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## “Keep the secrets of the past buried”: *Taboo*’s Salt Water Hauntings

**ABSTRACT** Whilst fiction classified as “neo-Victorian” has provided radical interrogations of Victorian discourses concerning gender, sexuality, and class, critical enquiries into Britain’s imperial past have long played a comparatively minor role. One recent exception is the BBC’s *Taboo* (2017), whose first series reimagines Britain’s involvement in the trading of enslaved Africans. This article explores the series’ ambivalent spatial politics, specifically its positioning of salt water as a signifier of death and colonial power. *Taboo* depicts various ways in which the colonized oceans return to haunt the British—no doubt a commentary on Britain’s reluctant reappraisal of its imperial history. At the same time, however, the series repeatedly resorts to colonialist narrative patterns and tropes of the imperial Gothic. In doing so, I suggest, *Taboo* eventually undermines its own critical stance, instead betraying a considerable amount of perplexity regarding the question of how to narrate empire in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS** empire, (neo-)Victorianism, period drama, salt water, *Taboo*, transatlantic enslavement

### Introduction

*Taboo* opens with an aerial shot across the sea. The camera tracks over the calm water until a ship comes into view, moves up to its masts, and then cuts to a small dinghy being rowed away from the ship. In the next shots, we see a dark, hooded figure riding ashore on horseback. He digs a hole, takes off the hood to reveal himself as the protagonist James Keziah Delaney (Tom Hardy), and then buries a bundle in the earth, which we later learn contains stolen diamonds. Subsequently, the camera cuts to the skyline of a gloomy and rainy London, and here the editing makes clear it is through Delaney’s eyes that we encounter the metropolis for the first time.

In this way, the opening sequence establishes salt water as a vital theme, an element that defines its protagonist and that charts a cartography in which imperial oceans are connected with the metropolitan “centre.” In addition, the opening sequence thus introduces the predominant theme of *Taboo*’s first season: the breaking of surfaces in the search for what lies concealed beneath; the digging for, as well as the burying of, secrets.

The inaugural episode of the BBC’s 2017 neo-Victorian series, which is co-created by Steven Knight, lead actor Hardy as well as his father Chips Hardy, and produced by Ridley Scott, follows James Delaney returning to London to attend the funeral of his father in 1814. He has inherited a plot of land, Nootka Sound, which is located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It is of strategic importance to both parties involved in the British–American War of 1812 because it provides a gateway to China. Based on this premise, the first season follows the East India Company’s (EIC) attempts to secure the land from Delaney. In the process of this, layer by layer the company’s involvement in the trading of enslaved Africans (see Pinkston 2018), the greatest of the series’ many taboo topics, is unearthed. Delaney spent several years in an undefined part of Africa, and soon it becomes evident that he returned not only a rich but also a traumatized man, haunted by what he experienced there. In terms of both themes and aesthetics, *Taboo* thus embraces imperial Gothic traditions, prototypical examples of which include late-Victorian texts such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) or Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897).<sup>1</sup> Like *Taboo*, the imperial Gothic envisions the British Empire as a realm of endless opportunities on the one hand and an imminent threat to the colonizers’ physical as well as mental well-being on the other. Patrick Brantlinger identifies the three central themes of the late-nineteenth-century imperial Gothic as “individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world” (1988, 230), which are all present in *Taboo* at least to some extent. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), another staple of imperial Gothic, is perhaps *Taboo*’s most immediate intertext, but the premises of the two scenarios are reversed: whereas in Conrad’s novella Marlow lays out the “horrors” he saw, Delaney does not speak a single word about what exactly happened in Africa. Instead, access

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1 Tropes associated with the imperial Gothic are also traceable in Victorian classics such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) or Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), but the imperial Gothic originates in what is commonly labelled “Oriental Gothic,” that is, eighteenth-century texts such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786). On the relationship between Romanticism, Orientalism, and the Gothic see Kitson 2015.

to the past is relayed in haunting images reminding him of his intricate involvement in Britain’s imperial venture.

