I contend that it is from within these structures that we can begin to understand the social transformation of racial attitudes that took place in Victorian culture. And it is anxieties about these changes that reveal themselves in the broader turn to the aesthetic that brings these tropes into relief. For, as Paul Gilroy argues, “[r]acism does not, of course, move tidily and unchanged through time and history. It assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations” (11). Many scholars argue that English attitudes about race underwent a radical transformation during this period. Eric Hobsbawm observes that “racism pervades the thought” of this time “to an extent hard to appreciate today, and not always easy to understand” (267). Catherine Hall asserts that “[b]y the 1850s [...] thinking about race was shifting away from ideas of black men and women as brothers and sisters, to a racial vocabulary of biological difference” (Hall, Civilising Subjects, 21). Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century humanitarian arguments, which led to the abolition of the slave trade and, later, of slavery itself, lost influence in midcentury England, only to be replaced by violently derogatory racial representations fueling an increasingly zealous imperial project.

Early in Book IV of George Eliot's Daniel Deronda, we find a particularly vivid example of the aestheticizing of this tropological structure. In this scene, dinner conversation takes an abrupt turn towards Governor Edward Eyre’s recent actions to suppress the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Participants in the discussion express a variety of opinions about the event, revealing a range of attitudes and stereotypes about Africans, Jamaica, colonialism, and racial representation circulating in mid-Victorian English culture:

Grandcourt held that the Jamaican negro was a beastly sort of baptist Caliban; Deronda said he had always felt a little with Caliban, who naturally had his own point of view and could sing a good song; Mrs Davilow observed that her father had an estate in Barbadoes, but that she herself had never been in the West Indies; Mrs Torrington was sure she should never sleep in her bed if she lived among blacks; her husband corrected her by saying that the blacks would be manageable enough if it were not for the half-breeds; and Deronda remarked that the whites had to thank themselves for the half-breeds. (Eliot, 331)

This passage condenses into a brief moment a startlingly diverse set of perspectives on racial issues in one easily deployed conversational exchange. Equally curious is its abrupt emergence and disappearance in the course of
the novel’s plot. Eliot uses the historical moment of cultural conflict spurred by the Governor Eyre controversy as a complex racial trope that provides a vehicle for communicating identifying information about characters. It also speaks to Eliot’s understanding that her readers would be familiar with the context of events and would recognize the representative positions taken by each of the characters. The author is thus able to use the controversial event to suggest personality characteristics for each of the dinner guests. Grandcourt, the cold, brutal future husband of Gwendolen, has little sympathy for the blacks. Sensitive Deronda sympathizes with Caliban in his outcast status, and at the same time employs conventional stereotypes of the African as, for instance, musical. The superficial women express ties with the West Indian planter society and fears of black savagery, including reference to the geographical displacement between the economic benefits reaped in the imperial center and the exploitation upon which those benefits are predicated. The passage ends with a thinly veiled, yet nonetheless startling, reference to miscegenation and interracial rape. The movement between these positions is essentially metonymic, with one leading to the other in an unstable ricochet between positionalities. By unpacking the implied arguments embedded within tropes such as the Governor Eyre controversy, we can view the array of views and points of contention that fueled and transformed the ideological climate of English culture during the mid-Victorian period. Moments such as the one in Eliot’s novel signal the power of representations of racial conflict to figuratively spark and contain a collection of ideas, positions, and attitudes about race in Victorian culture. It is the purpose of this study to model a reading strategy for explicating the complex systems of meanings evident in such moments.

Contemporary scholars have given significant attention to the question of race as a tropological phenomenon. Douglas Lorimer’s study of the overlap of class and race in mid-Victorian England, *Colour, Class and the Victorians* (1978), points out the interconnectedness of these factors within the figure of the “Negro.” In a discussion of the significance of the Governor Eyre controversy, for example, Lorimer argues that, by the 1860s, “disputes about the Negro became a jousting ground for rival social and political philosophies. The transformation in English racial attitudes was not simply a response to the demands of imperial rule, but an extension into the Empire of social and political attitudes moulded within the changing environment of mid-Victorian England” (200).

