

**“I DID AS OTHERS DID AND AS OTHERS HAD ME DO”:  
POSTCOLONIAL (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS  
AND PERPETRATOR TRAUMA IN SEASON 1  
OF *TABOO* (2017-)**

**“HICE LO QUE OTROS HICIERON Y LO QUE OTROS  
ME OBLIGARON A HACER”:  
(FALSAS)REPRESENTACIONES POSCOLONIALES  
Y EL TRAUMA DEL PERPETRADOR EN LA PRIMERA  
TEMPORADA DE *TABOO* (2017-)**

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**Abstract**

Neo-Victorian fiction has been concerned with historically oppressed and traumatised characters from the 1990s onwards (Llewellyn 2008). More recently, neo-Victorianism on screen has shifted its attention to the figure of the perpetrator and their unresolved guilt, as in the TV series *Penny Dreadful* (Logan 2014-2016) or *Taboo* (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017-present). However, perpetrator trauma is an under-theorised field in the humanities (Morag 2018), neo-Victorian studies included. This article analyses *Taboo* as a neo-Victorian postcolonial text that explores the trauma of its protagonist James Delaney, an imperial perpetrator who transported and sold African slaves in the Middle Passage for the East India Company. Although the series is not set in the Victorian period, neo-Victorianism is here understood as fiction expanding beyond the historical boundaries of the Victorian era and that presents the long nineteenth century as synonymous with the empire (Ho 2012: 4). Thus, I argue that postcolonial texts like *Taboo* should be considered neo-Victorian since they are set in the nineteenth century to respond to and contest (neo-)imperial practices. However, neo-Victorian postcolonialism offers ambivalent representations of the British Empire, as it simultaneously critiques and reproduces its ideologies (Ho

2012; Primorac 2018). This article examines the ways in which *Taboo* follows this contradictory pattern, since it seemingly denounces the imperial atrocity of the slave trade through Delaney's perpetrator trauma, while simultaneously perpetuating it through his future colonizing trip to the Americas. Hence, Delaney is portrayed as an anti-hero in the series, given that he is both the enemy and the very product of the British Empire.

**Keywords:** neo-Victorianism on screen, perpetrator trauma, imperial Gothic, slavery, Middle Passage.

## Resumen

La ficción neovictoriana se ha centrado en personajes históricamente oprimidos y traumatizados de los años noventa en adelante (Llewellyn 2008). Más recientemente, el neovictorianismo audiovisual ha desviado su atención hacia la figura del perpetrador y su culpa no resuelta, como es el caso de las series de televisión *Penny Dreadful* (Logan 2014-2016) o *Taboo* (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017-actualidad). Sin embargo, el trauma del perpetrador es un campo poco teorizado en las humanidades (Morag 2018), incluyendo los estudios neovictorianos. En este artículo analizamos *Taboo* como un texto poscolonial neovictoriano que explora el trauma de su protagonista James Delaney, un perpetrador al servicio del imperio que transportó y vendió esclavos africanos en el pasaje del Atlántico medio para la Compañía de las Indias Orientales. Aunque la serie no está ambientada en la época victoriana, entendemos el neovictorianismo como una ficción que se expande más allá de los límites históricos del victorianismo y que presenta el largo siglo XIX como sinónimo del imperio (Ho 2012: 4). Por lo tanto, defendemos que textos poscoloniales como *Taboo* deben considerarse neovictorianos, ya que el largo siglo XIX es utilizado para responder y cuestionar prácticas (neo)imperiales. Sin embargo, el poscolonialismo neovictoriano ofrece representaciones ambivalentes del Imperio Británico, ya que simultáneamente crítica y reproduce sus ideologías (Ho 2012; Primorac 2018). En este artículo examinamos las formas en que *Taboo* sigue dicho patrón, ya que aparentemente denuncia la atrocidad imperial del comercio de esclavos a través del trauma del perpetrador Delaney, pero al mismo tiempo lo perpetúa a través de su futuro viaje colonizador a América. Por lo tanto, Delaney es retratado como un antihéroe en la serie, ya que es tanto enemigo como producto del propio Imperio Británico.