As mentioned above, the show is preoccupied with surfaces and surface-breaking, with dissection. Throughout, surfaces are first smoothed and concealed, only to be ripped apart in the next instant—as for example in the case of Delaney’s father, whose body is buried, then exhumed, and finally anatomized. At first glance, this imagery seems indicative of a critical interrogation of imperial legacies. In this article, I therefore explore the ambivalent spatial politics of *Taboo* by focusing on its most pertinent and frequently recurring surface: the ocean. The history of empire is inextricably linked with, or founded on, salt water. Oceans opened pathways to the “new world” and, thus, to the expansion of empire. Ever since its beginnings in the fifteenth century, colonialism increasingly advanced “[t]he politicization and militarization of oceanic space” (Mancke 1999, 226), rendering oceans the sites of ever more violent competition between European colonial powers. Most importantly, however, salt water recalls the effects and aftereffects of transatlantic enslavement. As Paul Gilroy has argued, the continuous “movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship” articulated a Black consciousness on either side of the Atlantic (1993, 16). This notion of a “black Atlantic,” Gilroy suggests, “provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory” that shape Britain (and, indeed, other parts of Europe) until the present day (Gilroy 1993, 16). Against this backdrop, I suggest, it is particularly through the motif of salt water that *Taboo* unfolds its enquiry into the afterimages of empire. The show’s usage of salt water both establishes and complicates narrative as well as symbolic continuity. Whilst on the one hand propagating what Mark Stein has termed “*unfixing* the discourse of empire” (2000, 153; emphasis in original) by properly dissecting the past, *Taboo* repeatedly resorts to colonialist narrative patterns and tropes of the imperial Gothic, thus foreclosing its own critical stance in the same instance.

## Neo-Victorianism and the Troubled Memory of Empire

Scrutiny of Britain’s imperial past gains special relevance with regard to neo-Victorianism, which has solidified as a popular mode of contemporary British cultural production. Even though *Taboo* is set in the Regency period and thus is not exactly neo-Victorian in the strictest sense of the term, the framework nevertheless has currency. The benefits and disadvantages of

drawing the line precisely at the dates of Queen Victoria's reign have been discussed at great length. Particularly in the context of the British Empire's *longue durée*, Kate Flint's view that "the length of a reign [...] provides at best only the most tenuous of containers for intellectual and social movements that spill beyond it" (2005, 230) appears apt. We can therefore subsume under the umbrella term "neo-Victorian" those texts that are set sometime in the long nineteenth century. What those texts classified as "neo-Victorian" have in common is that they re-narrate Victorian concerns from a twenty-first-century perspective, highlighting subjects and subjectivities that the Victorians glossed over. Such works therefore exceed a mere regeneration of ideological or aesthetic truisms about the nineteenth century. Instead, they are, as per Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's seminal definition, "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (2010, 4; emphasis in original). Neo-Victorian criticism and creative production expose the ways in which cultural memory has recycled misconceptions about "the Victorians," such as the longstanding critical orthodoxy of an all-white Victorian society. Neo-Victorianism's interrogative potential therefore lies in the challenge or subversion of what is considered a historically "accurate" account of nineteenth-century Britain; it has the potential to expose presumed historical truth as textually inscribed—or "textualized," to use Linda Hutcheon's term (1989, 93).

Despite its revisionist potential, neo-Victorianism is not politically radical per se. In fact, critics have justly identified tendencies towards "period fetishism" (Llewellyn 2008, 168), a presentist imposition of twenty-first-century sensibilities and epistemological categories (Hadley 2010, 26),<sup>2</sup> or as a form of historical Orientalism dwelling in the past's alluring Otherness (Kohlke 2008b). Further, they have called attention to the amount of nostalgia traceable in both neo-Victorian texts and attendant academic debate. The latter is particularly prevalent, since the hey-day of neo-Victorian cultural production at the beginning of the twenty-first century coincides with a cultural moment that repeatedly glances back at Britain's former imperial grandeur. Jingoistic nationalism and neo-imperialist rhetoric has pervaded all levels of political discourse prior to, and in the aftermath of, Britain's withdrawal from the European Union—including, but not limited to, then

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2 Hadley adds that "Neo-Victorian fiction, however, seeks to avoid such charges. Its concern with historical narratives is connected to both the Victorian context that it evokes and the contemporary context in which it was written. Consequently, neo-Victorian novels hold out the possibility of establishing an empathic connection to the past without resulting in presentism" (2010, 26).

