Portable Neo-Victorianism: Review of Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*

Eckart Voigts
(TU Braunschweig, Germany)

Elizabeth Ho, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*
London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group
ISBN: 978-1-4411-6155-0 (HB) £ 60.00, $ 110.00

*****

In her seminal analysis of current Victoriana, Cora Kaplan offers a spirited piece of intellectual biography, recounting what led her into the research contexts of Victorianism and neo-Victorianism: it was "an offshoot of research on feminism and women's poetry" and taking issue with "class hierarchies, class injustice and class antagonism" of the Victorians, which resulted in her "outraged fascination" (Kaplan 2007: 4-5). While issues of class and gender were of paramount importance for the Victorianists of the 1960s and 70s, the 1980s marked a shift towards issues of post-colonialism, also registered by Kaplan, when she became alert to "the imperial and racial discourse" in a text such as *Jane Eyre* (Kaplan 2007: 5).

In one of the preceding issues of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, for instance, "social hierarchies of gender, class and race" are routinely evoked as central to neo-Victorian criticism (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 16). In fact, issues of Victorian racism and Victorian imperialism seem part and parcel of both neo-Victorian fiction and neo-Victorian research. "The Victorian", Elizabeth Ho echoes in her monograph, "has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination" (p. 9). In her text, which is set to become a standard reference point in debates on neo-Victorian representations of empire-nostalgia, and, more generally, on neo-Victorian attitudes towards ethnicity and race, Ho intelligently expands the perspective of neo-Victorian readings, arguing that the term 'neo-Victorian'

seems to build an empire of its own, colonising the entire realm of nineteenth-century fiction. Looking at texts from Australia, Canada and Hong Kong and beyond, Ho attempts no less than a de-colonisation of neo-Victorianism – re-centring and expanding neo-Victorianism until it becomes truly global.

Ho acknowledges Kaplan as one of the neo-Victorianists who, at least in her later engagement with Victorianism and its current remixes, embraced issues of ethnicity and race and the neo-Victorian trends of examining Victorian imperialism. She also notes, however, that Kaplan, too, focuses solely on the 'Empire at home', that is, on the British Isles, rarely moving "outward to explore other neo-Victorian sites of production" (p. 8). Thus, Ho highlights the 'Brit-centrism' of much neo-Victorian research. Ho sets out to 'cross these borders and fill these gaps', and succeeds – though perhaps playing down Kaplan's own capacity to look outside Britain in discussing Jean Rhys' classic *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which not only negotiates Rochester's racism and sexism in Britain, but also shows the impact of racism, prejudice and Othering in the West Indies. While Kaplan argues that, being set after Emancipation, Rhys's novel keeps "the themes of slavery and racism [...] at arm's length" (Kaplan 2007: 156), and Ho herself largely bypasses this well-researched foundational text of post-colonial neo-Victorianism, Kaplan's study throws into sharp relief that Rhys had already left the 'Brit-centrism' of neo-Victorianism behind as long ago as 1966 – before neo-Victorian fiction even fully emerged as a distinct literary trend. Apologetically, Ho reminds the reader that even her expanded view of neo-Victorianism still implies "the continued maintenance of Britain as its center" (p. 12). How could it be otherwise, unless neo-Victorianists gave up the practice of 'writing back' to the Victorian era, and, thus, to adopt Ho's 'shorthand' hypothesis, circumvent the need to 'write back' to the British Empire also.

There is much to be said, then, for Ho's fascinating expedition to unearth neo-Victorianism around the globe, which (fittingly) starts out in London. She notes, that, among other texts, Alan Moore's *From Hell* (1999) or Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987) fail to fully address the memory of the Victorian Empire and remain "ineffective in [their] recovery of histories of race and ethnicity" (p. 52). Ho then proceeds to show how Peter Carey, in spite of the Australian-inflected Dickens revisionism in *Jack Maggs* (1997), has via the Booker decorations himself

been turned into a Charles Dickens/Tobias Oates. Unlike Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2006), Ho argues, Carey's text is mute on racial anxieties, addressing neither indigenous history nor interrogating whiteness and may thus be called "nostalgic" or even transracial, envisioning "an Australia based on citizenship, membership and mutual recognition" (p. 57). In the case of Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Ho shows how the novel disintegrates monolithic whiteness. In Atwood's text, subversive Irishness, among other ethnicities, works towards racialising non-hegemonic forms of whiteness. Convincingly, Ho argues that *Alias Grace* marks 1867 as "the moment when Englishness and white Europeanness became the unquestioned, natural, inevitable outcome" of the foundation of the Dominion of Canada (p. 82).