**Palabras clave:** neovictorianismo audiovisual, trauma del perpetrador, gótico imperial, esclavitud, pasaje del medio.

## 1. Introduction

Trauma Studies in the humanities have traditionally focused on the victim’s perspective, so as to contribute to their healing process by bringing to the fore and raising awareness about their traumatic experiences. That way, society can empathise with their suffering and take measures to prevent similar experiences from happening in the future. However, there has been a recent shift in attention from victims to perpetrators “in psychoanalysis and trauma literatures (and in cinema trauma scholarship)” (Morag 2018: 16), to what is known as ‘perpetrator trauma’. This trend has also found its way into films and TV series, although it has been almost exclusively discussed in the case of Israeli documentary films (Morag 2012; 2013; 2018) and South African cinema (Karam 2019).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, neo-Victorian trauma narratives on screen also bring to the fore historical and postcolonial atrocities against the ethnic Other, including slavery. In fact, Iris Kleinecke-Bates states that neo-Victorian fiction shares “preoccupations with authenticity, fidelity and immediacy” with factual genres, such as documentary films (2014: 11). As a result, perpetrator trauma is now being explored in neo-Victorian postcolonialism on screen, especially in TV series such as *Penny Dreadful* (Logan 2014-2016), *Taboo* (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017-present) or *Carnival Row* (Echevarría and Beacham 2019-present). Fiction exploring perpetrator trauma usually depicts perpetrators who have committed atrocious crimes that have left them with a sense of unresolved guilt and willing to take responsibility for their actions (Morag 2012: 95) —although this is not always the case, as the attitude to responsibility may vary. In the case of the male protagonist of *Taboo*, James Delaney, his guilty conscience is reflected through nightmares, flashbacks and his commitment to make amends. However, Delaney’s remorse and atonement are depicted in an ambivalent fashion, since Season 1 ends right before he boards the ship that will take him to America, where he plans to replicate the very same colonial atrocities that he was trying to expose.

*Taboo* (2017-) is a British TV series written by Tom Hardy, Steven Knight and Edward John ‘Chips’ Hardy, and produced by Scott Free London and Hardy Son & Baker for the BBC. It was first released on BBC One in the UK on 7 January 2017. The main cast includes Tom Hardy as the male protagonist, James Delaney, Oona Chaplin as Zilpha Delaney, his half-sister, and Jonathan Pryce as Sir Stuart Strange, Chairman of the East India Company. A second season of the series was announced during March 2017, but its production was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (“Everything We Know” 2020). *Taboo* follows James Delaney, an English adventurer who, upon learning of his father’s death, returns to London after twelve years in Africa. The series is set against the historical backdrop of the 1812 War between the US and the UK, and it explores the

underbelly of nineteenth-century London, particularly the misery of the working class, prostitution and child exploitation, the corruption and violence of street gangs and political intrigues. It also touches upon the concepts of the slave trade and the Middle Passage —or the forced trip of African individuals across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas, where they became slaves working in US plantations (Wallenfeldt 2020).<sup>2</sup>

*Taboo* is here analysed as a neo-Victorian TV series, since it is set in the long nineteenth century and replicates typical literary tropes of the late-Victorian period for a screen context (Mousoutzanis 2020: 4). These tropes include elements belonging to the so-called ‘imperial Gothic’, namely the notion of going native, a potential ‘barbaric’ invasion and the subsequent decay of Western religion and civilization (Brantlinger 1988: 130). In this article, I first introduce the field of neo-Victorianism on screen, with an especial emphasis on its conflicting postcolonial representations of the British Empire. Then, I explain the newfound interest in perpetrator trauma and its cinematic representations. Against this theoretical backdrop, I examine the concept of perpetrator trauma in neo-Victorian postcolonialism on screen through the character of James Delaney in the TV series *Taboo*. Furthermore, I also explore the concept of the ghost in Trauma Studies (Abraham and Torok 1987; Derrida 1994), and the metaphor of the “unwelcome ghost” (Morag 2013: 5) of the perpetrator in *Taboo*: a revenant that comes back to haunt the society that condoned —or even ordered— his atrocities. I conclude that the ambivalent portrayal of imperial discourse in *Taboo* —particularly when representing the racial Other— both reproduces and challenges Orientalising stereotypes, ultimately presenting Delaney as a complex anti-hero that both benefits from the empire and tries to destroy it.

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## 2. Neo-Victorianism on Screen

Neo-Victorianism is a cultural field that adapts and appropriates nineteenth-century fiction, plots, characters, history and other socio-historical elements. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn proposed an exclusivist definition of neo-Victorianism, which would only include texts that are “*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (2010: 4, emphasis in original). Marie-Luise Kohlke, on the contrary, has argued that such a limiting definition might contribute to the canonization of the field. Therefore, she offers a more inclusive conceptualisation of neo-Victorianism as an “integrative umbrella term to encompass virtually all historical fiction related to the nineteenth century, irrespective of authors’ or characters’ nationalities, the plots’ geographical settings, the language of composition or, indeed, the extent of

narratives’ self-consciousness, postmodernism, adaptivity or otherwise” (2014: 27). In this article, the term ‘neo-Victorian’ follows Kohlke’s definition.

