# Dark (neo)Victorians: Race and the Empire in Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* and Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus*

Juan José Martín González, Universidad de Málaga

**Abstract:** This paper provides a close reading on the neo-Victorian novels Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) and Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2004). Aimed at providing a more hybrid perspective on Victorian Age, these neo-Victorian texts adopt a postcolonial stance in their historical reconstruction of black subjects in Victorian England. Additionally, I will evince how these novels complement recent historical perspectives into 'black' European history and operate as vehicles to illustrate the latest criticisms on postcolonial thought.

**Keywords:** neo-Victorianism, race, empire, Belinda Starling, Barbara Chase-Riboud.

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## 1. Introduction

Interrogations on race and the legacy of Victorian imperialism feature as one of the key lines within neo-Victorian fiction and criticism. Not in vain, race and imperial issues were already prominent in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), one of the earliest neo-Victorian novels and generally considered a foundational text in the phenomenon of neo-Victorianism. The point of departure of my paper is ascertaining the extent to which neo-Victorian fiction accounts for the experiences of 'dark' subjects in Victorian England and Europe by analysing two neo-Victorian novels, namely Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2004) and Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007), and how this 'dark' neo-Victorianism complements explorations into colonial history and postcolonial thought.

Regarding Margaret Thatcher's so-called appeal to Victorian values, Salman Rushdie claimed that "the continuing decline, the growing poverty and the meanness of spirit of much of Thatcherite Britain encourages many Britons to turn their eyes nostalgically to the lost hour of their precedence. The recrudescence of imperialist ideology and the popularity of Raj fictions put one in mind of the phantom twitchings of an amputated limb" (Rushdie 1992, 91-92). Rushdie points out here that Britain nostalgically appeals to Victorianism and the heydays of British Imperialism as a safety valve in times of social unrest. I suggest, however, that neo-Victorian Imperial fiction writes back against the Empire by recovering lost voices and endowing colonial subjects with agency and resistance whereas, simultaneously, it atones for the violent traces left in decolonised countries.

Regarding the relation between Victorian literature and the empire, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claims that "it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism… was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (Spivak 1985, 343). This assertion reverberates in neo-Victorian criticism, and accordingly we can argue that the memory of the Victorian age is almost inescapably intertwined with the memory of the empire.

As I will illustrate in what follows, the novels under analysis in this paper provide imaginative acts of historical recovery which coalesce with historical reconstructions on the presence of black citizens in Victorian Britain, which according to Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, feature as "a gap… in the scholarship of black Britain, one that leaped from the thousands of black inhabitants of eighteenth century Britain to the two migrations of black people into Britain during World War I and directly following World War II" (Holbrook Gerzina 2003, 2).

## 2. Barbara Chase Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2004)

Interrogations on race and the legacy of Victorian imperialism and ethnography provide the main focus for Barbara Chase-Riboud's neo-slave narrative *Hottentot Venus* (2004). This neo-Victorian novel provides a fictional account of the real historical figure of Sara Baartman, an African woman belonging to the indigenous tribe of the Khoikhoi who was taken under doubtful circumstances to Europe and was exhibited in freak shows all over Britain and France during the Napoleonic period. After her death in 1815, Sara was dissected by the French anatomist Georges Cuvier, and her body was exhibited in the Parisian Museum of Natural History well into the nineteenth century, until she was finally expatriated to South Africa in 2002. Chase-Riboud's novel counts among many other attempts to reconstruct the fragmented persona of the historical Sara Baartman, whose documentary evidence is limited to her baptism

and death certificates, newspapers advertising her freak shows and pseudo-scientific writings by nineteenth-century anatomists.

On a superficial level, *Hottentot Venus* seems to illustrate colonial history in terms of the simplistic dichotomy colonizer/colonized inherited from Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. The Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon in particular researched thoroughly the psychopathological features of colonisation and his words are revealing: "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (Fanon 1986, 12). Patrick Brantlinger, following other postcolonial scholars, puts it in a more illustrative way and he talks about a Prospero complex and a dependency complex by which, respectively, Europeans want to dominate and the colonized want to be dominated (Brantlinger 2011, 16). Sara seems to exhibit this dependency complex when she narrates how she is hung in a suspended cage as a wild animal and she is cheered and insulted by the audience: "Why I really endured it, I do not know. Just as I didn't know why I still remained inert and lifeless in my bath when the door to escape was open" (Chase-Riboud 2004, 9). Similarly, after her aunt sells her to a British missionary, the Reverend Cecil Freehouseland, she claims that "I was always ready when he wanted me and endeavoured to convince him by every action, every glance that my goal was to serve him as a daughter and a slave" (Chase-Riboud 2004, 18).

