There Ain’t No Black in (Neo-)Victorianism? Oh Yes, There Is! Review of Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Marlena Tronicke and Julian Wacker (eds.), *Black Neo-Victoriana*

Nadine Boehm-Schnitker
(Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany)

Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Marlena Tronicke and Julian Wacker (eds.), *Black Neo-Victoriana*. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2022.
ISBN: 978-90-04-46914-3 £ 93.00

*****

To call this 2022 edited collection an ‘eye-opener’ is perhaps an unhappy choice of words, because the forms of suppression, denial and exclusion of Black lives in (neo-)Victorian society and culture are, or at least should be, well known by now. Nevertheless, and this seems symptomatic about the topic, an extensive amount of research is still required to make the historical presence of people of colour in Britain widely acknowledged outside of academic (historical) discourses. *Black Neo-Victoriana* is both a marvellous, much needed and entirely convincing contribution to neo-Victorian scholarship and a timely intervention in the field in that it not only brings to light the powerful presence of Black people in the Victorian age, as well as in neo-Victorian Studies and the neo-Victorian project more widely, but also critically intervenes in current neo-Victorian negotiations of Black lives in an array of different media. A case in point might be our current adaptational practices that have become geared to monitoring potential racist discourses in adapted texts and consider whether this ‘original’ racism requires mending in adaptations for present-day audiences. This is particularly pertinent in times in which the *Black Lives Matter* movement has drawn more general attention to systemic inequalities modulated by the category of ‘race’ – a category of difference that, just to make the terminology clear, has no applicability to

Neo-Victorian Studies
14:1 (2021/2022)
pp. 246-260

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269

human beings in the first place but only exists in and through the discourse and practice of racism.

By way of a brief digression, before I turn to the edited collection itself, the cultural discourse about the 2018 ITV-adaptation of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) provides a good example of such adaptational conundrums, revealing how sensitively cultural producers reflect on their adaptational practices nowadays and choose them accordingly. In an interview conducted by Eleanor Bley Griffiths with screenwriter Gwyneth Hughes for RadioTimes.com, Hughes "explains how she handled racism towards the characters of Sam and Miss Swartz" in the adaptation of *Vanity Fair* (Griffiths 2018: n.p.). Hughes argues that entirely expunging the racism exhibited in Thackeray's novel "would have felt to me very cowardly, and a bit rubbish, and not trusting the audience to be grown up about these things" (Hughes in Griffiths 2018: n.p.). While Sambo's name is circumspectly shortened to 'Sam' in the adaptation, the rich heiress Rhoda Swartz retains her patronym, which recalls the German word for 'black', 'schwarz', and thus typologises the character according to a colour-spectrum. What this adaptational practice reveals, however, is a lack of sensitivity to the ways in which Thackeray's novel exhibits its characters' racism for critique and ridicule, thus thwarting any attempts at positioning our present as inevitably more enlightened or politically correct than the Victorian past.

In Chapter 21 of Thackeray's novel, the always ironic heterodiegetic narrator exposes the extent to which the fashioning of Victorian middle and upper-class whiteness[1] depends on money derived from the British empire, and *Vanity Fair* particularly focuses on Asia and Africa as example continents of colonial exploitation. The novel thus wittily exposes the way in which a blind eye is turned to 'race' as long as it facilitates social ascent in terms of class and wealth. This is revealed particularly blatantly with the Osborne family's treatment of Rhoda Swartz:

> 'You'll find us a united, simple, happy, and I think I may say respected family – a plain table, a plain people, but a warm welcome, my dear Miss Rhoda – Rhoda, let me say, for my heart warms to you, it does really. I'm a frank man, and I like you. A glass of champagne! Hicks, champagne to Miss Swartz.' There is little doubt that old Osborne believed all he said, and that the girls were quite earnest in their protestations

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

> of affection for Miss Swartz. People in Vanity Fair fasten on to rich folks quite naturally. If the simplest people are disposed to look not a little kindly on great Prosperity (for I defy any member of the British public to say that the notion of Wealth has not something awful and pleasing to him; and you, if you are told that the man next to you at dinner has got half a million, not to look at him with a certain interest) – if the simple look benevolently on money, how much more do your old worldlings regard it! (Thackeray 2008: 248-249)

