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SEMINAR 47:NEO-VICTORIAN BIOFICTION

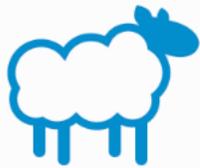
Convenors: Maria Isabel Romero-Ruiz (University of Málaga, Spain) and Helen Davies (University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom)

In Juliette Atkinson's terms, the Victorian era was 'the Age of Biography' and so it is apt that neo-Victorian literature and culture are also preoccupied with reimagining the lives of nineteenth-century subjects. The term biofiction is key here: the genre is characterised by the blurring of boundaries between historiography and literature, fact and fiction, traits that are particularly suited to neo-Victorianism's interest in challenging the master discourse of the traditional historical record. 'Eminent Victorians' might be fictionalised to emphasise their indiscretions, making conspicuous the power inequalities of history. Marginalised Victorians are brought to the fore and provided with a narrative agency that was denied in their cultural moment. However, as extant scholarship has demonstrated, ethical quandaries loom large in the arena of neo-Victorian biofiction.

We welcome paper proposals that deal with any aspect of neo-Victorian biofiction in texts, neo-Victorian media and visual representations. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Neo-Victorian 'celebrity' biofiction
- Biofiction of nineteenth-century 'others'
- The ethics and/or politics of neo-Victorian biofiction
- Narratology in neo-Victorian biofiction
- Neo-Victorian biofiction and historiography
- Contemporary biofiction, LGBTQIA+ studies, and nineteenth-century identities
- (Critical) Race studies and biofiction based on the nineteenth century
- Neo-Victorian biofiction and fresh critical perspectives: ageing, disability, diaspora, indigeneity, cosmopolitanism, (trans)nationalism/s, animal studies, ecocriticism, etc.

ACADEMIC PROGRAMME



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PANEL 1

Dietmar Böhnke, Diversifying Victorian Lives in Contemporary Television: The Case of Anne Lister in the BBC Series *Gentleman Jack* (2019-22) – in person

Television representations of Victorian characters have become increasingly visible in contemporary series (e.g. *Ripper Street*, *Dickensian*, *Penny Dreadful*, *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, *The Luminaries* etc.) and in neo-Victorian research recently. Among these, several can be discussed as biopics (e.g. *Victoria*, *Arthur and George*) and offer themselves for analysis as neo-Victorian biofictions. Together with the trend of representing LGBTQ+ lives and characters (cf. some of the above series, also *Fingersmith*, *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*), there is an opportunity here to investigate the complexity and diversity of Victorian biographies on screen, and to challenge the more stereotypical notions of identities in the nineteenth century. In this paper, I will look at the BBC series *Gentleman Jack*, written and created by Sally Wainwright, which is based on the life and diaries of Anne Lister (1791-1840), one of the first lesbian/queer women recorded in British history. I will be interested both in her highly unusual negotiation of gender and sexuality in the (pre-/early) Victorian period and in the way the series represents and reworks this in and for the present, highlighting in particular the intersection of class, gender, age, religion and region. While there is a clear emphasis on the authenticity of recreating Lister's life, in line with more traditional heritage television, there are also quite a few elements that problematize and undermine the easy division between fact and fiction, not least Lister's fourth-wall-breaking comments directly to the camera.

Chandrava Chakravarty and Sneha Kar Chaudhuri, Neo-Victorian Feminist Biofiction and Colonial Historiography in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* (2021) – in person

This paper will explore the critical dimensions of race, gender and history in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* (2021) – a neo-Victorian biofiction based on the life and times of Maharani Jindan Kaur (1817-1846). The novel brings the story of her life to the forefront focusing on her obscure childhood as the daughter of the royal kennel keeper Manna Singh Aulakh, an obscure commoner and how she gradually took centre stage during the early nineteenth century British annexation of Punjab as a strong and fierce queen who dominated the political scene in Punjab and as a female 'other' resisted and appropriated the British imperial design of the annexation of Punjab.

This paper will critically engage with two major aspects of this biofiction – a) how this novel critically engages with the history of colonial Punjab during the era of Victorian imperialism and establishes the unique significance of Rani Jindan Kaur b) how this biofiction written in the twenty first century offers a feminist celebration and historical revival of women's political ambition and power through the narrative of the Rani's struggle as a female subject against class bias in politics, patriarchal dominance and imperial power-mongering in nineteenth century colonial India. The novel makes effective use of extant historical sources to historically re-construct the life of a woman from the royal family of Punjab and projects her as a neo-Victorian colonial and historical icon of female power, agency and resistance who effectively negotiated the dichotomies of the public versus private spheres in Victorian India.

Helen Davies, Auto Biofiction and Otto Baxter's *The Puppet Asylum* (2023): Narrating Down syndrome in Neo-Victorianism (in person)

Of all the ‘others’ of the nineteenth century, the voices of people with Down syndrome are some of the most difficult to find in historical sources dating from this era. As with so many disabled lives of past times – and even today – the historical narrative of people with Down syndrome has been controlled and defined by nondisabled medical practitioners.⁶ In this sense, neo-Victorian biofiction would seem well-placed to challenge the ableist omissions and oppressions of traditional historiography. However, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben have argued, there are ‘ethical risks of re-voicing in the case of historically marginalised subjects’.⁷ Neo-Victorian authors might be accused of exploiting the misery of vulnerable nineteenth-century identities – real and imagined – for entertainment or commercial success.

This paper explores the ways in which Otto Baxter’s film *The Puppet Asylum* (2023) offers an alternative approach to recovering lost Victorian voices. Baxter is a director, writer and actor with Down syndrome, and *The Puppet Asylum* is a comedy horror musical set in the Victorian era but also drawing on details of his own life. I argue that Baxter’s *auto* biofiction offers viewers an invaluable opportunity to consider the enduring significance of Victorian attitudes towards Down syndrome in today’s society. In what ways might *The Puppet Asylum* also complicate the ethics of neo-Victorian biofiction?

