

'I Have Every Reason to Love England': Black (neo)Victorianism and Transatlantic Fluidity in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Abstract:

Within neo-Victorianism, or contemporary fiction which rewrites the Victorian age, Marie-Louise Kohlke has pointed out a critical “reluctance to engage head-on in cross-cultural comparisons, which seem essential in order to get fully to grips with exactly how cultural memory of the nineteenth century is mediated and shaped by a genre that is hardly exclusively ‘British’ in any self-contained sense” (Kohlke 2009, 255). Setting off from that premise, I tackle the neo-Victorian genre in its global dimension by focusing on the transoceanic links between Antebellum America and Victorian Britain as it is exhibited in two postcolonial neo-Victorian novels, namely Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) and Nora Hague's *Letters from an Age of Reason* (2001), both of them dealing with African Americans crossing the Atlantic ocean towards Victorian Britain. These texts provide a remediation on significant loopholes in Victorian literature, namely the absence of race as an explicit subject in general and the under-representation of interracial love affairs in particular. Similarly, these neo-Victorian texts provide imaginative acts of fictional recovery coalescing with historical reconstructions on the growing presence of African Americans in Victorian Britain which, according to Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, feature as a gap in the historiography of Black British history (Holbrook Gerzina 2003, 5). The transatlantic interplay between African Americans and nineteenth-century Britain, or “Black America’s romance with Victorian Britain” (Dickerson 2008, 4) was not free from contradictions, though, given that African Americans were then appealing to a country which at the time was setting the foundations for late-Victorian scientific racism, a project which secured the British Empire’s subjugation of non-white races and provided the basis for modern-day racism (Brantlinger 2011, 6-7). The transatlantic fluidity between Black America and Victorian Britain reveals a double drive, a conduit for mutual influence which finds resonance in the recovery of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy’s term for the hybrid, fractal and transcultural circulation of subjects and ideas across the Atlantic ocean as a result of the slave trade which unearths black subjects as historical agents with an intellectual history (Gilroy 1993, 4-6). In the novels under analysis, the Atlantic ocean comes to stand for a liquid conduit facilitating both the reconstruction of broken transatlantic family ties and the appropriation of European radical discourses in order to support African-American abolitionism. Ultimately, I contend that for the African-American characters in the texts under scrutiny, Victorianism represents a model of respectability, democracy and modernity, the very values of citizenship that black slaves were denied by the American slave system. The inherent contradictions of associating the Victorian age, the epitome of imperialism and colonial domination, with the liberation of African-American slaves only reveals the complexities of the term ‘Victorianism’ and what it has meant to past and present generations.

(454 words)

References (maximum 150 words) (Chicago style)

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Keywords (maximum 5) (separated with semi-colons)

neo-Victoriansim; transatlanticism; African-Americans