The overt narrator does not beat about the bush here; he takes racism head on and exposes the British double standard in dealing with it. In what follows, readers learn that Old Osborne is quick to make marital plans for his son George, who, initially, he wanted to marry Amelia Sedley, before changing his mind when her family becomes impoverished. His son George, in contrast, rejects marrying "'a Hottentot Venus'" (Thackeray 2008: 259), sticks to Amelia and then, ironically, falls in the Napoleonic War. In a similar vein, the Sedley family eschews any ties to the racialised Other as long as sufficient cash flows from the colonies to finance their home and life style. Their son Jos, the Collector of Boggley Wollah, comfortably provides wealth. Nevertheless, his family cannot imagine him marrying a woman of Indian descent and would prefer him marrying the poor but white Becky Sharpe rather than having to envisage "a black Mrs. Sedley, and a dozen of mahogany grandchildren" (Thackeray 2008: 62). Their racist hypocrisy is implicitly ironised here, so that it is problematic to call *Vanity Fair* as a whole a racist novel.

The 2018 adaptation opts for different strategies in exposing racism, for instance a different character configuration in the *mise-en-scène*. It has the Sedleys articulate their views in front of their Black servant Sam rather than in private as in the novel (see James Strong, and Gwyneth Hughes 2018: S. 1, Ep. 1, 0:16:27-40). Hughes comments that the scene was created in this particular way

> [s]o that we the audience are invited to see that horrible, rude, unpleasant, boorish behaviour from the point of view of the black guy who is unnoticed in the corner. It's his scene. And for me, that made that scene really worth having in our show

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

> because it was really about how people like Mr Sedley thought in those days. And sadly today. But we are in the middle of a big old white-dominated classic drama, inviting the audience to step into the black guy's shoes, and I am proud of that scene. (Hughes in Griffiths 2018: n.p.)

What I find interesting about this comment is that in the adapted text, pride is now derived in contradistinction to (Thackeray's) narrative ways of exposing such racism. The actual political correctness is claimed for the adaptation that curiously conflates the Sedleys' comment about people of colour from India with racism directed against the Black servant Sam. Presumably, although this is mere speculation, the latter would experience their racism as a similar insult as the possible Indian wife of Jos Sedley would. However, these strategies only *seemingly* put the adaptation in a more 'enlightened' position than the novel, since this view erases the historically different situations of India as a colonised country and the different colonies in Africa. In other words, the adaptation's general rejection of racism, as laudable as it is, becomes complicit in two problematic strategies: to posit the adapted source text as more problematic than the adaptation, thus creating a historical bias (i.e., the Victorians were racists without knowing it and 'we' at least reflect on it), and to conflate different histories to show that racism is always the same and can be shunned generally, despite the fact that this oddly homogenises the people Othered in this process – the Black servant is conflated with the Indian woman and thus both are bereft of their different identities, geographies, histories and personal situations. Do not get me wrong; my intention is not to engage in a blame game. Rather, what I want to illustrate with this example are the difficulties in contesting the racism enmeshed in our social systems through cultural products of those same systems. Such conundrums reveal once more the timeliness of *Black Neo-Victoriana*.

The collection's introduction is definitely a must-read for anyone who wishes to get an insight into salient historical facts about people of colour in Victorian Britain and into tackling systemic racism in (neo-)Victorian studies. In 'Introduction: Blackness and Neo-Victorian Studies: Re-routing Imaginations of the Nineteenth Century', Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Marlena Tronicke and Julian Wacker concisely summarise their aim in their abstract, arguing that

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

> Black neo-Victoriana have the potentiality to critically intervene in the discourse of neo-Victorianism, which both in its cultural and academic manifestations has at times contributed to the imagination of a white Victorian Britain and a white global nineteenth century even when contesting it. (p. 1)

Neo-Victorian studies are thus at times complicit with systemic racism by failing to emphasise the biographies and histories of Black people in the nineteenth century. Thus, the field unwittingly contributes to creating a myth of a white Victorianism – a myth in Roland Barthes's sense that ideologically erases history from cultural images and thus iconises and eternalises a white-washed Long Nineteenth Century. Historically, however, the period boasts many and manifold Black presences. Correspondingly, the authors argue that

> [i]t is, therefore, important to conceive of these 'lost' voices as strategically obliterated rather than forgotten, an erasure that facilitated the creation of a misleading, homogenising concept of 'the Victorian' as a shorthand for a white Long Nineteenth Century. (p. 3)

Illustrating their findings with reference to the complex narrative structures of neo-Victorian novels such as Sara Collins's *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019), Isaac Julian's 1993 short film *The Attendant* or the Netflix-series *Bridgerton* (2020), they render the problem at the core of *Black Neo-Victoriana* easily accessible and clear for their readers, who may range from students and scholars of literary and cultural studies to a wider audience interested in the discourses of our time.

