

Monday 8 August

1pm Milgate Room, AD Hope Bldg, SLLL



John Wolseley, History of the Whipstick Forest with ephemeral swamps and gold bearing reefs (2011).
Watercolour, charcoal and graphite on paper 234 x 287cm

Jessica Hancock

Unsettling the Past: Colonial Environments in Neo-Victorian Fiction

Of the surge in popularity and literary reputation of historical fiction in the last few decades, the sub-genre of neo-Victorian fiction has proved one of the most marked trends. Scholarship has productively examined the ways in which these novels imagine alternative narratives of the past; explore hitherto marginalised voices; critique modern preoccupations and enrich our understanding of memory and memorialisation. However, scholarship has largely been focused on texts set in Britain, and examination of the imaginative return to the nineteenth-century colonies by British authors has been modest by comparison. In particular, the significance of the natural world in texts set in the colonies has never been explored with regards to neo-Victorian theorisation. My research has found that, much like texts set in the British Isles, neo-Victorian fiction of the British-colonial world is often concerned with the realisation and creation of identity. My thesis builds upon and expands the work of John Glendening, who argues that in British-based neo-Victorian fiction, a scientific and atheistic sense of wonderment replaces Victorian fiction's religious explanation for a meaningful existence. However, in their depiction of the colonial environment rather than their home one, these British texts also navigate issues of race, exoticism and a form of literary colonisation as they write into the colonial landscape. Through close analysis of a few select novels, I argue that the environment of the colonies profoundly shapes the development of the protagonists. The ability of the characters to connect with the colonial landscape also extends to their ability to develop as a person, and only characters with sympathy for the natural world become fully rounded characters. Yet I argue that this identity building, by British authors and about British characters, is also concerned with a British sense of identity. It is only through establishing the specifics of place, and writing a local rather than a general nature world, that these novels can avoid exoticism.

Jessica Hancock is nearing submission of her doctoral thesis, under the supervision of Dr Kate Mitchell. Her research explores recent British neo-Victorian fiction and the ways in which the environment is used to explore issues of modern identity and our place in the world.



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