Nevertheless, Sara Baartman's voice is also endowed with agency and resistance, a fact which problematizes the role of the racial other as nonchalantly complicit with her own subaltern position. Sara endorses an anti-imperialist role when she claims: "Just because I consent to this life doesn't mean I chose it… I'm not a slave… I'm a free woman" (Chase-Riboud 2004, 134). In this sense, Chase-Riboud is imaginatively reconstructing Sara's voice to channel concerns which are deeply rooted in the post-colonial agenda. Indeed, "even the 'real' Baartman is largely a product of the imagination" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 121). Chase-Riboud's reconstruction of Sara's identity, even if it has been criticized as artificial (Gordon-Chipembere 2006, 54), constitutes an ethical and noble attempt to unearth the underbelly of colonial history from the point of view of the oppressed.

Chase-Riboud's most picturesque attempt to recover Sara's voice occurs after she has died, just when the anatomist Cuvier is vivisecting her corpse in front of a scientific audience and her own disembodied voice pledges to take revenge on those who exploited her: "No one will have peace, neither Africa nor Europe… neither science nor faith, and no white man, neither dead nor alive" (Chase-Riboud 2004: 285). The sections of the novel occurring during the 1860s are narrated equally by Sara, whose brain and sexual organs lie dismembered in jars on display in the French Academy of Sciences. Sara's ghostly voice comments contemptuously on the rise of racial sciences which sprang up during the second half of the nineteenth century and which developed on a high measure out of the accumulation of colonial body parts. Cuvier

himself boasts of keeping Sara's skeleton, brain and sex in the King's Museum of Natural History (Chase-Riboud 2004: 287). What is at stake here is the doubtful ethics of turning human beings into items subjected to scientific observation, rendering visible the internal contradictions of western science and its fluctuation between scientific vocation and morbid fetishism.

Sara's narrative goes in parallel with a considerable number of black people who settled in Victorian Britain throughout the nineteenth century, people who learnt to speak English and earned their lives just like any other Victorian, and were integrated into European society. Considering the recent field of Afro-European studies, the recorded presence of dark people in Victorian Britain enables some scholars such as Vanessa D. Dickerson to talk about a "Black Victorianism" (Dickerson 2008, 10). Recent historicism indicates that black people could be seen all over Britain. Only in London, Heilmann and Llewellyn, following other sources, mention between 5,000 and 10,000 black people by the opening of the nineteenth century (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 269), a figure which rises to 2.6 million by 1851 (Killingray 2003, 51). This fact dismisses the wrong idea that black subjects gathered only around trading ports and it seems to suggest that Sara Baartman belonged to a collective who enjoyed considerable perceptibility in Victorian times.

Chase-Riboud's novel exploits the stark contrasts between Victorian scientific racism (materialised in manifold disciplines which emerged during the nineteenth century, such as anthropology or ethnology) and recent historical perspectives on race-relations in Victorian England. Indeed, critics are keen to qualify Victorian racist theories and stereotypes as "ahistorical" (Brantlinger 2011, 12; Lorimer 2003, 188) in the sense that they did not consider the actual circumstances of dark people and their assimilation into Victorian Britain. Rather than obtaining empirical knowledge on dark subjects, Victorian pseudo-sciences sought to confirm biased theories on non-white races formulated in advance (Bolt 2010, 110). Chase-Riboud displaces the narrative focus to the racial Other, Sara Baartman, who is allowed to act as a historical agent rather than as an object or 'curiosity' under scientific scrutiny, and to whom the reader is allowed to know without pre-established biases and categories.

## 3. Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007)

The historical recovery of dark Victorians also applies to Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007), which deals with a Victorian lower-class woman who must take up the family business, a bookbindery, because of her husband's rheumatism. Gradually Dora gets entangled in the sordid trade of Victorian pornography in the hands of a pseudo-scientific group, Les Sauvages Nobles, in which the pornographer Mr. Diprose and the scientist Sir Jocelyn Knightley are its most infamous

participants. To complicate the plot, she enters into an extramarital relationship with Din Nelson, a former slave fleeing the American Civil War.

Starling's novel provides an interrogation on British imperial history and the role of Victorian Britain in abolitionism. This becomes evident when Starling ventriloquizes Knightley's character to introduce her authorial voice into the narration: "Does it strike you as strange that, having so benefited from slavery for centuries, our conscience should only stir when more profitable methods of sugar production are discovered? How happily we erase past shame with present virtue… it was market forces, rather than morality, that led to the abolition of the British slave trade" (Starling 2007, 105). Additionally, although slavery was officially abolished in 1833 throughout the British Empire, the 'peculiar institution' was substituted by the Apprenticeship system and indentured labour, whose quasi-slavery conditions still involved physical punishment and horrific working conditions.