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson’s recital of Rudyard Kipling’s imperialist poem “Mandalay” (1890) during a state visit to Malaysia in September 2017, or Tory backbencher Jacob Rees-Mogg’s invocation of “Victorian greatness” in *The Victorians: Twelve Titans who Forged Britain* (2019). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, whilst neo-Victorian creative output has often provided radical reimaginations of Victorian discourses concerning gender, sexuality, and class, critical enquiries into Britain’s colonial past—transatlantic enslavement in particular—has long played a comparatively minor role. In *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* (from which I borrow the title for the subsection at hand), Elizabeth Ho has therefore identified postcolonial readings as a relative blind spot in neo-Victorian studies, remarkable insofar as “‘the Victorian’ [...] has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination” (2012, 5).<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that neo-Victorian studies remain entirely ignorant of questions of matters of space as well as their underlying politics. Indeed, scholars have extensively discussed the question of how to define their subject matter, of where to locate the neo-Victorian geographically. Should the label be applied to Britain and countries of the former British Empire only, or would it be more productive to speak of a “global neo-Victorianism” that equally includes the literatures of countries and historical contexts outside of British colonial rule? (Kohlke 2008a; Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015; Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013; Joshi 2011). Despite such an awareness of spatial concerns—as well as of the possible neocolonialist implications the debate brings with it—thorough enquiries into the legacies of empire have only gained momentum in recent years. Neo-Victorian cultural production remains predominantly Anglocentric and white, scarcely featuring Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour (BIPoC) characters, particularly in leading roles. Colonial settings, in many neo-Victorian texts on both page and screen, are still often restricted to the settler colonies of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, in other words, “these *improper* postcolonialisms defined by a present still haunted and seduced by colonial structures or privilege” (Ho 2012, 11; emphasis in original). More recently, however, neo-Victorian scholarship and cultural production has begun to reorient such debates, specifically focusing on how Blackness—and, with it,

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3 More recently, Ho has reiterated the necessity to broaden the scope of neo-Victorianism beyond the British imperial context. Referring to the history of Hong Kong, which complicates any straightforward investigation into imperial legacies in that it entwines British and Japanese imperial dominion with Chinese hegemony, she remarks that “the nineteenth century can stage many memories of many empires” (Ho 2019, 2), which is why she has edited an entire special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* dedicated to “Neo-Victorian Asia.”

legacies of transatlantic enslavement—are negotiated within the Victorian cultural imaginary (see Espinoza Garrido, Tronicke, and Wacker 2021). And yet, the spatial politics of many neo-Victorian texts remain dubious, because they all too often disregard the realities of empire altogether, convey the notion of a predominantly white empire, or else suggest that imperialism “happened elsewhere,” securely located outside the British Isles. In conceptualizing the field of neo-Victorian studies, the centring of salt water therefore significantly impacts the debate on whether “Victorian” should be understood as an exclusively British or rather as a transatlantic phenomenon.

## Fluid Imperial Surfaces

*Taboo* forms an exception to the ostensible imperial obliviousness found in so many neo-Victorian texts, as it engages the (material) traces of empire head on. To name but a few examples, there are various BIPOC characters (most notably in the areas surrounding the London docks), the stately rooms of the Prince Regent (Mark Gatiss) are decorated with taxidermied zebras, ostriches, and giraffes, and the programme showcases an almost excessive number of maps. Also, Delaney’s newly acquired stepmother and former actress Lorna Bow (Jessie Buckley) is not only Irish but has also appeared onstage in the (fictitious) play “The Painted Savage,” whose grotesque title metonymically reflects the many similar, starkly racist nineteenth-century publications. That way, *Taboo*’s London is clearly marked as the imperial metropolis, a capital whose everyday texture is shaped by the intersections of numerous imperial strands. Admittedly, these are superficial examples. What stays below the surface and threatens to emerge, however, is of greater significance. The imagery of surface-breaking already touched upon in the series’ exposition is fully established in the opening credits, which depict various characters floating in the ocean. Some of them are white (including Delaney himself), some are Black and in chains; some of them are already dead and some are alive for now, still producing bubbles. The credits conclude with Delaney himself trying to swim to the surface, yet we do not see him succeed; instead, the camera remains under water with him. This TV show, the opening credits therefore suggest similarly to the exposition, is about taboos trying to surface, about truths revealing themselves. At the same time, it is indicated, this will be a laborious and maybe fruitless endeavour, full of possibly deadly pitfalls. As both the horrors of the Middle Passage and the boats carrying refugees in the Mediterranean Sea a couple of centuries later powerfully remind us,