Both neo-Victorian literary and screen texts are adaptations of Victorian literature that recreate the past through a vocabulary and style that can be appealing and understandable for contemporary audiences (Primorac 2018: 1). Consequently, the increasing number of neo-Victorian screen texts are now enjoying a similar academic interest to that of their literary counterparts. Some of the most popular neo-Victorian screen texts include the TV series *Ripper Street* (Warlow 2012-2016), *Penny Dreadful*, or *Carnival Row* and films like Cary Fukunaga’s *Jane Eyre* (2011) or Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak* (2015). One of the common points that all these neo-Victorian texts share is that they bring to the fore the previously ignored stories and traumatic experiences of historically marginalised characters.

In fact, the long nineteenth century has come to be regarded as a pivotal area of research on historical trauma, both in terms of the study of its actual catastrophes and their aftermath, but also at a fictional level in their belated “working-through” via neo-Victorianism (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 1). One of the main aims of neo-Victorian fiction is to uncover the repressed stories of traditionally marginalised individuals, particularly women, LGBTQ+ and ethnic minorities, as well as working-class or disabled characters (Llewellyn 2008: 165). However, there are also neo-Victorian texts that explore the trauma of seemingly privileged characters, such as white, middle-class heterosexual men in imperial contexts. TV series like *Penny Dreadful*, *Carnival Row* and *Taboo* itself examine the unresolved guilt and PTSD symptoms that white male—or, as in the case of *Taboo*, mixed-race—characters experience after taking part in colonising endeavours.<sup>3</sup>

Even though *Taboo* is not set in the Victorian period, I argue that it should be considered a neo-Victorian text, given that neo-Victorianism expands beyond the historical confines marked by the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). As Elizabeth Ho contends, neo-Victorianism is to be interpreted more as a metaphor where the nineteenth century stands for an “era of colonialism” (2012: 3), rather than as a historical signifier. Moreover, the nineteenth-century colonial past “cannot be thought of as separate from neo-imperial presents and futures” (5), so that neo-Victorian texts like *Taboo* also reflect on Britain’s imperial legacy at present. As a result, neo-Victorianism encompasses a time frame spanning three centuries: the nineteenth, the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Finally, because the Victorian period “has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination” (4), neo-Victorian texts on screen can serve as the perfect stage for contemporary audiences to negotiate their contradictory feelings towards the empire and its legacies in the current—increasingly—neo-imperialist and globalised world. However, neo-Victorian postcolonial texts tend

to represent the empire and its practices in an ambivalent way, simultaneously criticising and reproducing imperial ideologies and stereotypes (9).

Indeed, neo-Victorianism on screen displays a strong celebratory nod to the nineteenth century, which is perceived as an idealised and exoticised era, “emblematic of racial, gender and class certainties” (Primorac 2018: 57), as in the case of *Taboo*. The series attempts to scrutinise the ethical implications that can be found in the unexplored link between the perpetrator’s actions and the unacknowledged responsibility of the British imperial power structures. It focuses on its protagonist’s experience as a slave trader in the service of the East India Company (henceforth EIC), kidnapping and transporting slaves from Africa to America by ship. *Taboo*’s critical response to imperial politics and ideologies is rather ambivalent, especially with regard to its tendency to exoticise and portray the racial Other in a stereotypical manner that might suggest a possible nostalgic nod to colonialism. This is particularly the case with James Delaney himself, a biracial character with a white English father and a Native American mother, although he is played by a white English actor (Tom Hardy). Delaney is further exoticised on account of the twelve years he spent in Africa, where —as implied by other characters in the show (and himself)— he went native. This is evidenced by his stereotypical Othering traits, such as cannibalism (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 2), his performance of African rituals (episode 4) and the fact that he speaks a tribal language (episode 1). As a consequence, I argue that *Taboo* should be considered a neo-Victorian text, as it presents the main characteristics and ambivalences of the genre, particularly in its contradictory representations of the British Empire.

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### 3. Perpetrator Trauma

As mentioned above, neo-Victorianism is used by contemporary writers and directors as a platform to work through the horrors and traumas of the empire and its legacies in contemporary societies. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event” (1995: 4). As a result, a great number of neo-Victorian texts are trauma narratives that offer a stage for readers or viewers to confront “subjective endurance in the face of crisis and conflict, representing how defensive responses are created out of many types of wounding” (Vickroy 2015: 3). Likewise, trauma fiction replicates the characteristics and symptoms of trauma experience, such as “fragmented thoughts or dissociated outlook” (3), as well as the coping mechanisms to overcome them.