Starling's novel shatters common pitfalls in postcolonial theory and colonial history, such as the excessive reliance on binary oppositions and the widespread oblivion of women as "producers of Orientalist discourse or as agents within colonial power" (Lewis 1996, 18). Indeed, the traditional postcolonial opposition which identified the west and the east as male and female respectively is inverted and women in this novel are portrayed as complicit in the support of imperialist ideology, or in other words, "women, too, can be participants in the commodification of others" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 132). This is illustrated by how Starling portrays in the novel The Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery, a society run by upper-class female abolitionists managed by Lady Sylvia Jocelyn, Sir Jocelyn's wife. Far from being an innocent society dedicated to fight the horrors of slavery, its female members employ sexual exploitation by organising private gatherings in which freed slaves are compelled to exhibit themselves half-naked so that they can indulge in rape fantasies. Dora also seems temporarily infected by the all-pervasive Victorian racism when she tells about Din: "How dare he behold me… play with me… I was his employer; he was my slave" (Starling 2007, 267). Therefore, although Dora shows a racial sensitivity which is significantly higher to the remaining characters, she is nevertheless unconsciously led to exercise her western dominant position over her racial others.

Issues of interracialism are also addressed in the novel, which is quite significant since "inter-racial love affairs… still remain an underrepresented theme in neo-Victorian fiction" (Kolhke 2008, 198). Whereas Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* replicates the usual plot in which the white master abuses his female slave, Starling renders a narrative turnaround in which Dora and her black assistant enter into a truly intimate relationship, in contraposition to her sexless marriage. Nevertheless, Dora's sexual intimation with Din is not free from the widespread Victorian abhorrence on miscegenation, as it is exhibited right after they have consummated their relationship: "We

had perpetrated a terrible sin… yet my shame mixed curiously with a wondrous, golden sensation of glory" (Starling 2007, 365). Significantly, whereas Victorian scientific theories provided evidence to indicate that racial hybridity resulted in the decline of the dominant white race, imperial historicism indicates that racial miscegenation was very common throughout the colonies (Lawrence 1998, 222), resulting in mixed-race populations scattered all over the Empire. Neo-Victorian novels such as *The Journal of Dora Damage* evince openly this point.

Even more meaningful is the fact that Dora's client, Jocelyn Knightley, overtly racist and disdainful of interracial relations, is eventually revealed to be of mixed-race origins, just after he has repudiated his wife for bearing a black-skinned baby. Knightley's own racist obsessions actually reveal "his profound anxiety about his own skin and its racial classifications" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 139) and they are again echoed in Fanon's perceptions on interracialism: "I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white… who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love" (Fanon 1986, 63). Knightley's coward attitude contrasts sharply with Din Nelson's, whose farewell speech to Dora are revealing: "I am a black man, Dora, and it defines me more than your skin will ever define you. I am black, an' I must fight for its recognition an' acceptance, an' for the freedom of my country" (Starling 2007, 367).

In the context of Victorian Britain's relations with African Americans, the novel's most imaginative section occurs in chapter 15, in which Starling features a group of runaway American slaves who gather in a secret cellar in the Victorian London underworld in order to organise resistance against the American Southern Confederacy during the American Civil War. Staling illustrates here what has been called, in the words of Vanessa D. Dickerson, "Black America's romance with Victorian Britain" (Dickerson 2008, 4). Portraying a group of runaways slaves plotting against the secessionist American South constitutes an imaginative act on the reconstruction of a past which is effaced from the historical record but still it fits perfectly with the fact that "Britain was… in the minds of nineteenth-century blacks in the south, a geopolitical mecca" (Dickerson 2008, 9).

## 4. Conclusion

The recurring presence of dark subjects in neo-Victorian narratives and the historical correlation of such recurrence validate one of the most significant postulates within Afro-European studies, which is the fact that Europe has been a multicultural territory from the very beginnings of Western civilisation, despite the fact that traditionally the presence of African, Latin American or Caribbean subjects has been effaced from the European imagination. Accordingly, postcolonial neo-Victorianism

and Afro-European studies are aimed at providing a more hybrid perspective on the Victorian Age and the European territory respectively. In other words, postcolonial neo-Victorian texts contend that the inherited image of Europe as a "culturally bleached" (Gilroy 2004, xii) territory is a fantasy.

The intersections between postcolonial studies and neo-Victorian fiction provide fresh perspectives on imperial history, revealing the internal contradictions of the Victorian imperialist project. Indeed neo-Victorian texts have become a vehicle to modulate common pitfalls in postcolonial theory, such as the excessive reliance on binary oppositions which, after all, just try to put order to what is actually protean and unfixed. Additionally, traditional postcolonial analyses provide a simplistic and polarised view on western-eastern relations, virtually ignoring gender issues or resistance to colonial discourses both in the west and in the east. Cultural historians on the British Empire such as Patrick Brantlinger tellingly affirm that the ideological framework grounding contemporary racism is intimately linked to nineteenth century European imperialism (Brantlinger 2011, 6-7). Accordingly, postcolonial neo-Victorian fiction provides a field on which we can interrogate the legacy of Victorian imperialism and its traces in contemporary culture while contributing towards a hybrid perspective on Victorian Britain.

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