The figure of the “Negro” became a symbol for an array of social issues connected with race in Victorian culture, including labor relations, immi-
gration, class definitions, and emancipation. In addition, public reaction to the Governor Eyre controversy precipitated a breakdown in the social and legal distinctions between the metropolis and the colony. Often during the first half of the nineteenth century, these social, legal, and geographical distinctions dynamically interacted within metaphors of racial and biological determinism.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that race itself is a trope that brings together a virtually limitless collection of characteristics under its umbrella: “Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application” (Gates, “Race,” Writing, and Difference, 5). My study builds on Lorimer’s and Gates’s observations to suggest that a range of individual tropes emerged rooted in historical, cultural, and philosophical conflicts about race in Victorian England. To decipher these tropes is to gain a window into the complexity of Victorian racial attitudes, social ideologies, and strategies of representation.

I am not suggesting that writers simply reduced a limitless collection of factors to an all-encompassing ideology of race. Quite the opposite: social controversies exist in active dialogue within a range of tropes with which authors engaged on these issues. The aestheticizing of these factors helped produce texts in which racial themes intersect within fractured and disjointed narratives, thus illustrating Christopher Lane’s point that racial representations are not limited by a need for logic (2). Racial texts are often conflicted and irrational, and those very conflicts give us the opportunity to examine the complex array of elements within each figure. I do not argue that by providing a careful, formal analysis of texts engaged with race, we can find the inconsistencies and therefore undermine their ability to hold social and discursive power. I am suggesting, instead, that the irrational, conflicted nature of these texts was part of their representation, that the power of racial rhetoric lies in its ability to outlast the formal exigencies of reason. Race is an irrational, yet powerful, ubiquitous, and persistent concept.

This study adds to current scholarship on nineteenth-century racial tropes by identifying and further explicating a range of tropes that have received varying degrees of critical attention, within the context of uses of and references to issues of the aesthetic. It is this combination of factors that this study seeks to explore as a way into the ideological complex in which race was produced. Chapter 1 examines how Haiti and Toussaint
L’Ouverture became complicated and multivalent signifiers in early nineteenth-century writing. This analysis then fuels a close explication of the way both tropes function in Harriet Martineau’s abolitionist novel *The Hour and the Man* (1841), and, more particularly, in her overt dramatic staging of the various issues at work in the St. Domingo Revolution. Martineau’s novel is a fictional biography of Toussaint, leader of the slave rebellion that resulted in Haiti’s independence. Two issues become centrally important in my examination of this little-discussed work: Martineau’s paradoxical emphasis on historical accuracy, despite her decision to eradicate the British presence in the fight to quell the rebellion; and an intriguing scene near the end of the novel, in which interpretation itself is represented as a metafictional key to understanding her text. In my discussion of both issues, I argue that Martineau’s abolitionist political stance fuels her desire to turn Toussaint into a symbol of African potential, to make him as European as possible, and to delete any information that could possibly alienate readers. Martineau uses Haiti as a standard for black self-determinacy and potential. Additionally, my discussion of Martineau’s use of interpretive indeterminacy suggests that this abolitionist text ironically relies on the very irrationality that often glues together racist texts. This binding force is often more comfortably attributed to texts with radically racist agendas, because it indicates their unreasonableness. However, no such easy distinction exists in mid-Victorian representations of race.

*Deciphering Race* then elaborates on Gates’s observation that race itself functions as the ultimate trope of difference by looking at the term in the most notorious of anthropological and scientific studies, Robert Knox’s *The Races of Men* (1850). Often considered to be one of the most extreme of the “scientific” racists, Knox declares that race should be understood as the determining factor of all human history. In this way, “race” became a term containing virtually unlimited explanatory power. Knox’s text ends with a consideration of the importance of art in understanding race. “Race” functions throughout the text as both an empty and an overloaded signifier. The paradox of Knox’s text is that it insists on the biological inability of particular races to coexist within the same political system, thus offering, through its segregationist rhetoric, a compelling critique of the imperialist project. This paradox explains why Knox views the St. Domingo Revolution as a failure; Africans, he suggests, are not able to live within European social systems, and so should be left alone. Contradictions in his presentation, however, become resolved and obfuscated by the concluding recourse to issues of aesthetics and beauty.