Trauma scholars have long established the importance of telling one’s traumatic experience for trauma survivors. According to Dori Laub, in order to start the healing process, survivors need to share, and thus come to know, their story with an empathic audience (1992: 78). Laub underlines the central role of witnessing in allowing the survivor to come to terms with their traumatic experience, and argues that if they do not have an empathic listener, they might resort to silence so as not to suffer public discredit (79). Building on Laub’s theories of bearing witness, Suzette A. Henke coined the term ‘scriptotherapy’ that entails “the process of writing out or writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (1998: xii-xiii). As Aris Mousoutzanis argues, Delaney puts his traumatic experience into writing in the form of a legal document where he relates the sinking of a ship that transported African slaves (2020). This way, he arguably attempts to work through his unresolved guilt and make amends with the victims that he wronged —i.e. the African slaves that he transported and trapped in the hold of the ship under the orders of the EIC (Mousoutzanis 2020: 7).

According to Raya Morag, Trauma Studies have traditionally focused on the identification with the victim/survivor and their experiences (2012: 95). The term “perpetrator trauma” was coined by Rachel M. MacNair in her article “Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing”, which examined subjects that had perpetrated atrocities (2002). The idea behind this concept is that perpetrators can be traumatised by their own crimes against others (Mohamed 2015: 1162). Although perpetrator trauma was already discussed by Caruth at the end of *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), it has not been as thoroughly theorised as the trauma of victims (Morag 2013: 4). Indeed, trauma tends to be more examined in “individuals or communities viewed as legitimate and worthy of attention” —i.e. victims/survivors— and Trauma Studies have usually underlined the link between trauma and the recovery of the victim’s voice (Mohamed 2015: 1177). As a result, the trauma of the perpetrator tends to be overlooked at an academic level. In fact, perpetrators are only deemed to be traumatised if they are also viewed as victims, “such as child soldiers and individuals who commit crimes under duress” (1167). Likewise, we have come to accept that most perpetrators suffered a traumatic experience in their past that prompted their violent tendencies, especially during their childhood. These traumas might entail “abuse by a family member, a parent’s addiction, extreme deprivation or loss —that contributed to his criminal wrongdoing later in life” (1176).

Some neo-Victorian screen texts portray perpetrators that had previously been traumatised victims, such as Guillermo del Toro’s *Crimson Peak* or *Penny Dreadful*. In the case of the former, the patriarchal perpetrators —the siblings Lucille and Thomas Sharpe— had been the victims of child abuse and domestic violence

before becoming a murderous couple. Likewise, *Penny Dreadful* includes a number of victims-perpetrators, most notably the resurrected radical feminist, Lily Frankenstein, who had been the victim of patriarchal violence and abuse before being reborn, or the mass perpetrator Ethan Chandler, who was raised by a cruel and absent father. However, the representation of perpetrator trauma in neo-Victorian texts involves some ethical complexities, especially in terms of “articulating the confession and re-enacting the yet unacknowledged deed” (Morag 2012: 95). Perpetrators depicted in these trauma narratives have committed extreme atrocities, “which leave them emotionally numbed and with unresolved guilt—gradually willing to take responsibility for their deeds” (Morag 2012: 95). Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that the objective of focusing on the figure of the perpetrator is in no way to undervalue the importance of the victim’s trauma and perspective or “society’s imperative to bear witness” (Morag 2018: 5). Indeed, the attention on the trauma of the perpetrator does not intend to develop empathy for perpetrators, nor to forgive them. As opposed to the victim’s need to share their experiences with an empathic audience to come to terms with their past trauma, perpetrators actually need to empathise with their victims, which will lead them to self-denouncement and to take part in policies that might prevent similar atrocities from happening in the future (Morag 2013: 23). Echoing these ideas, *Taboo* ambivalently explores the concept of perpetrator trauma through its focus on James Delaney, a former EIC official who seemingly wants to atone for his crimes against African slaves and make reparations by denouncing the British imperial institutions that allowed these atrocities in the first place—although he ends up replicating and perpetuating them.