salt water is not only a life-giving but also lethal element in which people as well as their histories continue to drown. On a larger scale, this can surely be read as a metaphor for Britain’s reluctance as regards coming to terms with its own imperial past and its self-stylization as an abolitionist nation, “the givers of liberty and freedom” (Hall 2020, 173) rather than enslavers. Whereas this kind of symbolism suggests a progressive and critical portrayal of British imperial legacies, *aesthetically*, the opening credits look much more problematic. On the one hand, the dead bodies resemble a type of jellyfish that have become one with the ocean, an image that touches on the ocean’s ontological status as a salt water graveyard for those who did not, or chose not to, survive the Middle Passage. However, vis-à-vis *Taboo*’s overall grey-and-black colour scheme, which effectively conveys the gloom and menace associated with the imperial Gothic, the luscious blue of this sequence communicates a sense of coolness, of calm and—somewhat paradoxically—of vitality. This not only stands in stark opposition to the “messiness” of empire the show portrays elsewhere but also reduces the victims of transatlantic enslavement to mere aestheticized objects the camera indulges in, thus already prefiguring central ambivalences of the show itself.

As explained in the first episode, the opening credits hint at Delaney’s backstory. He was a crew member aboard the fictionalized EIC ship *Cornwallis* which sailed under the alias *Influence* whenever it illegally carried enslaved Africans. The ship sank close to the African coast with nobody, except Delaney, surviving.<sup>4</sup> The name “Delaney” might thus be read as a reference to Amasa Delano in Herman Melville’s novella “Benito Cereno” (1855), which is equally set on a ship carrying enslaved people. Within the symbolic structure of *Taboo*, the EIC not only functions as the supposedly benign face of aggressive British imperial politics but also represents that which it controls and which its economic power relies on: oceans. In this respect too, salt water functions as a connective element. As Delaney remarks to the lawyer Mr Thoyt, who has betrayed confidential details of his father’s business to the EIC: “You are their whore. The same as

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4 As Andrea Major rightly observes, the sinking of the ship is dated to 1804, i.e. to a time when the trading of enslaved people was still legal in Britain (it was officially abolished with the Slave Trade Act in 1807, but covertly continued in various guises beyond this particular date); thus, this practice only infringes on the EIC’s own trade policy. As far as historical records are concerned, this is only one of the many creative liberties the show takes with regard to historical accuracy. Major writes that “[t]he EIC’s involvement in slave trafficking is a story that deserves to be told, but it was largely confined to the 17th and early 18th centuries, and to the Indian, rather than the Atlantic Ocean” (2017, n.p.).

almost everyone else in this city” (ep. 2, 40:12–40:19), thus acknowledging the extent to which society as a whole is implicated in the imperial system via Britain’s colonized oceans. As its main source of Britain’s economic prowess, the EIC is introduced in all colonial amenities and pomp—yet also as the seat of sin and decadence, as suggested by this scene’s juxtaposition to the preceding scene which shows Delaney’s disgust at the gluttony taking place at his father’s funeral (ep. 1, 14:15–14:31). Analogously, the EIC’s cabinet meeting begins with the close-up of a silver teapot, and afterwards Sir Stuart Strange (Jonathan Pryce) ritualistically pours three cups of tea (ep. 1, 14:44). He is framed by two globes on either side, which denotes the company’s claim to global economic control. As the camera zooms out, other insignia of colonial splendour come into view. Within this positioning of the EIC as a global power, the Indian continent as the company’s original source of revenue is strangely absent. For historian Andrea Major, the resulting portrait that is painted of the EIC is a distorted one. As she remarks,

many of the crimes it actually did commit, such as facilitating the opium trade, exacerbating rural poverty and famine, and aggressively extracting revenue in India are written out of the narrative. Admittedly, the institutionalised exploitation of colonial resources through over-taxation and the slow drain of wealth are not particularly televisual, but they had long-lasting consequences for Indian society and economy. The silences and exaggerations in the depiction of this period of Britain’s colonial past are also important because they speak directly to how we understand the relationship between colonial exploitation and Britain’s social, economic and political development. (Major 2017, n.p.)