INTRODUCTION
Chapter 3 examines the fetish as a particular type of racial trope in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins’s 1857 Christmas story, “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners.” Dickens consciously allegorized the events of the 1857 Indian Rebellion in this pirate tale set in South America. Within the fetish, the figures of metaphor and metonymy work together to produce a dialectic of identification and disavowal that speaks to the issues at work in discourses about events in India. Homi K. Bhabha argues that “the fetish represents the simultaneous play between metaphor as substitution (marking absence and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack)” (98). Race, at this time, was often seen as an ever-increasing collection of boundary crises about social, structural, and generic criteria. Dickens and Collins depict colonials transgressing traditional expectations of behavior in order to maintain the alleged integrity of their national identity. The conflict in a colonial outpost gives both authors’ characters the opportunity to move beyond social norms, but only in the service of eradicating or outwitting the pirate demon bent on destroying both the colonials and the British way of life. “Perils” concludes with a catharsis that attempts to resolve the cultural rage triggered by the Indian Rebellion. The colonials humiliate a treacherous pirate demon, and a heroic British officer kills a traitorous black servant. I argue that these two figures function in the story as racialized fetishes, the eradication of which suggests an attempt at narrative closure. Ultimately, however, the two scenes fail to provide a sense of fictional resolution.

Turning then to governmental discourse, chapter 4 addresses the way the term “truth” functions as an implicit trope in the transcript of the Royal Commission’s inquiry into the events of the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Perhaps more than any other event over the course of the century, the Governor Eyre controversy polarized the British public, thus explaining the lack of contextual grounding needed by Eliot when she deploys the event in her novel. The transcript of the British government’s inquiry into Eyre’s actions is an exceedingly detailed set of documents, including hundreds of pages of interview sessions conducted with innumerable persons from the island’s different communities. In my discussion of this text, I use the term aesthetic to speak to the rigid generic parameters governing the structure of the inquiry and its resulting text. Owing to a particularly acute Victorian belief in the ability to obtain the truth, the Royal Commission’s transcript superimposes the hyperrational format of governmental inquiry with testimonies from a wide range of witnesses. The various social and economic positions of the witnesses partly determined individual testimony and the ability of the Royal Commission to
establish what they considered the real facts of the situation. An examination of this text, therefore, gives us an opportunity to address the figurative construction of “truth” and its place in the development of racial and social ideologies. When the British government tried to be most rational, the entire enterprise paradoxically collapsed into virtual meaninglessness.

My final chapter examines the trope of the ruin site in James Grant’s *First Love and Last Love* (1868). Written in the midst of the Governor Eyre controversy, Grant’s novel is a fiercely jingoist portrayal of the 1857 Indian Rebellion. Like Martineau’s novel, this text conveys the violent repercussions of racial rebellion from the perspective of its fighting participants. Both texts also engage more broadly with violence, as well as with nationalism and the centrality of women in colonial conflict. The main protagonist, Jack Harrower, carries with him a drawing of his home in England, and he turns to it for comfort in the midst of the chaos, as represented by the ruin sites in which he and the heroine of the novel take shelter. Grant’s use of the ruin scene—an image common to racial narratives during the period, and one I trace throughout this project—suggests a conflation of the domestic and colonial environments and functions as the spatialized racial other to Harrower’s drawing of home. Central to this dynamic is the figure of the Englishwoman and the trope of rape as articulated by Sara Suleri, Jenny Sharpe, and Nancy Paxton. Through his use of the raped and terrorized white female, Grant exploits exaggerated reports of widespread rape of white women by Indian men as a way to trigger rage against the Indian population. The conflation in his novel of violence, female exploitation, foreign danger, the domestic, and ruin structures creates a mood similar to one recurring in Gothic novels of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, suggesting an earlier manifestation of what Brantlinger has called the “imperial Gothic.”