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#### 4. Perpetrator Trauma in *Taboo*

As discussed above, fictional perpetrators are usually portrayed as having experienced a traumatic past—especially a traumatic childhood—which triggered their current atrocities. As in the case of Del Toro’s neo-Victorian film *Crimson Peak*—where the villains’ experiences of parental neglect and domestic violence shaped them as patriarchal perpetrators in adulthood— James Delaney, the protagonist and traumatised perpetrator of *Taboo*, comes from a highly dysfunctional family. His father—a white Englishman—married a Native American woman from the Nootka tribe, named Salish, and the show puts a lot of stress on Delaney’s biracial heritage, as a way of marking him as the racial Other. Delaney’s portrayal as a biracial character, however, is one of *Taboo*’s noted misrepresentations of colonialism and race, as the series seemingly brings to the fore historically marginalised characters—in this case, a biracial individual— but through a white



actor (Tom Hardy). As Mousoutzanis asserts, Delaney encapsulates two of the main racial anxieties and stereotypes of the long nineteenth century: the cannibal and the mixed-race individual (2020: 12). On the one hand, cannibalism was regarded as “the absolute nadir of human behavior” and was thought to be “practiced by black or brown savages but not by white Christians”, who had to save those cannibal ‘savages’ “from themselves” (Brantlinger 2011: 2-3). On the other hand, miscegenation —especially between white, European, and African individuals— was one of the biggest threats challenging white supremacy “from about 1860 to 1914”, as it could bring about “English, racial degeneration” (Brantlinger 2011: 2). Thus, Africa was associated with negative stereotypes “of barbaric practices, bloody human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery and fetishism” for centuries, and European colonisers thought it was their duty to extinguish such practices, sometimes by enslaving or exterminating African people (MacMaster 2001: 75). However, the whitewashed representation of Delaney’s racial Otherness in *Taboo* “makes the associations between cannibalism, miscegenation and whiteness even more problematic” (Mousoutzanis 2020: 12). In any event, the representation of ethnic oppression through a white actor is arguably a cultural appropriation and misrepresentation of the traumas of biracial and Native American characters. In doing so, the series is actually replicating imperial colonising practices that appropriated and exploited the natives’ cultural heritage and possessions for the profit of white individuals.

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Likewise, Sonia Saraiya underlines *Taboo*’s exoticisation of Africa through Delaney’s character, as his time on the continent “is given a kind of hand-waving occult power” (2017). He performs African rituals, such as the chanting of prayers and incantations in a tribal language at his father’s funeral (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 1). He can also project himself in his sister’s dreams by reciting some words in the flames and painting his body with ashes (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 4, mins. 19-21). He also engages in cannibalism —e.g. he is attacked by an EIC hired assassin and bites the latter’s neck and eats his flesh until he bleeds out (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 2, min. 55). However, as Sayaira points out, “without the grounding specifics, these are lazily sketched signifiers about ‘dark magic’, which either capitalize on Delaney’s mixed-race heritage or his time with ‘savage’ tribes” (2017). Likewise, in adopting these stereotypical traits associated to African tribes, Delaney seems to have “gone native”, a concept that Brantlinger lists as one of the main characteristics of imperial Gothic (1988). Delaney also represents the potential collapse of Western civilization as a result of a “barbaric” invasion (Brantlinger 1988: 130), since his refusal to abide by the British laws is interpreted by some characters in the show as his transformation into an African “savage”. Nonetheless, part of Delaney’s occult power appears to be ascribed to his mother’s Native American heritage, as he himself claims that he had

those abilities before arriving in Africa, where he only perfected them: “[w]hen I left England I thought I was mad, but they taught me how to use it. Now it’s a gift” (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 4, min. 41). Moreover, Mr Wilton, one of the agents of the EIC that investigates him, claims that when Delaney was young, his “confidence allowed his savage nature and mother’s madness to emerge” (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 1, min. 16).

Indeed, Delaney’s Native American mother, Salish, is also racially Othered in the show. She only appears in Delaney’s flashbacks, covered in Native American body paint, contorting and laughing hysterically in the river. She does not have any lines in the show, and Delaney states that she was silenced by his own father since “she wasn’t allowed to walk the streets, nor show her face in public, nor speak in English, nor her savage tongue because she was a madwoman” (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 3, min. 23). Salish was declared mad and sectioned in Bedlam Asylum after she tried to drown Delaney in the river when he was just a baby. Shortly after, she died in the asylum, due to some of the torturous treatments that she was forced to undergo, and Delaney’s father then married an Englishwoman with whom he had a daughter, Zilpha. Delaney finds out about these treatments when he sees the room where Salish was confined in Bedlam, which is furnished with chains, ropes and other restraints that were used to keep the inmates strapped to their beds. He also hears the moans and lamentations of the patients that were kept there (episode 6, mins. 4-5). When Delaney learns about his mother’s story, he blames his father—a coloniser that had bought a non-white woman and then imposed his culture, language and way of life on her—for causing her alleged madness: “[m]y father cast my mother into madness, then jumped straight after” (episode 6, min. 2).