In their critical literature review, the authors sketch studies from the 1970s onwards and take their cue from Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina's 2003 edited collection *Black Victorians/Black Victoriana*, intending, as they do, to bridge the gap between Victorian and African American studies (see p. 6). One key objective is to monitor and address the problem that "[c]ontemporary neo-Victoriana cannot be separated from the structural suppression of Black British histories in the national imagination" (p. 14). Among the historiographical problems in the field is the comparatively limited historical scope in extant research on Black British people, which focuses mainly on

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

two historical turning points: on the one hand, the time up to the Abolition of slavery in 1833, and, on the other, the aftermaths of the two World Wars. The edited collection strives to broaden this limited perspective, which, I would emphasise, perfectly chimes with neo-Victorianism's focus on historiographic metafiction. Neo-Victorianism must continue to set itself the task of reflecting on such historical exclusions in its own canon of both academic and creative writing. *Black Neo-Victoriana* serves as a highly informative, meticulously researched and formidably compiled starting point for such an endeavour.

The collection's achievement to make Black voices heard, people of colour visible and their presence in and impact on British history graspable prompts a forceful hermeneutic positioning of the editors' gaze that, in fact, could equally well serve as the preface of any academic contribution:

> As privileged, non-Black editors working in the field, it is important for us to seek collaboration, dialogue, and allegiances in joint attempts to widen neo-Victorian studies and shed light on its potential blind spots. In calling this collection *Black Neo-Victoriana*, we neither seek to define nor to fixate what Black neo-Victoriana have constituted in the past, what they are, or what they ought to be. We do not lay claim to the term. Instead, we have largely tried to let the chapters speak for themselves. (p. 24)

With that, the editors and writers of *Black Neo-Victoriana* expertly reflect on their own subject positions in the field, thus also circumnavigating any toxic debates about cultural appropriation. My personal reviewer's gaze – a white, female, precariously employed reviewer's gaze at that – is, in its own right, quite problematically calibrated in its transdifferent coding in which dominant traits such as whiteness overlap and are in tension with the less preferred traits in established dualisms. Hence, in what follows, I opt for the same choice as the editors and will try to let the individual contributions speak for themselves as far as possible.

'Part 1: Black Life Writing and Biofictions' is devoted to "the literary afterlives and re-memberings of Black women and men who lived in Victorian Britain" (p. 21). This part opens with Jesse Ryan Erickson's 'Confessions of a Black Ouidaite: Autoethnographic Neo-Victorianism', thus

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

turning the personal political into a methodological approach in which "personal narrative, episodic memory, experiential recall are drawn upon as sources for hermeneutical interpretation" (p. 34). Reflecting on his profession as an antiquarian, on his passion for books, and his fandom for Ouida, Erickson manages to shed light on possible positionings of 'Black lives' in contexts coded white, while illustrating what subject positions may emerge in such cross-cultural enmeshments – succeeding in a racialised profession associated with 'high' culture while enjoying Ouida's sensational fiction. Embracing "a new dandyism" (p. 51), Erickson entangles different cultural practices in his self-fashioning and reveals how "counterhegemonic" (p. 51) cultural choices may attribute to establishing more viable subject positions in racialised cultures. While Erickson's approach is well situated in personal and general histories of Black lives, the autoethnographic approach nevertheless seems to require further reflections in meta-studies to bring the insights granted by a hermeneutics of the self to full fruition.