Put differently, *Taboo* presents a simplified and streamlined version of British colonial rule fashioned for TV audiences. It prioritizes graphic shock value and visual efficacy over less tangible but exceptionally robust forms of exploitation, thus erasing colonial structures and ideologies that are still prevalent today and adding to their normalization or trivialization in socio-political discourse.

What emerges in the following dialogue is not only the company’s ruthlessness in their pursuit of Delaney’s inheritance but also their forging of history, which stands in for British imperial politics at large. Whenever one of the members raises his hand during the meeting, the scribe automatically stops recording the conversation. So, here, too, truth is prevented from reaching a surface—in this case, paper. This continuous purging of historical records is mirrored in the strategic withholding of information about Delaney. In doing so, *Taboo* makes use of a recurrent trope of



historical cinema, the positioning of the personal in relation to society, which Leger Grindon terms “a vehicle for historical explanation” (1994, 10). However, historical explanation, as far as *Taboo* is concerned, is difficult to unlock, as are Delaney’s personal antecedents. According to one of the company’s members, the rumours about him are “awful and unnatural” (ep. 1, 19:46). Before he gets to reveal what kind of rumours he is talking about, the camera cuts away to Delaney at the shore of the Thames and furthermore only captures him from behind, thus characterizing him as a dubious figure. In this way, *Taboo*’s editing links the EIC with Delaney’s own implication in their scrupulous colonial politics. As a former cadette in their service, he knows what they did and do, as he points out repeatedly. In fact, his first (English) line in the entire programme is “Forgive me, father, for I have indeed sinned” (ep. 1, 03:20–03:27). Yet more importantly, through the character of Delaney, the positions of colonizer and colonized are merged in convoluted and ideologically questionable ways. Delaney himself reveals that rather than from Naples, as has been claimed all his life, his mother was a Canadian Indigenous woman “bought” by his father alongside Nootka Sound in exchange for gunpowder (ep. 1, 24:38–25:00). To attest to his somewhat hybrid status, his body is covered in tattoos that look like a blend of images from various Indigenous cultures, and he repeatedly monologizes in Twi, the language spoken by the Ashanti people in Ghana. In episode three, he even performs a ritual that covers his face in soot and hence symbolically racializes him (ep. 3, 21:23–22:20). Echoing the practice of blackfacing in the minstrelsy tradition, *Taboo* here—inadvertently, I assume—discloses its own problematic politics of representation with the white English actor Tom Hardy in the leading role, as well as an all-white team of lead producers.

At large, the cinematography renders Delaney an inaccessible character, not only via a top hat which habitually projects a shadow across his eyes, but also through a range of irritating close-ups that never fully capture his face. Hardy’s portrayal of Delaney implicitly invokes Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—another brooding and racialized Victorian character that ultimately remains rather opaque—whom Hardy played in Coky Giedroyc’s 2009 adaptation for ITV. Throughout *Taboo*, the only glimpse into Delaney’s interior is provided via two kinds of visions or flashbacks. The first evokes the deadliest qualities of salt water, depicting enslaved Africans fighting for their lives on the sinking ship. We first see Delaney, in the present, using hammer and chisel on the wooden floorboards of the ship he just bought in the docks. Triggering a flashback, these movements then cut to a number of Black hands reaching through a cargo hatch and then someone applying the hammer to the hatch (ep. 2,