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According to Victorian gender conventions, a white upper-class housewife had to be modest and obedient to her husband and be confined to the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, contrary to the chaste angel of the house, there was the rebellious woman that challenged these Victorian precepts and was branded a “madwoman”, a male epithet that was used “to possess them more thoroughly” (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 17). Hence, the motif of female madness was exploited in Victorian literature to reflect how these women resisted patriarchal domination. Madwomen were usually sectioned in asylums or, as in some cases in (neo-)Victorian literature, confined in the attic of the family home. The term “madwoman in the attic” carries the weight of this literary trope and was famously discussed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (2000). Thus, Salish would be considered as a madwoman according to Victorian standards of proper femininity. In the same way as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (Brontë 1987)—the epitome of the Victorian

madwoman in the attic— Salish was brought to England and stripped of her language, culture and rituals and, later on, was “locked up in the attic of her husband” (Nygren 2016: 117) due to her alleged mental illness and colonial position. Thus, like Bertha, Salish is “a casualty of patriarchal, colonialist, and ableist hegemony” (Nygren 2016: 117). As a result, *Taboo* conflates these two Othering traits —madness and ethnicity— to depict both Delaney and his mother as exotic and dangerous natives. In doing so, the series is replicating —rather than contesting— the abovementioned colonial discourse present in *Jane Eyre*. Moreover, after marrying Delaney’s father, Salish was forced to pass as an Italian countess and to change her name to “Anna”, so as to conceal her ethnic origin. Salish’s passing echoes the harsh representation of miscegenation and interracial relations in Victorian literature, which were “exhibited at their best by sidestepping the racial Otherness of one of the lovers (a mainstream example is Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*) and at their worst by utterly demonizing interracialism” (Martín-González 2016: 195). Hence, in muting the racialized and disabled female character, *Taboo* is reproducing the ideologies of these Victorian novels that demonised, Othered and silenced racialized characters for the benefit of their white counterparts (Primorac 2018: 58).

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It is also worth noting that Salish is depicted as a persistent ghost that haunts her son’s memories throughout Season 1, particularly when he bathes in the river —the place where she tried to murder him. The figure of the ghost features prominently in trauma research, particularly in two related critical sources: Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994), and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s *The Shell and the Kernel* (1987). In these cases, ghosts are a metaphor for the victim’s need to remember and tell their stories “for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Lewis-Herman 1992: 1). As discussed above, Salish has a very limited presence in the show. We only get to know her through Delaney’s fragmented and distorted memories, especially in the one where she is bathing in the river fully clothed and covered in Native American body paint. As a result, Salish could be considered an apparition that haunts Delaney’s memories and embodies the patriarchal and colonial violence that her husband inflicted upon her. Ghosts haunt the living in order to share their traumatic stories and seek reparations for the atrocities they endured (Lewis-Herman 1992: 1). Hence, it could be argued that Salish haunts her son, an imperial coloniser like his father, to make him reflect on his past crimes and prevent him from repeating them in the future. However, Delaney’s conflicting moral views —those of a former slave trader who, at the same time, criticises and resents his father for buying his Native American mother and imposing his culture on her— obliterate any possible reparation to the racial Other in the series.

Morag suggests that there is also an “unwelcome ghost”, that of the perpetrator, “who stands as a profound challenge and hurdle for the society at whose behest s/he was sent” (2013: 5). While he was in Africa, Delaney discovered that his father had bought Salish along with a piece of Native American land called Nootka Sound thirty years prior to the events depicted in the series. After his father dies, Delaney returns to England to inherit and take over that territory, as its strategic location—close to the isle of Vancouver and the American-Canadian border—could benefit him economically. However, both the EIC and the British Crown are also interested in acquiring this territory for the very same reason. The former make Delaney a generous offer and try to appeal to his patriotism as an English subject, but he refuses to sell because he plans to make a deal with the Americans to establish a monopoly on Chinese tea there. When Delaney comes back to England, he is feared and described as a ghost by the rest of society because he was thought to be dead. An example is when Sir Stuart Strange tells him, “[i]n those days, I always chose boys who had the shadow of death on them. I thought they were less likely to return. Of course, they do return... as ghosts” (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 8, min. 3). Following Morag’s reasoning, Delaney would represent the unwanted ghost of the perpetrator that the EIC company sent to perform the atrocity of slave trading in the Middle Passage. However, they do not want to take responsibility for the atrocity they committed “by proxy” (Morag 2013: 8) after profiting from it, so they reject the unwelcome ghost of the perpetrator because it is a reminder of their unacknowledged guilt. In portraying both Delaney and his mother—the main ethnic characters in *Taboo*—as ghosts, the series is further alienating them from the rest of the characters—who are depicted as white and alive. As a result, their ghostly nature could be considered as another Othering trait that exoticises these ethnic characters.