In Chapter 2, Susanne Gruss explores the biography of Prince Alemayehu in 'Black, Queer, Victorian? The Precarious Neo-Victorian Afterlives of Prince Alemayehu' and thus takes a different perspective on the topic of biofiction. Here, we are dealing with analyses of literary representations of Prince Alemayehu's story in Elizabeth Laird's historical novel for children entitled *The Prince Who Walked with Lions* (2012) and David Rocklin's *The Night Language* (2017). In contrast to the cultural self-scrutiny in Erickson's autoethnographic approach, Gruss tackles mediations of an individual's historical impact in current neo-Victorian prose, taking into consideration quite different cultural markets with her double focus on children and adult fiction. This also sheds light on the cultural spaces and strategies of remembering, since it is always interesting to monitor which historical topics are passed on to young generations. Gruss discusses three central aspects in her consideration of Prince Alemayehu's marginalised history in Britain. First, she probes the ethics of biofiction and its attempts at speaking *for* a marginalised subject, which may bring hidden discourses to light, but might equally contribute to dispelling the traces of this past, appropriating it all the more from a (white) British perspective. Second, she intends to "explore in how far biofiction (and its pitfalls) might be used to reorient our understanding of black British history by talking back to the whitewashing of British history in fictional form" (p. 57). Finally, she critiques the seamless interconnection of Britain's 1868 Napier expedition

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

with Britain's practices of collecting the precious remains of the now Ethiopian, then Abyssinian culture. This enmeshment of colonisation and culture is scrutinised together with the neo-Victorian ways in which the loot is now exhibited and dealt with in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the afterlives of Sarah Baartman and written by specialist Helen Davies, who has previously published on Baartman in her *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (2015). In her chapter 'We Need to Talk about Sarah Baartman: Black Bodies, White Voices, and the Politics of Neo-Victorian Authorship', she explores the ways in which Baartman is appropriated in two novels situated outside of the prototypical neo-Victorian canon with texts set in Britain in the Victorian era, Diane Awerbuck's *Home Remedies* (2012) and Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Girl/White Girl: A Novel* (2006). Tying in with the editors' hermeneutic self-positioning in their joint introduction, Davies demands that "the politics of authorial identity […] be taken into account when evaluating the ethics of neo-Victorianism at the intersections of ethnicity and gender" (p. 77). So, what is required is both a further reflection on the return of the author in neo-Victorianism and a reflection on narratological decisions with regard to Black characters in neo-Victorian fiction, as well as aspects of their consumption on many different levels. If, according to the rule established by Susan Lanser, narrators are frequently cast in the guise of their authors, do they connive at reproducing systemic inequalities by choosing white narrators speaking *for* their Black subjects? The ethics of production, narration and consumption must come under heightened scrutiny in narrative situations across the colour-spectrum in order that these processes do not reinscribe and reiterate problematic racialisations and their concomitant voyeurism, condoned by sensation-seeking forms of consumption. In Diane Awerbuck's *Home Remedies* (2002), for instance, the stereotypical power hierarchies between Black and white women seem to be reversed when the white Joanna is employed and later dismissed by the Black Viola, a successful academic and specialist on Baartman. However, in an exacerbating and increasingly personal conflict between the two women over who 'owns' "Sarah's life, body, and memory" (p. 85), Viola is finally shown to devour Baartman's labia, consuming literally what others consumed voyeuristically or symbolically. Davies reads Viola as appropriating the cannibalism associated with Khoekhoen people and shows how this racist prejudice is transferred to the initially 'civilised' academic Viola. The novel

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

thus reiterates problematic stereotypes that it offers up for consumption once more, a consumption that, voyeuristically, centres on a Black woman's sexualised 'cannibalism' of Baartman, as Davies makes clear.

Marlena Tronicke's '"A 'Natural Tint'": *Red Velvet* and the Archive of Black Victorian Theatre' concludes Part 1 and deals with Lolita Chakrabarti's neo-Victorian play *Red Velvet* (2012) and its politics of casting. Tronicke argues that "*Red Velvet* lays open the discrete mechanisms of nineteenth-century attempts at disguising Black Britishness" and, indeed, does so "to an extent that it is barely recognisable, and hence erased from the conceptual archive of Victorian theatre history and cultural memory at large" (p. 109). Furthermore, she shows how British archives tend to obliterate the memory of the Black actor Ira Aldridge, whose great success was more easily acknowledged outside of the confines of Victorian London. Tronicke thus contributes a further perspective on biographical fictions, expanding the collection's scope to include theatre history.