31:19–31:33). It was Delaney, the camera suggests by way of this visual match, who nailed the cargo hatch shut and thus bears the responsibility for their brutal death. This scene draws heavily on Britain’s iconographic archive and is especially reminiscent of the 1999 controversy surrounding the National Maritime Museum’s Gallery of Trade and Empire. As part of their permanent exhibition, the Greenwich museum showcased “The Drawing Room,” an exhibit distilling Britain’s profiting from the horrors of transatlantic enslavement of African people into a single, gruelling image. Deliberately referencing the tacit acceptance of enslavement as Britain’s economic base in Jane Austen’s 1814 novel *Mansfield Park* (Ezard 1999, n.p.), the installation depicted a figure dressed in the typical Regency fashion drinking tea, with a bowl of sugar as well as bread and butter next to her on the table. Below, and outside of her field of vision, visitors could see a Black hand stretching through the cargo hatch of a ship. Prior to the exhibition’s opening, the museum “warned that its new permanent exhibition on the British empire would be ‘unflinching’” (Ezard 1999, n.p.), designed to force visitors to confront Britain’s, and thus their own, complicity with transatlantic enslavement in a particularly visceral manner. Across the board of various media, however, the exhibit caused outrage, with various critics accusing the museum of “depriving the British people of any aspect of their history in which they can take justifiable pride” (Ezard 1999, n.p.). After increasing concern from its trustees, the museum decided to remove the exhibit.<sup>5</sup> If read alongside this exhibit as a meaningful, if ill-fated, attempt at addressing Britain’s imperial legacies, *Taboo* relates its own struggle to provide an adequate response to this question. It positions itself in a cultural context in which such a reappraisal of history is not only laborious but also, at least to some extent, unwelcome.

The second vision Delaney encounters repeatedly features a female figure standing in water. She wears a black, feathered dress as well as face paint, and whenever this vision occurs, her face is distorted in agony. The Canadian Indigenous, namely Nuu-chah-nulth, origin of Delaney’s mother Salish (Noomi Rapace) suggests that the figure might be her, an assumption which is confirmed in episode two, when the vision occurs to Delaney whilst he tries to locate the Nootka Sound treaty (ep. 2, 24:25–24:32). The choice of “Salish,” i.e. an Indigenous language group neighbouring the Nuu-chah-nulth, as the name for Delaney’s mother bespeaks the show’s repeated conflation and streamlining of cultural contexts and communities. In episode three, Delaney finally finds the black dress the woman wears in

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5 For a more detailed analysis of the exhibit, including images as well as an overview of its discussion in the press, see Stein 2000.

his own house. We learn that Salish died from some form of “madness,” and that she spent much time in Bedlam whenever she refused to impersonate Spanish and Italian nobility to amuse her husband. Echoing the fate of Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847), she spent the last months of her life locked up in her room. According to Delaney’s manservant Brace, who in turn was told by Delaney’s father, Salish attempted to drown the baby James a few days after birth; this, it can be inferred, is the moment Delaney revisits in his flashbacks. Throughout the series, other characters conjecture that Delaney might have inherited his mother’s “madness,” and so in addition to the Victorian trope of what Elaine Showalter has termed the “female malady”—that is, “a cultural tradition that represents ‘woman’ as *madness*” (2008, 4; emphasis in original)—the label “madness” here functions as an oppressive tool that not only genders but racializes Salish’s Otherness. Because Salish is already dead, there is no counter-discourse to these reports, except Delaney’s own scepticism.

All we get of the two colonial contexts of North America and Africa are images, but they are fragmented and hence deny access. Unlike Marlow’s detailed account in *Heart of Darkness*, here colonial space resists narrative containment and interpretation through the white British colonizer, thus objecting to a second colonization through narrative. The colony as a traditionally coercive space of intersecting racialized power structures is reimaged as a space of resistance, if only tentatively so. Salt water, then, controls the spatial politics of *Taboo*: it connects individual characters, all of whom have crossed oceans at one time or another; it opens a window into the past which remains otherwise concealed to the audience; and it announces itself as a powerful, if not unavoidable, anchor for critical forays into Victorian Britain that cannot be contained or suppressed.