The Delaney family is also portrayed as highly dysfunctional due to the half-siblings’ incestuous relationship. Incest is a salient trope in neo-Victorian narratives of family trauma (Llewellyn 2010), particularly in neo-Victorianism on screen, as in the case of *Crimson Peak*, *Penny Dreadful* or *Carnival Row*. The main characters in these narratives are usually individuals “whose lives are profoundly affected by dysfunctional parental and sibling ties, and who must negotiate a precarious sense of self against the backdrop of past and present family trauma played out over their bodies” (Heilmann & Llewellyn 2010: 41). Incest was also a prominent literary trope that developed “at the heart of the Romantic movement” during the early nineteenth century (Richardson 1985: 738), when *Taboo* is set. English Romantic poetry particularly focused on brother-sister or sibling relationships, as opposed to the portrayal of incest during the Gothic period, which explored incest between parents and children (Richardson 1985: 738). In *Taboo*, it is implied that the siblings had an illegitimate child, so that their father sent Delaney to the EIC

military seminar in Woolwich, where he became an exceptional cadet. In that seminar, he was trained in the Company’s imperialist practices that he would later implement against African slaves in the Middle Passage. As he tells Sir Stuart Strange, chairman of the EIC, “[c]onquest? Rape? Plunder? I studied your methods in your school and I do know the evil that you do because I was once part of it” (Knight, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 1, mins. 50-51).

The idea that perpetrators can be traumatised on account of the perpetration itself—rather than by a previous event they experienced as victims—is not yet accepted by either trauma scholars or society at large, since perpetrators are deemed “unworthy” of being heard (Mohamed 2015: 1177). Nonetheless, it seems that performing an atrocity or crime might cause “a psychological injury” to perpetrators, who can, as a result, experience post-traumatic symptoms that are similar to those of the victims, including nightmares, insomnia, flashbacks or paranoia, among others (Karam 2019: 74). Delaney seems to have symptoms related to his traumas as both victim and perpetrator. Throughout Season 1, he has intrusive flashbacks of his mother bathing in the river where she tried to drown him, especially when he finds himself in a marine environment—i.e. a river or the sea. But he also has vivid flashbacks to his time as a slave trader in an EIC ship called the Cornwallis—later renamed the Influence. One of these memories is about a stormy night when the ship was wrecked and he was ordered to trap the slaves in the hold so that they would sink with the ship. In this recurring flashback, there are African men and women crying out, with their hands reaching out through the iron bars of the hold while they are drowning (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 3). As Felipe Espinoza Garrido contends, “[t]he murder of enslaved people serves as a symbolical original sin of Delaney, and, by implication, the EIC and Britain in the nineteenth century” (2020: 218-219).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Delaney also has paranoid episodes related to this event, where African slaves directly accuse him of their ordeal: “You did this. You will pay for this” (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 1, min. 38). Nevertheless, Morag contends that even if the symptoms experienced by perpetrators resemble those of the victims, the former actually lie “in the profound moral contradictions challenging the perpetrators rather than in their psychological disintegration or disturbing and intrusive memories” (2013: 19). Delaney experiences these moral contradictions, as he struggles between his business plans in America—that would perpetuate his colonial atrocities—and his guilty conscience.

Scholars that mainly focus their studies on the trauma of the victims have traditionally maintained that perpetrators refuse to take responsibility for their crimes by making up excuses to shift the blame on to the victims themselves. According to Judith Lewis-Herman:

In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting [...] After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. (1992: 7-8)

Delaney repeatedly returns to the site of his crimes in his mind, where ghosts of African slaves haunt him. However, he confronts them without taking responsibility for his actions: “You are not here. You are not here. You are not here. I have no fear for you and I have no guilt for you. I did as others did and as others had me do, and we are all owned, and we have all owned others... So don’t you dare stand there and judge me” (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 1, mins. 39-40). Thus, he blames his superiors and the system that allowed those atrocities to happen in the first place and that, to some degree, even normalised them.