Part 2, entitled 'Black Victorians on Screen: Politics, Ethics, Protests', continues with these different medial perspectives and explores Black neo-Victoriana in film and television. With that move, the collection also contributes to further establishing screen productions as neo-Victorian media, considering that these were long excluded or considered secondary to the novel in the field (see Whelehan 2012: 288-289). Part 2 opens with U. Melissa Anyiwo's '"For All the Blood We Share, for All the Miles We Have Walked… We Are Not the Same": Revealing an Intolerant Past in Showtime's *Penny Dreadful*', which tackles a by now highly canonised neo-Victorian television series. Emphasising "that the inclusion of non-white characters" in the show need not indicate either equality or any form of revisionism, Anyiwo reveals the problematic politics of casting and representation, which reveal that, ultimately, "*Penny Dreadful* recasts the idea that black and brown peoples are born inferior and even when they are not, their cultural norms train them to be that way" (p. 134). Once more, it becomes evident that the neo-Victorian project may, in its very adaptational relationship to the Victorian age, reiterate and solidify racial exclusions, upholding Victorian value systems and racialisations.[2] Focusing on mixed-race characters such as Dr Jekyll or John Clare, Frankenstein's creature in *Penny Dreadful*, Anyiwo argues that their perceived 'monstrosity' derives from their racial hybridity in a series that still posits whiteness as a norm. This important criticism of the series might have been thrown into even clearer

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

relief by comparison with *Carnival Row* (2019-2023), for instance. The series reflects on racism in many different ways and features Black characters that resist easy ascriptions, even though it is based on a strongly racialised society across a spectrum of humans and fantasy creatures. In particular, I am thinking of the faun Agreus Astrayon (David Gyasi), who challenges racialised hierarchies on the basis of his enormous wealth. Despite his 'inferior' racialised status as a faun in the fictional society of The Burgue, he is granted access to the upper echelons of society when the impoverished Lady Imogen Spurnrose falls in love with him – a social ascent quite reminiscent of *Vanity Fair* and its ironies of overlapping categories of difference.

In 'Three Lady Macbeths and a Critique of Imperialism', Antonija Primorac continues the critical evaluation of at times unwitting racial exclusions in the field of film adaptation. She analyses representations of Lady Macbeth that, at first glance, do not strike one as particularly Victorian; hence Primorac is quick to elaborate on the precise neo-Victorian import of her focus point: William Oldroyd's appropriation entitled *Lady Macbeth* (2016) "performs a neo-Victorian re-appropriation of Shakespeare's notorious villainess through a cultural translation" of Nikolai Leskov's novella *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1865) "into a mid-Victorian narrative, set in North-East England" (p. 144). Thus, Primorac tackles adaptational practices in a transnational context and discusses the politics of so-called 'colour-blind' casting as a seemingly meritocratic strategy to find the best actors and actresses for a role irrespective of ethnic backgrounds. Besides, she deals with period drama, a genre that was until recently dominated "by whitewashed depictions of Britain's imperial past" (p. 146). What becomes painfully clear is that the ideal of colour-blind – or what Primorac more aptly terms "integrated" (p. 145) – casting may cause new racialised inscriptions and exclusions whether this is intended or not when actors of colour are cast for roles that show them as marginalised or supressed characters, as in the case of Anna (see p. 155). Primorac shows convincingly how, akin to the symbolically 'blackened' Bertha Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), a character, newly encoded as Black through colour-blind casting-choices, becomes sacrificed to allow for a more powerful subject position of a white female character in the adaptation. Female success stories along the lines of the *Bildungsroman* remain dependent on sacrificing the 'Other' woman in period drama. Such problematic intersections of race,

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

gender, and class pose interpretive and ethical problems: not only are they colour-blind but also blind for the interpretive consequences of their casting choices in societies that are largely not colour-blind but still racialised as well as patriarchal – this all despite the fact that such films consider themselves post-imperial, post-feminist *and* post-racial. The article closes with an important plea for monitoring such continuing inequalities that remain operative in our time as surrogations of Victorian value systems within today's adaptational practices.

