

Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire.

Elizabeth Ho. New York: Continuum, 2012. 240pp. ISBN 978-1-4411-6155-0.

In *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*, Elizabeth Ho explores a range of neo-Victorian texts to show how the return to the Victorian is a means of rethinking postcolonial politics and experience in the wake of the British Empire's dissolution. She turns to texts set in post-imperial Britain, the former settler colonies of Australia and Canada, the "last" colony of Hong Kong, and locations such as Japan and China to argue that the nineteenth-century British past cannot be thought of separately from neo-imperial presents and futures since "the experience of empire and after...informs our national, cultural and political identities" (7). Ho situates neo-Victorianism within a postcolonial agenda rather than a more conventional postmodern understanding to reveal how neo-Victorian texts "supplement and enhance post-colonial theory as a memorial practice at a time when our geopolitical conditions call for new ways of engaging with history" (8).

In Chapter 1, "Neo-Victorianism and 'Ripperature': Alan Moore's *From Hell*", Ho examines how visual genres like graphic novels manipulate temporality and sequentiality. Moore's *From Hell: A Melodrama in Sixteen Parts* (1988-98) "illustrates how the graphic novel and its ability to hold text and image, past and present, in critical tension becomes a privileged form to address the potentialities and anxieties in the shifts in temporality that neo-Victorianism requires" (27). Moore's graphic novel is also situated within the larger contexts of Ripperature such as Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell*, *Scarlet Tracings* (1987) and Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) – part of a proliferation of Ripperature and "Ripperology" (theories about Jack the Ripper's identity) that appeared at the same time as the discourses of Thatcherism and Blairism. These discourses were attempts to reinvigorate Britain's centrality in the globalised world and to reinstate Englishness at home, and were mirrored by the arc of Ripperature's popularity.

In the second chapter, "Neo-Victorianism Down Under: Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*", Ho turns to Australia as she examines Carey's revision of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and the portrayal of the convict Magwitch. *Jack Maggs* (1997) is Carey's attempt to "recover...and recover *from* the stigma of convict ancestry" (55). His decision to define convictism as the "foundational moment" (57) of Australian national identity is at odds with growing uncertainty in the 1990s about Anglo-Australian identity highlighted by a series of political events such as Paul Keating's "Redfern Address" in 1992. The legacies of empire appearing in the text are connected to the "White Australia" policy enshrined in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, whose standards of racial purity continue to "traumatize the present" (57). Carey's neo-Victorian narrative offers a version of "old" Australia that "envisions an Australia based on citizenship, membership and mutual recognition" (58). Citizenship in this case can transcend the idea of nation, but can also contain the multiple meanings of being Australian.

In Chapter 3, "Neo-Victorianism South of Nowhere: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*", Ho uses another example of a criminal character to explore the white settler colony of Canada. In *Alias Grace* (1996), the Victorian "is deployed...to make visible the origins" (81) of Anglo-Canadian identity. The novel "rewrites the foundational story of the Dominion of Canada in 1867 as the moment when Englishness and white Europeanness became the unquestioned, natural, inevitable outcome" (82). Drawing on Richard Dyer's *White* (1997) to explore the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position, Ho situates the novel's publication within the context of the Quebec separatist agenda. Neo-Victorianism in the novel helps reveal the

nineteenth-century racial policies within the project of contesting the invisibility of whiteness within Canadian multiculturalism.

Chapter 4, “‘Far-Flung’ Neo-Victorianism: Hong Kong and Jackie Chan’s Neo-Victorian Films” explores the “curious” (113) presence of neo-Victorianism in Hong Kong, a city shaped by both British and Chinese imperial discourses. After its reunification with China in 1997, Hong Kong became a “postcolonial anomaly, a territory neither decolonized nor emancipated by the exiting colonial power but simply ‘handed over’ to another imperial entity” (113). In contrast to the earlier examples of Canada and Australia, Hong Kong does not seek the Victorian to address questions of colonial dispossession or racial identity. Instead the Victorian is reconceptualised within a global context. Drawing on the neo-Victorian movies of Jackie Chan – *Project A* (1983), *Shanghai Noon* (2000), and *Shanghai Knights* (2005) – Ho recovers Hong Kong’s “history of immigration and diaspora and revises the memory of the Victorian in the present as one of transit, movement and expansion rather than a specifically imperial history rooted in geography and sovereignty” (116). These films, she argues, show how neo-Victorianism makes visible the attributes of temporal anachronism, inauthenticity, incompleteness and escapism, and make them available for global consumption.

Chapter 5, “Neo-Victorianism and Science Fiction: ‘Steampunk’” discusses another of Jackie Chan’s neo-Victorian films, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (2004), because it “significantly complicates neo-Victorianism’s generic boundaries and appropriative strategies” (141). By considering this film within conceptions of the steampunk genre, Ho then draws upon two well-established examples of neo-Victorian science fiction, *The Difference Engine* (1991) by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling and *The Diamond Age or, A Young Lady’s Illustrated Primer* (1995) by Neal Stephenson, to examine the “(neo)-‘Victoriantalist’ anxieties of their imagined geographies” (144). She concludes with Otomo Katsuhiro’s anime film *Steamboy* (2004) as it complicates the earlier Western “Victoriantalist” examples. By bringing together steampunk and neo-Victorianism, race can be entangled with technology, and people and places are understood within processes of globalisation and neo-imperialism.

In the final chapter, “The Neo-Victorian-at-Sea: Toward a Global Memory of the Victorian”, Ho explores the sea as a “metaphorical and real space of globalization” (173). The sea offers a more liquid, less fixed space in which to examine the implications of empire. She reads Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* (2000) and Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008) as texts that transform the Victorian into a memory of the voyage between cultures and peoples. In the concluding discussion of China Miéville’s *The Scar* (2002) and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), she asserts that they reflect a commitment to a “global, deterritorialized” (189) neo-Victorianism.

This monograph is a welcome addition to neo-Victorian studies, and should be of interest to scholars of postcolonial, postmodern, and neo-Victorian literature. By drawing on a range of texts, Ho interrogates and challenges traditional definitions of the genre. She wonders whether neo-Victorian studies and texts can embrace a new paradigm that will do more than simply repeat past imperial conquests. Her answer, in clear, concise writing, suggests that there remains more work to be done to explore the shifting meaning of neo-Victorianism in constructing our understanding of empire.

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