In conclusion, I look at the recent return of the remains of Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) and explore this event as a possible way in which we can begin to remove the image of the racial other from the realm of the aesthetic and return to it the dignity and respect accorded to all human beings. Throughout this study, I have chosen to illustrate the fractured identities of this woman by rendering her name Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n). This strategy keeps before me the multiple identities and constructions of this woman’s life as well as the anatomized and divided way her body was treated, both as a public spectacle and as an object for scientific dissection. Elements of her name are separated off in much the same way that parts of her body were isolated to prove her inferiority, aberrant nature, and radical difference from those who examined her. Ultimately, I argue that
Ba(a)rtman(n)’s life stands as a powerful example of the failure of Enlightenment scientific rationalism’s aestheticizing and anatomizing project to produce any real, ethical, or useful knowledge about racial difference.

My interest in the aesthetics of Victorian racial tropism stems from a fascination with both the content and the underlying structure and dynamics of these resilient figures. We can understand a trope as a particularly complex sign, in which the space between the signifier and the signified works within the logic of a range of relationships, depending on the trope employed. In a simple metaphor, for example, a relationship of equivalence is set up between a sign and a signifier, based on an uncommon similarity embedded in their respective meanings. The space where the transaction occurs, and the bodies of information that intersect to create the equivalence, is of particular interest to me. Critics describe this tropic transaction between signifier and signified in a variety of ways. In Hayden White’s analysis, tropes are “linguistic containers” holding a collection of complex, contested, and often irrational ideas about social distinction. Thus, for White, the space of tropic transaction is demarcated as a closed and finite one that contains a variety of linguistic negotiations. In his discussion of poetic figures, Gérard Genette suggests that what is important is not so much the container, to use White’s term, but the gap, or space, implied by the boundaries of that container: “We see that here, between the letter and the meaning, between what the poet has written and what he thought, there is a gap, a space, and like all space, it possesses a form” (47).

What is intriguing about the example from Eliot’s Daniel Deronda is that the moment, in essence, is a rendering of the world of the gap or the container. The figure, the Eyre crisis, is aestheticized in order to create firmer characterizations of the primary personages in the novel. Within the text, the trope is used as a way to delineate the ethical and moral differences between characters. But the event is not named specifically, and the resulting conclusions are not stated baldly. What we get is the dynamics of the gap—the various conflicting ideas, attitudes, and beliefs brought into interaction in cultural understandings of Eyre’s decisions in Jamaica. The complex linguistic negotiations contained in the gap between signifier and signified, evident in tropic structure, parallels the service racial tropes provide to the cultures in question. Central to each of the texts I examine is the problem of racial conflict or unrest. The appearance of tropes speaks to the attempt to bridge the gap between the two cultures. As White argues, “Metaphors are crucially necessary when a culture or social
group encounters phenomena that either elude or run afoul of normal expectations or quotidian experiences” (*Tropics*, 184). Metaphors, in other words, provide a space where the characteristics of the two conflicting systems are brought together in the service of finding commonality or producing momentary dialogue. The contained nature of the moment in Eliot’s novel also harkens back to Edward Said’s famous reading of *Mansfield Park* in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said powerfully illustrates the importance of these moments for understanding the crucial ways the colonial environment underpins the cultural representations put forth in the nineteenth-century realist novel. I suggest that these moments, these discrete references to racial unrest and colonial economic structures, function tropically in Victorian writing. They provide a bridge between cultures in conflict. All of the texts I examine have at their root the problem of racial conflict in places such as Haiti, India, and Jamaica. The appearance of tropic structures as a way to represent conflicting cultural and value systems is to be expected.

I argue that the dramatic enactment of racial tropes also implies a simultaneous call to interpretation. Eliot’s reference to competing perspectives on the Governor Eyre crisis provides a trope that allows Eliot to bridge the differences between her characters, to bring together a wide variety of viewpoints on the crisis itself, and to create a momentary link between England and Jamaica. The moment also has built within itself the process of interpretive reflection. By having this moment abruptly appear and disappear, the text draws attention to the contractedness of the trope as a vehicle in itself; the trope encourages the reader both to understand the discussion as representative of the cultural crisis and to see the discussion itself as, in a sense, modeling the type of reflection that such events should precipitate. Certainly, the discussion of the event is not complex—positions would appear to align with the social and economic positions of the particular characters in question. But the encapsulation of these diverse viewpoints into this moment suggests the nature of social conflict and the ways in which rather simplistically formed attitudes have global ramifications. This reality in itself suggests, in chilling starkness, the connection between dinner table and colonial outpost.