Whereas the first chapters tread more or less familiar ground in neo-Victorian studies, the next one, focused on Jackie Chan's 'neo-Victorian' films seems exotic and, as the subheading concedes, "far flung" (p. 113). Ho relates historical Hong Kong narratives to contemporary ideological strife around the passing of Hong Kong to China, criticising both residual claims of the British Empire and new imperial aspirations by China. She defends Xie Jin's *The Opium Wars* (1997) against Western attacks as mere "Chinese propaganda" (p. 171), but concedes that it portrays cultural hybridity through the sceptical lens of an essentialised Chineseness. She then shrewdly moves to read Jackie Chan films via Rey Chow's keyword 'port', addressing ethnic and national masquerade in *Shanghai Knights* (2003) and the film's crucial scenes of smashing "its way through British and Victorian iconography" (p. 137), for instance, by having Chon Wang (played by Chan) kick Jack the Ripper off a Whitechapel bridge into the River Thames. Another subchapter is devoted to Chan's 2003 "outsider's study" (p. 141) of Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), which emphasises the role of the colonised subject in the colonial endeavour, for instance by introducing the Chinese character Passepartout/Lau Xing as Phileas Fogg's enterprising valet and protector (see p. 141). In the following re-reading of the anti-Japanese "techno-orientalism" (a term Ho adopts from David Morley and Kevin Robins, see p. 153) of 1990s steampunk, she focuses on the internal interrogation of US imperialism, substituted by a powerful British empire dealing with a pre-technological, weak America (see p. 154). She then points out how a text such as Otomo Katsuhiro's *Steamboy* (2004) displaces Japanese attitudes towards technology and imperialism (including

their own) onto British Victorianism: "the Western past – Victorian and technological – is also Japan's past (p. 163). These chapters are highly original and cover new ground in Neo-Victorian Studies.

Ho finally addresses the role of the sea in British colonialism, taking a cue from Paul Gilroy's seminal 1993 study *The Black Atlantic* and subsequent research such as Bernhard Klein's *Fictions of the Sea* (2002). Focusing on Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ho charts how naval travelling inevitably results in hybridity. In a delightfully expounded argument, she addresses cases of "cartographic failure" (p. 187), not just as a deconstruction of Victorian imperialism, but also of neo-Victorian criticism. Ending on formal experiments in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and China Miéville's *The Scar* (2002), Ho indicates future possibilities for expanding the parameters of neo-Victorianism – its compounds throughout the book addressed with mocking distance as 'the N-word' and the 'V-word'.

Yet even a study bent on increasing the scope of neo-Victorianism to become a truly global research project is unlikely to be without blind spots. Both Ireland at the time of the Great Famine and Bougainville Island remain *terrae nullius* in this monograph. It would be fascinating to learn what Ho might have had to say on Joseph O'Connor's *The Star of the Sea* (2004) in her chapter on neo-Victorianism 'at sea'. How would she have read Lloyd Jones' *Mr Pip* (2006), a much-discussed text shortlisted for the Man Booker prize in 2006? This "strange hybrid of the postcolonial and the Victorian" (Llewellyn 2008: 179) by a New Zealand author is a particularly curious absence in Ho's study as it fits her bill of 'globalising' neo-Victorianism so well.

While the Empire seems to lurk even in Victorian texts such as *Great Expectations* (1860-61), in which it does not seem to figure prominently, only to be brought to the fore in neo-Victorian novels such as *Mr Pip* or *Jack Maggs*, issues of race and ethnicity are still not as prominent, obvious and self-evident in neo-Victorianism as its traditional preoccupations with class and gender. What is more, even when these issues are highlighted, they can hardly escape a foundational 'Brit-centrism'. The elegant and persuasive prose of Ho's excellent study is set to change this situation. It invokes the burgeoning recent work on fictions of memory to account for what Kaplan called our "outraged fascination" with all things Victorian. While Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de memoire* is put to good