Despite thus identifying both Indigenous populations and enslaved peoples as the victims of Britain’s predatory politics, the ways in which *Taboo* employs the tropes of madness and haunting divulge a questionable politics of emotion. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed establishes “emotion as a form of cultural politics or world making” (2014, 12). She challenges the common assumption that feelings occur naturally, as it were, elicited by others. Rather, she understands emotions as resulting from the attribution of specific interpretive categories, which in itself forms a political act. As Ahmed suggests, we experience others as fearful only once we, prompted via discriminatory discourses, have attributed the label “threat” to their bodies (Ahmed 2014, 72). Against this backdrop, the question of who suffers and who is in turn portrayed as causing harm, is pertinent. In *Taboo*, all suffering is mapped onto the male hero, who, even though racialized within the diegesis, is played by a white actor and

hence *visually* reads as white. Whilst Salish's suffering, conveyed via flashbacks only, serves as a substitute to position Delaney in a larger history of suffering and violation, Black bodies are identified as a source of threat. Apparitions of enslaved people drowned in the sinking of the *Cornwallis* haunt Delaney's sleep, their agonized cries disturbing his peace of mind and demanding a final reckoning. In this manner, *Taboo* not only reprocesses and reaffirms the imperial Gothic's narrative of the suffering white, male colonizer but also feeds into the discourse of Britain's imperial past as painful for both sides involved.

The question of exactly how critically *Taboo* engages with imperial legacies equally concerns the question of genre. Critics have addressed the show's general over-the-top-ness, which seems to be the prime reason for its lukewarm critical reception.<sup>6</sup> Granted, Hardy's Delaney is a constantly ill-tempered character in an incestuous relationship with his half-sister who habitually beats up or slashes other people; in all corners of a dark, mud-ridden, and simply filthy London bones crack and blood spurts; and Delaney's harrowing flashbacks hardly fall within the realm of other popular forms of contemporary period and heritage cinema à la *Downton Abbey*. The diegetic prioritization of imperial crimes, too, could be deemed atypical of conventional period drama. Most overtly, glossing over of the realities of empire applies to the so-called heritage films in the manner of the 1980s and early 1990s Merchant Ivory adaptations of Victorian classics. As Andrew Higson points out, this filmic tradition promotes "conservative ideals, and avoids addressing the cultural and racial diversity of a changing Britain" and instead "focus[es] on a highly circumscribed set of traditions, those of the privileged, white, Anglo-Saxon community who inhabit lavish properties in a semi-rural Southern England, within striking distance of the metropolitan seat of power" (2003, 26–7). Whereas since the 1990s various adaptations of Victorian classics have moved a little further and critically investigated notions of gender and sexuality, many of them remained, and in fact often remain, rooted in Orientalist aesthetics and imperial ideologies (see Primorac 2018, 55–95). For its obvious departure from heritage cinema, Sarah Hughes locates *Taboo* in the legacy of *Hammer House of Horror* (1980), *Witchfinder General* (1968), and *The Wicker Man*

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6 For Sonia Saraiya, "[p]onderous and heavy-handed, this new period drama wastes its talented actors on chiaroscuro and angst" (2017, n.p.). Paul MacInnes rather fittingly likens *Taboo* to "one of those hidden stages at Glastonbury where you turn up expecting Mumford and Sons and instead get three circus performers riding naked on a bear while a wrinkled man, equally naked, shouts polemical blank verse over his cousin's remix of the Prodigy played entirely on squeezebox" (2017, n.p.).

(1973); in her words, a filmic tradition that “cares little for actual historical detail, operating instead under its own weird rules where atmosphere is everything and each plot development comes accompanied by its own sense of creeping dread” (Hughes 2017, n.p.). Clearly, her use of the phrase “historical detail” is contentious, but in the case of *Taboo*’s engagement with British imperial politics, it even seems that the opposite is true: by struggling to keep the “creeping dread” of empire beneath the surface, *Taboo* is *more* historically “accurate” than most other period films and TV series that eschew the topic altogether. At the same time, its rendition of images of empire is conventional and in various instances suspect. *Taboo*’s emphasis on violence, dirt, and the general unpleasantness of nineteenth-century Britain are generic features of post-heritage cinema, which Claire Monk defines in opposition to heritage cinema as such films “self-consciously seek to distance themselves (aesthetically, politically, and/or in terms of content or its treatment) from heritage filmmaking” (2011, 101). A tenet of post-heritage cinema is a professed lack of nostalgia towards the past—Antonija Primorac more accurately speaks of “reflective” as opposed to “restorative nostalgia” (2015, 38)—yet arguably *Taboo* is a distinctly nostalgic series. The outright fetishist depiction of Delaney and particularly his physicality (which no doubt caters to Hardy’s fan base) betray a nostalgic longing for a long-lost, hands-on, and violent “imperial masculinity.” Delaney solves problems through blackmail, violence, and bribery—in other words, attributes that similarly underpin the wide-ranging support for such transgressive male figures as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro who propagate the end of what is widely and dubiously labelled “political correctness” and display a striking penchant for a return to imperial grandeur and exploitative structures. Even if identification with Delaney is intentionally complicated, the show’s entire appeal stands and falls with the viewer’s attempt to at least root for him as the protagonist. Tied to him as the only possible focal character, the recycling of the above tropes is too pervasive not to be deemed nostalgic and, hence, perpetuates neo-imperialist sentiments.