In Victorian racial tropism, a complex array of controversies about categories of social stratification became reduced to one succinct reference. Race was a flash point for many social questions in mid-Victorian England: the rise of scientific racism; the expansion of the colonial project; the increasing instability of the conventional social hierarchy; anxieties about miscegenation; changing ideas about what constitutes “English-
ness”; and increasing colonial unrest. As the public became impatient with repeated outbreaks of violence in the colonies, domestic controversies dovetailed with accounts of these rebellions, greatly increasing racial animosity in the 1850s and 1860s. Abolitionist rhetoric, which held so much moral authority and popular support during the early part of the century, came under harsh attack as the economic problems of the newly emancipated West Indies and the conflict over slavery in the American context reached critical levels. The movement toward more democratic social relations weakened traditional social boundaries. Agitation by working-class populations, especially in the late 1840s and early 1850s, widening opportunities for women, and deteriorating distinctions among social classes—all these factors contributed to a growing concern about the security of social position, a concern that revealed itself in the tropes Victorian writers used to represent these issues.

The types of information boiled down within these tropes can be divided into three general categories: reports of the events of particular uprisings in the colonial context, such as the St. Domingo Revolution of the 1790s and the Indian Rebellion of 1857; accounts of the erosion of traditional boundaries, such as class and gender, in the metropolitan context; and studies of race and colonialism in historical, scientific, and travel writing. Often, especially in overtly political discourse, we find the same tropes used by speakers from different ideological positions. However, the complexity of ideological dynamics at work in the trope’s structure allows for the manipulation of positions, so that the images or signs can take on very different valences. For example, during Parliamentary debates about the abolition of slavery, a Member of Parliament invoking Haiti could suggest one of two very different responses: Britons’ fear of native attack in the colonial territories, or humanistic belief in the ability of the African people to rise to a level of self-determination equivalent to that of the Britons. Either belief, depending on context, could be suggested simply by mentioning the event. This procedure—transforming historical events into tropes condensing a wide array of cultural fears and concerns—occurred not only with the establishment of Haiti, but also with Emancipation, the 1857 Indian Rebellion, and, to a lesser extent, the 1865 Governor Eyre Controversy.

The significance of racial tropism extends beyond formal issues of representation to the ethical dynamics involved in critical examinations of these structures. In other words, the structure of the trope presents us with an ethical quandary: on the one hand, it allows for the communication of a range of viewpoints in one terse reference. When Lorimer refers to the
figure of the “Negro,” or Brantlinger to “Nana Sahib,” they allude to a constellation of issues, drives, and complexities surrounding these figures vividly illustrated in the passage from Eliot’s novel. On the other hand, alluding to a trope also allows for a certain critical distance, permitting both critic and reader to remain outside the ethically fraught situation of confronting the complexity of racist rhetoric. It is easy, in other words, to remain outside the complex convergences illustrated in the range of perspectives embedded in these structures. To engage with a racial text, such as Robert Knox’s The Races of Men, can produce anxiety in critics whose main ideological agenda is to dismantle the structures of racial oppression that still exist in Western society today. Fueled by the need to maintain a posture of judgment against the text’s offensive racial typology, critics generally veer away from such issues as Knox’s critique of imperialism because of the bizarre and faulty logic at the heart of the argument. However, I argue that conflicting ideological and ethical positions are part and parcel of racial tropism, whether in a liberal, abolitionist novel, or in an offensively racist, anthropological treatise. This interpretive crisis ties more generally into the process of formalist analysis. British Cultural Studies critics such as Stuart Hall often criticize American cultural critics for their emphasis on deconstruction, arguing that structural analyses do not take into consideration questions of ethics, given their ahistoricist focus on linguistic play. By adding to this opinion the problem of racist rhetoric, which seems to require an emphatic declaration of abhorrence, the process of structurally analyzing racist rhetoric quickly becomes suspect. This study suggests the overlap of the two—the marriage of close textual analysis and an overtly ethically focused project requires the articulation of an ideal of community toward which the work moves. Progressive methodologies have often given up the question of ethics to more conservative and traditional critics—this concept needs to be reclaimed.

