Neo-Victorian

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BY any name—be it Victoriana, post-Victorian, retro-Victorian, or neo-Victorian—reimaginations of the long nineteenth century claim a transparent, self-reflexive perspective on today's heterogeneous relationships to the Victorians. The neo-Victorian, as nearly all definitions emphasize, can attend to "lost" voices and marginalized perspectives, the exclusivist nature of racialization, and the racialized inflections of gender, and, therefore, to the mechanisms by which Victorian reverberations still distort collective imaginations of the nineteenth century. And yet a rift persists between neo-Victorianism's theoretical potential and its aspirations, on one hand, and its practices, both cultural and academic, on the other. This particularly concerns the cultural entanglements of coloniality, these all-encompassing modes of violent racializations that sustain global capitalism.[1] To illustrate this, let me draw upon Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong's call to undiscipline the field of Victorian studies, and particularly their notion that "race and racial difference subtend our most cherished objects of study, our most familiar historical and theoretical frameworks, our most engrained scholarly protocols, and the very demographics of our field."[2] The function of race, they argue, extends far beyond questions of representation or canonization and engrosses the fundamental structures *for* and parameters *of* knowledge production in Victorian studies. The same holds true for the neo-Victorian, despite its achievements in addressing lasting effects of colonialism and deprovincializing the field's historical emphasis on Britain—for example, with work on global neo-Victorianisms,[3] neo-Victorian Asia,[4] or the methodological transnationalization of neo-Victorian studies.[5] In particular, Global Majority scholars have pointed out hostility in academic spaces to their anticolonial interventions,[6] the "erasure of the perspectives and subject positions of those who experienced the era without the

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metonymic attachment to the monarch and her reign,"[7] and the fact that neo-Victorianism often makes visible "the persistent problems of colonial relations" without, however, offering reparative approaches to undo them.[8] These tensions are particularly visible when we consider which literary and cultural traditions and whose histories have received extended critical attention under the rubric of "neo-Victorian" and which have not. Among those texts rarely afforded academic attention are countless nineteenth-century narratives written from South Asian, Caribbean, and Indigenous perspectives (often from the Americas or the Pacific region). The same holds true for examples from anglophone African literatures and from Black British culture. While I will focus on the latter two here, my overall point is that attention to any of these literatures and cultural configurations forces an engagement with the borders that have been tacitly erected in neo-Victorian studies, and that such attention opens up alternative genealogies of the neo-Victorian, which hold the potential to reframe it.

Given the prominence of the African continent in global northern discourses as a central locus of colonial exploitation, it is particularly striking that African literatures are rarely recognized as critical to neo-Victorianism—even though African authors have for decades decentered Britain's white, imaginative hold of the nineteenth century. Ama Ata Aidoo's Ghanaian folk tale adaptation *Anowa* (1970), which is very much a staple in West African scholarship, might in fact sit next to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a foundational neo-Victorian text. Both are set in the nineteenth century, and in revising canonized literatures—Akan lore and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), respectively—they dissect the interdependencies between British colonial encounters, legacies of enslavement, gendered oppressions, female agency, and, not least, suicide as a form of resistance. Like *Anowa*, Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Healers* (1978) and its negotiation of local Asante (mis-)governance vis-à-vis British coloniality in the late nineteenth century, or Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984), which chronicles Khama III's rule over the Bamangwato, exhibit an archetypically revisionist neo-Victorianism, as do works by Emmanuel Dongala, and, more recently, Yaa Gyasi and Wayétu Moore.

Likewise, Black British writers, artists, and filmmakers have long engaged in neo-Victorian cultural practices, far beyond Rhys, but like her, often with a view to British Caribbean connections. Since the 1980s, Sonia Boyce's and Maud Sulter's oeuvres have revisited nineteenth-century visual culture and its erasure of Black women, most

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recently in Boyce's video and wallpaper installation *Six Acts* at Manchester Art Gallery (2018). In the 1990s Isaac Julien's short film *The Attendant* (1993) or Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (1997) examined the interlocking mechanisms of enslavement, heteropatriarchy, and anti-Blackness, while Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1991) scrutinized the unceasing idealization of white heroines despite their profiteering from the plantation economy. All the while, Yinka Shonibare's photography dismantled the aestheticization of white modernity in his reimaginations of dandyism. These examples are necessarily selective, yet they all stand in a lineage with other contemporary artists and writers such as Barbara Chase-Riboud, Laura Fish, Sara Collins, Heather Agyepong, or Kara Walker, whose works address Britain's lasting coloniality through a reimagined nineteenth century.

Such highly self-reflexive, transnational engagements with the long nineteenth century have been in place for at least half a century, originating from a vast array of locations whose traditions are not geared toward the primacy of white British colonial experiences. They are critically attuned to the systems by which race structures discourses of national and transnational identities and memories. Given the theoretical premises of neo-Victorianism, they are vital contributions to the field's investigative impulses, and yet they have rarely been recognized in neo-Victorian scholarship. Their omission speaks to a dominant strand of neo-Victorianism that remains entangled in a transhistorical coloniality, one that structures genres, arts, media, and academic practices alike. All this points to what is perhaps the most pressing question for the field at the current moment: What will it take for neo-Victorian studies to keep its promise of moving beyond the toxic legacies of its Victorian forebears and enter into meaningful dialogues with disciplines such as Indigenous studies, African studies, Black studies, or postcolonial studies? Could the neo-Victorian even become a field that scholars from these disciplines might choose to engage with to a much larger degree? These disciplines are, after all, acutely aware of how contemporary hegemonies and paradigms relate to a significant degree to the long nineteenth century's colonial exploitations. Just as Victorian studies is tasked with its undisciplining, such an approach to neo-Victorian studies would require critical (self-)assessments of the field's disciplinarity, its structures and epistemologies of exclusion, its methodological and conceptual limitations.[9] These interventions cannot be made effectively if they come from within the current domains of neo-Victorian scholarship alone.

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Notes

1. Aníbal Quijano, "Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 11, no. 2 (2000): 342–86, https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2000.228.
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3. Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, "Introduction: What Is Global Neo-Victorianism?" *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2015): 1–16; Lewis Mondal, "*The Birth of a Nation*, Transatlantic Encounters, and African Americans as 'Global' Neo-Victorians," in *Black Neo-Victoriana*, edited by Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Marlena Tronicke, and Julian Wacker (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 165–85.
4. Elizabeth Ho, ed., "Neo-Victorian Asia," special issue, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019).
5. Anna Maria Jones. "Transnational Neo-Victorian Studies: Notes on the Possibilities and Limitations of a Discipline," *Literature Compass* 15, no. 7 (2018): e12461, https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12461.
6. Kerry Sinanan, "Race and Racism in Austen Spaces: Eroticizing Men of Empire in Austen," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640–1830* 11, no. 2 (2021): 10, https://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.11.2.1294.
7. Mondal, "*The Birth of a Nation*," 167.
8. Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 11; see also Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 155.
9. See also Jones, "Transnational Neo-Victorian Studies," 2–3.

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