use in Ho's reading of St. Paul's 'Ripperture', and Marita Sturken's work on the erasure and strategy of forgetting informs her reading of *Alias Grace*, other approaches might have been added to her theoretical frameworks foundations (Maurice Halbwachs, Aleida Assmann, to name a few). In fact, after the publication of Assmann's *Erinnerungsräume* as *Arts of Memory* in English (2011), it remains to be seen if Nora's, Halbwachs's and Assmann's concepts of spatial, collective and communicative memory, which have become almost a cliché of the burgeoning German research into cultural memory, will similarly come to impact neo-Victorianism. Kate Mitchell's adaptation of memory discourses to neo-Victorianism in *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* (2010), which also informs Ho's monograph, may pave the way towards more studies in this vein.

Clearly, as per Ho's reading of Mitchell, neo-Victorian texts (however *faux*) parade as memory, seeking, in part, to supplant the totalising impulses of history writing (see p. 15). Neo-Victorianism is the very opposite of antiquarian history, attempting what Friedrich Nietzsche thought impossible: engendering life into a dead past and preventing mere preservation and mummification. Thus, Ho argues, neo-Victorian fiction resists the temptation to pass judgment on the Victorians and prefers interrogation and examination – tendencies we might describe as a faked participatory ethnography. In elegant prose, thoughtful reasoning, and well-informed contextualisation with contemporary global issues, Ho's intelligent study will help transform neo-Victorian studies from a field devoted to insular and parochial historical novels into a key area of geo-cultural negotiations of cultural and political empires, no matter whether they are old or new, eastern or western.

Postscript

It is interesting to note in passing that the term 'neo-Victorianism' appeared much earlier than in Dana Shiller's study of postmodern nineteenth-century narratives in 1997 (for Ho's discussion of this narrative of origin, see p. 4). When historian Hugh Tinker, then Director of the Institute of Race Relations in London, published his article 'Race & Neo-Victorianism' in 1972, he delved into Victorian racism, using Christine Bolt's classic *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (1971) as a point of departure. His discussion of whether the EU (then EEC) could help overcome Empire nostalgia seems uncannily topical at a time when Britain debates a referendum that could

result in the UK leaving the European Union. While Tinker obviously does not address any neo-Victorian texts, he does make the standard neo-Victorian case for the topicality of the Victorian past: "The age of Victoria, I submit, is still with us" (Tinker 1972: 47). Faced with the fact of multi-ethnic immigration to Britain, he asks:

> Are they to be our own internal empire, subject to our old-new forms of Racism? Or could the Victorian sense of mission be mobilised to create ways in which they can live as themselves, yet part of us? This would be a victory for the morality and science and progress in which our grandfathers believed: but which they did not seem to be able to practise. (Tinker 1972: 55)

Tinker's 1972 roll-call to neo-Victorian social progress is inspired by well-meaning liberalism. It fails, however, to interrogate the premises of 'his' white 'us' and 'their' coloured 'them'. In comparison to Elizabeth Ho's thorough and well-written study, it is striking to see that she, on the contrary, sets out to make 'whiteness' an issue in the restaging of "white European complicity in the nineteenth century", going beyond the "hypersignification of raced bodies" and viewing neo-Victorianism vis-à-vis the "the drastically altered status of whiteness in the postcolonial world" (p. 12). No doubt, Ho would detect in Tinker's appeal to engage with Victorian attitudes to race lines of thought familiar from many of the neo-Victorian texts she examines, namely "the residue of imperialism in current policies of multiculturalism" (p. 12).

Bibliography

Assmann, Aleida. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Arts of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boehm-Schnitker, Nadine and Susanne Gruss. 2011. 'Introduction: Spectacles and Things – Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4:2, Special Issue: *Spectacles and Things: Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism*, 1-23.

Kaplan, Cora. 2007. *Victoriana. Histories, Fictions, Criticism.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Klein, Bernhard. 2002. *Fictions of the Sea: Critical Perspectives on the Ocean in British Literature and Culture*. Aldershot et al.: Ashgate.

Llewellyn, Mark. 2008. 'What Is Neo-Victorian Studies?', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1:1 (Autumn 2008): 164-185.

Mitchell, Kate. 2010. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Houndmills, Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tinker, Hugh. 1972. 'Race & Neo-Victorianism', *Encounter* (April), 47-55.