Ethical positioning results from the speaker’s, narrator’s, or author’s control over a particular instance of deployment. Daniel R. Schwarz argues that “[r]epresentation of the relationship between author and reader is representation of an ethical relationship” (188). He continues: “If selfawareness of oneself and one’s relationship to family and community—including one’s responsibilities, commitments, and values—is part of the ethical life, then reading contributes to greater self-understanding. Reading complements one’s experience by enabling us to live lives beyond those we live and experience emotions that are not ours; it heightens one’s perspicacity by enabling us to watch figures—tropes, that is, personifications of our fellow humans—who are not ourselves, but like ourselves” (Schwarz, 195).
Eliot, for example, activates and stages a representative set of arguments about the Morant Bay Rebellion and presents them to the reader. It is, therefore, in the interaction among the author, narrator, trope, text, reader, and cultural context that we can discern a particular interpretation of a trope. It was when examining this transaction that I began to think about the ethical problems posed by the use of this structure to convey social controversies. Influenced by the critique of leftist liberalism carried out by many in the Critical Race Theory movement, my study looks at the ways in which the seeds of overtly racist ideas are to be found in liberal abolitionist rhetoric. I focus on white writers in order to understand better the dynamics of imperial discourse on race and, more specifically, to understand what led an overwhelmingly white culture, fueled by liberal ideologies and abolitionist rhetoric, to move in the direction of vehement scientific racism. I set out to understand the essential irrationality at the heart of white racial discourse. What I found was that when these writers employ a tropic structure to convey ideas about race, they implicitly convey a wide range of ideologies, as illustrated in the passage from Eliot's novel. The ultimate meaning to be derived from a particular usage relies on narrative emphasis to bring out one or another of the viewpoints implied in the trope. What is fascinating about Eliot's passage is that she uses the range in the service of character elucidation, and she implies her own ethical position regarding the events by means of the varying levels of ethical validity implied in her characters. Although Deronda, the character with the most ethical legitimacy, feels sympathy for the African residents, his sympathy is filtered through one of the most fraught racial touchstones in literature—Caliban. Thus there are no clear supporters for the rebellion, and the text’s concern without clear support is balanced by the novel’s treatment of Jewish identity. Although individuals (Mirah, the Jamaican Rebel, and Caliban) may have admirable qualities, the groups (Jewish and African) as a whole gain little support in the presentation. In fact, Eliot’s revisionist understanding of Jewish identity in the metropolis points more clearly to an argument about class and cultural assimilation than about ethnicity and religion. The “good” Jewish characters, in other words, have identities and manners in keeping with conventional, middle-class cultural values.

This study is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of racial representation in the period. Rather, each chapter presents a detailed analysis of one work in which authors attend to issues of form in such a way as to stage the deployment of racial tropes. I then place this discursive moment within its cultural context. This contextual work provides an
understanding of the central debates about race at the time of the text’s production and circulation; it also provides a broader model for reading representations of difference in Victorian writing. These central debates are often revealed in moments when the issue of the aesthetic becomes explicit, thus revealing the system of tropes at work, tropes which reduced to linguistic shorthand different and conflicting elements of the development of cultural attitudes and beliefs about race. Thomas McLaughlin argues that our basic cognitive procedures are interwoven with these tropes, which become so prevalent as to seem critically undetectable: “We come to think by means of figures worn smooth, made invisible” (86). McLaughlin suggests that “[f]igures convince . . . not by a strictly logical presentation but by an appeal to the irrational, the part of the mind that delights in their multiple meanings and deep reassurances” (88). In textual analyses, we study these tropes in order to unravel how cultural issues are reduced to succinct references, signifying such complex and conflicted categories as racial difference. This contextual work helps illuminate the particular tropological structures underpinning much racial rhetoric in mid-Victorian England—structures that continue to haunt British and American racial discourse today.