In '*The Birth of a Nation*, Transatlantic Encounters, and African Americans as "Global" Neo-Victorians', Lewis Mondal explores the mnemonic strategies that keep Nat Turner's 1831 slave-rebellion in Virginia in our cultural memory in a theoretical network connecting Edward Said, Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey and Sara Ahmed, among others. He analyses William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and Nate Parker's period drama film *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), both of which re-imagine the uprising. Continuing Primorac's interest in adaptation, Mondal also zooms in on an "ethical myopia" in adaptational practices (p. 166), focusing, as he does, on the genre of the neo-slave narrative. He further expands this focus with a view to processes of globalisation in neo-Victorianism and discusses both the pitfalls of a neo-imperial impetus of a global neo-Victorianism as well as the conditions under which "African Americans *are* the global Victorians that current critical neo-Victorian debates are alluding to" (p. 183).

The final part of the edited collection tackles 'Material Remains, Refashionings, and Reconstructions', and Maria Weilandt opens this section with her analysis of Yinka Shonibare's fashion art. In 'The Black Dandy and Neo-Victorianism: Re-fashioning a Stereotype', she considers the racialisations of the dandy's presumed White masculinity that glosses over the fact that, historically, there is ample evidence of Black dandyism, as exemplified by Julius Soubise, George Walker or others (see p. 193). Exploring Shonibare's *Dorian Gray* (2001) among *The Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) and *Big Boy* (2002), Weilandt reveals how Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) is appropriated via different medialisations in Shonibare's photographs to show that "[d]espite his wealthy status and his fashionable appearance, the Black body is racialised and confined to the position of the Other" (p. 196). The adapted text's painting is turned into mirror images by Sonibare that reflect how strongly viable subject positions are racialised, turning the Black dandy into the 'monstrous' Other of the white

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

stereotype. Additionally, Weilandt expands on the very materiality of fashion and the transnational journeys and colonial appropriations of fabrics that define Shonibare's critical art form.

In 'Steamfunk: Remembering Black Futures in Nisi Shawl's *Everfair*', Judith Rahn and Iolonda Ramos move from fashion and fashion theory to "the genre of steamfunk [that] centres on visionary potentials that reside in Blackness and which bring about changed historical worlds" with a view to "bridg[ing] the gap between traditional binary notions of race, class, gender, and the worthiness of human life" (p. 214). Evoking alternate steamfunk pasts and realities, the novel *Everfair* employs forms of re-mapping to re-create spaces, particularly the Congo after the Congo Conference (1884-1885) in Berlin. In its character construction, the novel reflects on the cultural significance of prosthetics in order to criticise colonial practices of punishment, for instance on rubber plantations where loss of limb was a common chastisement for perceived under-productivity. Adding queer desire into the mix by having the main character, Lisette Toutournier, fall in love with her polyamorous lover's wife Daisy, Shawl's novel not only challenges binaries but positively envisions an Afro-futurist ideal. What is striking, however, is the lack of attention to the environmental destruction entailed in colonialism in a genre that derives its name from steam power – a central energy source of the Industrial Revolution.

With 'Country Houses, Slavery, and the Victorians: Reinterpreting Heritage Sites', Corinne Fowler zooms in on a highly contested field, namely the problematic legacies of country houses, their relations to slave labour and the British slave trade, and the function of organisations such as the National Trust and Britain's heritage industry more widely. While the colonial origins of nineteenth-century British prosperity are not only a concern of many Victorian texts, *Vanity Fair* being a case in point, they should be an obvious concern of historians. However, it is unnerving as well as surprising how many vitriolic responses research into such colonial legacies provokes. Fowler lists examples such as the one by TheTruth Hurts1963, complaining "Here we go again, knock our history etc! When will it end?", or by Say_ithowitis, who'd prefer to gloss over the past with ""why can't we just have a good day out?" (p. 242). Researchers too must nowadays face comparable attacks when they make such histories more widely accessible. This, once more, reveals the importance of *Black Neo-Victoriana* while it also bespeaks the warring ideologies backing up notions of 'Britishness' or even