PANEL 2

Barbara Braid: Self-reflexivity in neo-Victorian screen biofiction – in person

Ann Heilmann’s and Mark Llewellyn’s understanding of neo-Victorianism as “texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) [which] must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (2010: 4) marks self-reflexivity as a defining factor that distinguishes neo-Victorianism from historical fiction. Since then, this definition has been critiqued and revised; for instance, Jessica Cox notes that it privileges literary fiction at the exclusion of popular culture, which, she claims, “is less likely to engage with metatextual strategies” (2019: 5). While I agree with Cox on the hegemony of the literary fiction in the neo-Victorian field, I argue that popular neo-Victorianism may also engage with revision and self-reflexivity while using the conventions and aesthetics of popular genres and media. Nowhere is it more evident than in neo-Victorian biofiction – the study of which, similarly to neo-Victorian field, is also dominated by an examination of “serious” literature and biopic. Yet, I would like to contend that biofiction is not simply another term for biographical novel or film, but its own mode, defined – among other things – by its self-reflexivity. Popular biofictions in particular utilize a range of metatextual techniques, related to the genre or convention which they (often ironically) comment on and/or transgress, or to the medium in which they are created. The proposed paper looks at a selection of screen texts which evidence how popular biofiction interrogates the issues of (post)authenticity, temporality, cultural memory and historical legacy – so crucial to neo-Victorian biofiction as a narrative mode.

Liani Lochner, Mediated Autobiography and the Nineteenth Century’s ‘Others’ in Zoë Wicomb’s *Still Life* (in person)

In Zoë Wicomb’s *Still Life*, an unnamed author attempts a biography of the so-called Father of South African Poetry in English, the Scottish abolitionist Thomas Pringle. Embedded within this frame-

⁶ See, for example, John Langdon Down, *On Some of the Mental Afflictions of Childhood and Youth*. London: J&A Churchill, 1887.

⁷ Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, ‘Taking Biofictional Liberties: Tactical Games and Gambits with Nineteenth-Century Lives’. In (eds) Kohlke and Gutleben, *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*. Leiden: Brill, 2020, pp. 1-53; p. 22.

story are the narratives of two figures whose lives entered the historical record mediated through his literary endeavours: Hinza Marossi, the young Tswana boy adopted by Pringle who is also the subject of his poem, “Bechuana Boy,” and Mary Prince, whose slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*, he edited. Bringing together in the unidentified amanuensis’s “house of fiction” (10) a number of voices “born out of writing” (53), who strain against their historical or literary “eternal life” (8) and the interventions of “so-called clever readers” (55), *Still Life* sharply brings into focus a long-standing concern in Wicomb’s literary and critical oeuvre: the remainders produced by dominant notions of narrative authority and the discursive and institutional networks in which narratives circulate. The presence of Nicholas Green, lifted from Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, “a playful version of Vita Sackville-West’s life-story” (Raitt and Blyth), permits the amanuensis to absent the text and the characters of Hinza and Mary to engage with colonial-era ideas of patriarchy and authorship. It also asks us to read *Still Life* as a reinvention of the genre of biography. Examining Wicomb’s ironic subversions of and inter-generic negotiations with the conventions of mediated autobiography, this paper argues that *Still Life* rejects historical fiction’s demands for verisimilitude to interrogate the literary and discursive personas fixed by colonial history and the literary canon.

Ulla Ratheiser, Bringing out the woman: biopics of Queen Victoria (in person)

This paper delineates how recent biopics of Queen Victoria, as a sub-genre of neo-Victorian biofiction, foreground the experiences of the (private) woman rather than that of the (public) monarch in an attempt to humanise not only the 19th century queen but also the institution of the monarchy then and now. Filmic representations such as *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) or the ITV series *Victoria* (2016-2019) achieve this by a variety of techniques, on the narrative as well as the visual level, such as focusing on representations of the queen’s body or establishing a dichotomy between dutifully serving the soulless political institution of the crown and Victoria’s personal wishes and desires.

In so doing, both filmic portraits tap into a discourse that has been prevalent concerning the representations of a queen regnant and the “anomaly” of a woman on the throne.⁸ One way of solving this anomaly seemed to be the conceptual splitting of the body of the queen into a natural one, that of the woman, and a political one, that of the monarch. The division into a “natural” and a “political” component allows both biopics to equip Queen Victoria with a personal dimension and thus a distinctly humane quality. This humanity in a monarch, in turn, certainly seems a feature worth highlighting around the time of Queen Elizabeth’s II Sapphire Jubilee in 2017.

Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz, ‘Life is the Falling Moment’ Captured by a Camera: Neo-Victorian Biofiction, Class and Gender in Helen Humphreys’ *Afterimage* (2000) – in person

This article will consider neo-Victorian biofiction as a genre which allows authors to imagine the lives of Victorian popular figures and convey their own ideas about life and society. My aim is to demonstrate how Helen Humphreys’ *Afterimage* (2000) recovers the life of the Victorian photographer Julia Cameron to develop or even invent the negative aspects of her personality such as her lack of empathy for her social inferiors or her lesbian identity. However, some of the characters are given voice in the narrative, especially in the case of the servant Annie Phelan. At the same time, it is my aim to prove how photography, that is, art within the novel, can be a very convenient medium to show images “from life” -- as Julia Cameron called her photographs -- to the reader, and to question social mores through literary and visual archives.

KEY WORDS: neo-Victorian, biofiction, Julia Cameron, social issues, lesbian identity

⁸ Marjorie Garber. *Shakespeare After All*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005, 216.