My goal in conducting this type of analysis is threefold: to explore issues of race and aesthetics; to understand how they are built out of the structural complexity of racial tropism and the conditions and ramifications of figurative deployment; and to comprehend the ways in which these controversies have a stranglehold on our way of understanding cross-racial conflict and communication. Increasingly, postcolonial and nineteenth-century scholars are focusing on alternative paradigms of knowledge and consciousness at work in the colonial environment. A critical shift from understanding these alternative epistemologies as outside of the Western master narrative, to understanding them as part of the construction of the narrative, may perhaps produce tools to help dismantle Western discursive authority structures. Collections such as After Colonialism (1995), edited by Gyan Prakash, and Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge (1996), by Bernard Cohn, engage with the epistemological paradigms and historical specificities of the colonial environment so as to disempower the discursive authority of conventional Western histories. Deciphering Race aims to contribute to this dialogue by unpacking the tropological structures in which English Victorians—and many contemporary critics—talk about race. The local analyses in my study model a reading strategy that encourages students and critics alike not simply to identify tropes of race, but also to look fearlessly at the ambiguous inter-
nal structures and arguments in the tropes’ mechanisms. The methodology is in keeping with what Stuart Hall argues is the turn towards “ethnicity” which “acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual” (168). “Ethnicity” brings postmodern emphases on heterogeneity to bear on what is at times a monolithic concept of “race.” Whereas Hall’s work looks at contemporary British cultures and calls for the need “to decouple ethnicity, as it functions in the dominant discourse, from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state” (169, original italics), my goal is to suggest one way that this coupling took place, and to show that the use of tropes to discuss race helped, in a sense, to solidify this link. This crucial textual work allows us to unmask the irrationality of these discursive structures, and to begin to understand how race functions as a battleground for a myriad of social issues at work in the culture in which it is deployed.

Anthony E. Cook, in his article on the development of Martin Luther King’s vision of human community, argues that “I believe the postmodern preoccupation with deconstruction is but a precursor to serious reflection on how we should live in community” (101). The project is fueled by what I see as the ethical imperative to help dismantle structures of oppression, specifically in the languages we use to represent those different from ourselves. I use the term “deconstruction” not in any dogmatic way, but instead to suggest the process Gayatri Spivak articulates. She asserts that deconstruction “simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced” (Spivak, 27). Tropes have the ability to reveal and obscure at the same time. A variety of ideas, perspectives, and ideologies become imbued within these “contact zones,” and depending on the viewpoint of the one deploying the trope, and the aesthetic, historical, political, geographical, and discursive context in which it appears, different constellations of meanings become activated. As I stated earlier, unpacking these tropes will not immediately dismantle their power. The strategy of aesthetically rendering racial tropism, the phenomenon of reducing complexity into images and symbols that contain and maintain the controversies, is still at work in contemporary British and American culture. Our political and media machines thrive on the ability to create scapegoats and define geographical entities as Other in order to reduce difficult historical and cultural differences into easy binaries of good and evil. I argue, however, that the dynamics of the
original controversies are not lost—rather, they exist to be unpacked within the obscured meanings embedded within the signs.

To recognize the signifier “race” as a “linguistic container” in which battles rage regarding a constellation of social crises is to begin to understand why productive cultural movement away from racial typologies still eludes us. Deciphering Race provides reading strategies for moving beyond the identification of the tropes and themes by which Victorian culture conducted discussions about race to examine both the structure and ramifications of the figurative strategy. In this way, my hope is that this series of readings will help us to see how figurative structures, while providing a bridge between different cultures and epistemologies, also reinforce a distance that keeps groups separate. Only by disentangling these structures, by addressing and unpacking our assumptions and narratives about those different from ourselves, and by understanding our deep cultural anxiety and investment in these ways of talking about one another, can we begin to create the conditions for productive, local understanding between different cultures, races, and communities.