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

'Englishness' in public discourse. Fowler singles out Speke Hall near Liverpool that "provides a typical example of the ways in which slavery's legacies have been rendered invisible to us today" (p. 232). Richard Watt I, she outlines, purchased the Tudor property in 1795 with money made in the slave trade. Bequeathing the property to his great nephew and his descendants, the origins of wealth receded further and further into a nebulous past and the property served as a seemingly innocent façade for its owners' gentlemanly self-fashioning. Having illuminated how the Victorians contributed to a historiography that forgets its less palatable past, Fowler goes on to analyse not only material objects, but also series such as *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) that whitewash the ways in which country houses were upheld and cared for, and the public responses to her own research. The latter also illustrate the ways in which the history of the British Empire is taught at schools, namely as a largely benevolent history that, for many people, appears to be sullied by research into that which is excluded from whitewashed cultural memory. Fowler's article forms a substantial contribution to *Black Neo-Victoriana* and should serve as important reading in future classes on the legacies of British slavery in both history and English studies.

The edited collection is rounded off by Jennifer DeVere Brody's 'Afterword: Beyond *Bridgerton*: Blackness and Neo-Victoriana'. Tying in with Erickson's auto-ethnographic scrutiny of his own profession, biography and cultural predilections, deVere Brody negotiates her own academic career in Victorian Studies as a Black scholar with contemporary developments in the field. Taking her cue from *Bridgerton*'s "obscuring [of] so many colonial questions" (p. 252), she analyses the socio-political situation in the 1990s when she was hired in a context of postcolonial research and strangely became both its object and its subject. Her biography uncovers the discursive formations that either enable or disable careers, but it also shows the ways in which her object choice is calibrated by the socially constructed chessboard of viable subject positions. Finally, she points towards our current options of "redrawing the boundaries – spatiotemporal, geopolitical, generic, and otherwise – of (neo-)Victorian Studies" (p. 256), thus both situating *Black Neo-Victoriana* in its current but also in its future contexts, underlining the importance of the edited collection as a whole.

Bringing together research ranging from literary and cultural studies, film and media studies, fashion studies, material culture studies, history and gender studies (though this is hardly a complete list), *Black Neo-Victoriana*

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

proves a treasure trove for anyone interested in the presence and impact of people of colour in British history and culture. One topic that is slightly underrepresented might be due to the editors' ethical endeavour to recover the "'lost' voices" of Black Victorians that were "strategically obliterated" in (neo-)Victorian Studies so far (p. 3): Black complicity. While white complicity is addressed several times, the topic of Black complicity recedes to the background even though it is widely dealt with in current neo-slave narratives for instance. This imbalance, however, does not detract a jot from this well-rounded edited collection. Versatile in theory, the individual contributions run the gamut of neo-Victorian studies and offer a plethora of innovative insights into the field. Interesting for student and scholar alike, *Black Neo-Victoriana* is a must-read for any (neo-)Victorianist. I suspect that it will change the ways 'we' can think of the Victorian age and how 'we' do neo-Victorian research.

Notes

1. Bearing in mind current discourses about decolonisation and the privileging of whiteness, I use lower case for 'white' (and related terms) in contrast to 'Black'.
2. In this article in particular, but also in the collection as a whole, several mistakes have slipped the editors' notice during copy editing. The more jarring oversights include 'Hong Kong' misspelled as 'Honk Kong' on the series' title page, 'Athanaeum' instead of 'Athenæum' (p. 104), and 'Carlisle' instead of 'Carlyle's' (p. 138). While this is not a primary concern for such a substantial contribution to neo-Victorian research, it is nonetheless worth noting with a view to an eventual second edition.

Bibliography

Griffiths, Eleanor Bley. 2018. 'Concealing Vanity Fair racism would have been "cowardly" says screenwriter', RadioTimes.com, 28 September, https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/vanity-fair-itv-racism-sam-servant-miss-swartz/ (accessed 10 January 2023).

Richardson, Rebecca. 2020. 'Adapting Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* after #MeToo', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 16:2, n.p., http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue162/richardson.html (accessed 28 December 2022).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND

Strong, James (dir.) and Gwyneth Hughes (wr.). 2018. *Vanity Fair*. Perf. Michael Palin, Olivia Cooke, Tom Bateman. ITV. [Amazon Prime Video]

Thackeray, William Makepeace. 2008. *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero* [1847]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whelehan, Imelda. 2012. 'Neo-Victorian Adaptations', in Cartmell, Deborah (ed.), *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*. Malden, Masachussetts & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 272-292.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7768269
CC BY-NC-ND