## Conclusion

Imperialism, as depicted on this programme, is a distinctly messy undertaking, a message that is equally communicated by the serialized format. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative, background information and supposed truths are unlocked gradually from one episode to another—often via flashbacks that are difficult to pinpoint—and even at the

end of series one, many questions regarding Delaney's backstory remain unanswered. All of this complicates the notion of narrative coherence as such, particularly when it comes to narrating empire. Regarding the concrete use of salt water on this show, I have shown how in *Taboo's* most prevalent imperial surface, the ocean consistently features as a symbol of violence and colonial exploitation—in the various flashbacks of enslaved people drowning aboard a sinking slave ship as well as in the visions of Delaney's mother, in dead bodies floating in the ocean, or embodied by EIC representatives. Whereas both the Americas and the African continent feature as absent presences only, through Delaney's mother and drowned Africans, the recurrence of water thus spans a spatial imaginary of imperial power, with the true nature of its concealed atrocities only gradually rising to the surface. At the same time, though, through both the legal investigation into the sinking of the *Cornwallis* and Delaney's fragmented memories, the colonized oceans return to haunt the British. As Toni Morrison has famously put it, “[a]ll water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was” (1995, 99). These salt water hauntings counter the subliminal submersion of imperial legacies and attendant guilt, not only within the show's diegesis itself but also in British society at large. “I hope I can trust you to keep the secrets of the past buried—buried in a deeper grave,” Delaney's sister Zilpha (Oona Chaplin) writes in a letter to him at the end of episode one (ep. 1, 54:30–54:40). What she means is, of course, their past affair, but these lines equally apply to the theme of empire critique. In the same way as Delaney's affair with his sister is taken out of the grave the very moment it is mentioned in the series, Britain's imperial legacies cannot remain buried either. They will inevitably rise to the surface—of political and critical discourse as well as cultural production. In true neo-Victorian fashion, *Taboo* thus contours cultural continuities between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century discourses of empire, more specifically a convenient forgetfulness of Britain's acquisitive greed.

As Stein asserts with reference to the aforementioned exhibit “The Drawing Room” at the National Maritime Museum, “[t]he British Empire cannot be *undone* in the sense of reversing it or restoring preceding historical conditions. Likewise, its effects cannot be annulled or cancelled. However, *unfixing* the discourse of empire, opening it up, and interpreting its history and its current efficacy, such types of undoing are both possible and necessary” (2000, 153; emphasis in original). As its own muddled, and indeed often troubling, imagery and ideological inconsistencies demonstrate, *Taboo* discloses a considerable amount of perplexity with regard to the question of how to “unfix” the discourse of empire in neo-Victorian

fiction. Both the show’s politics of emotion and its nostalgic presentation of the hero reaffirm rather than deconstruct colonial hierarchies. Another such example is the “white saviour” trope the show taps into when the Sons of Africa lawyer George Chichester (Lucian Msamati) can only prove the EIC’s involvement in the sinking of the *Cornwallis* with Delaney’s help. Considering how influential the nineteenth century has been, and continues to be, regarding the question of how to define Britishness, neo-Victorian literature more than any other form of historical fiction takes a strategic position in such “types of undoing.” It is thus all the more imperative for re-readings of Britain’s imperial history to take seriously their own reliance on conventionally imperialist narrative tropes and images. Such re-readings need to scrutinize their own hauntings of imperial salt waters to move beyond mere lip-service to postcolonial reappraisals of nineteenth-century British politics as well its aftereffects on the present day.

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## Filmography

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