The horrors of slavery and the Middle Passage took place in the context of imperialism and colonialism, which could be considered what Robert Jay Lifton defines as an “atrocity-producing situation”. Such situations are so “structured, psychologically and militarily that ordinary people [...] can commit atrocities” (in Morag 2018: 15). In these environments, a sense of “sanctioned brutality becomes the norm” so that perpetrators can justify any aberrant action: “dormant sadistic impulses are expressed”, and there is a “quest for meaning through the act of atrocity” (Morag 2018: 15). In these cases, Morag contends, the power structures responsible for sending soldiers to atrocity-producing situations need to acknowledge their complicity in those crimes to help society move forward (17). In the case of *Taboo*, the EIC is the imperialist power that has been profiting from the horrors of slavery and that sent men to commit atrocities in their name against African subjects. However, several critics have pointed out *Taboo*’s historical inaccuracy in portraying the EIC as more powerful and cruel than it really was (Singh 2014; Major 2017; Mousoutzanis 2020.), while at the same time ignoring “its most significant sphere of influence” (Major 2017), India, that is largely absent from the series. By 1814, the influence of the EIC was waning. As a result, in depicting it as more influential and sinister than it really was, *Taboo* is “both in tandem with and in reaction against the imperial nostalgia” that characterises neo-Victorian Gothic on screen (Mousoutzanis 2020: 10).

However, the power structures promoting perpetration by placing soldiers —or crew members, such as Delaney in *Taboo*— in atrocity-producing situations are neither interested in acknowledging their responsibility nor in allowing perpetrators to own up to the traumatic crimes they carried out in their name, even though “acknowledgement of perpetrators’ trauma will set in motion society’s acknowledgment of the perpetrator as its envoy, and its relation to (usually ethnic)

others” (Morag 2013: 7). This is the case of Sir Stuart Strange, who refuses to admit his active participation in the illegal slave trade and tries to prevent Delaney from confessing his crimes (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 8). Likewise, mass atrocities are usually not processed or “become part of systemic atrocities that have undergone naturalization and are thus difficult to notice even as they are being produced” (Morag 2013: 7). The horrors of slavery and colonialism as depicted in *Taboo* are arguably examples of these naturalised atrocities, since ethnic Others were deemed inferior to white individuals and their ordeal was, therefore, accepted as normal and necessary, or simply ignored. Accepting the trauma of the perpetrator would allow us to translate a seemingly individual experience into a collective one, “thus healing the social order and the (ethnic) other” (Morag 2013: 9).

Most perpetrators experience a “static” or passive guilt, characterised by a sense of self-hatred or a numbed culpability that does not contribute to any positive social change (Morag 2013: 18). Delaney seems to experience this type of guilt, as he attempts to numb his conscience by drinking alcohol and focusing on his new business endeavours, rather than acknowledging his responsibility. However, perpetrators need to transform these passive feelings into an active sense of guilt that will allow them to bring about a meaningful social change. This active guilt should be motivated by the perpetrator’s empathy for their victims, a willingness to take responsibility for their atrocities and the need to look forward, rather than backwards. Looking forward would involve “halting policies that lead to atrocity, increasing the impact of international human rights norms [...] making reparations, [and] encouraging domestic activism”, among others (Morag 2013: 18). As discussed above, traumatised subjects have a need to share their stories with an empathetic audience, as this sets in motion their healing process. As the only survivor of the crew of the Cornwallis, Delaney is asked by Mr. Chichester (Lucian Msmati) —the spokesperson for the Sons of Africa, a political group that promotes the rights of Black people— to write a full statement naming Sir Stuart Strange as the person responsible for the loading of the Cornwallis with slaves and for sending it to a sugar plantation in Antigua that was owned by Strange’s own brother. In exchange, Delaney would receive a full pardon for his crimes (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 7). Mousoutzanis contends that Delaney attempts to work through the traumatic experience of the sinking slave ship by verbalising it in this legal document (2020: 7-8), where he writes: “When the Cornwallis left Cabinda and became the Influence, it was I, James Delaney, who stowed the Jack and Company flags. An East India Company ship, renamed, laden with illegal slaves and flying the stars and stripes... At the direct request of Sir Stuart Strange” (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 8, mins. 6-7). Mousoutzanis argues that the fact that Delaney overcomes his trauma by confessing his crimes to Chichester

is evidenced by how he sees the latter as a double of the ghosts of Black slaves that haunt him (2020: 8). Thus, in acknowledging his guilt to a former African slave and in helping him to make reparations to the African people, Delaney might feel that his former actions can be forgiven.

However, the main aim of the perpetrator's confession is not to be forgiven or understood (Morag 2013). In fact, there is a significant difference between the victim's testimony and the perpetrator's confession. Whilst the victim's cathartic release requires witness identification and empathy, the aggressor's confession is characterised by its "uncathartic nature". Morag offers the term "perpetrator's empathic unsettlement",<sup>4</sup> which could be defined as an empathic response to the victim that will motivate the perpetrator to transform any form of self-pity, guilt or self-hatred into "self-denouncement" (2013: 21). Even though perpetrators might have a concealed longing for forgiveness during the act of confession, this "should not override their sense of guilt and shame" (Morag 2013: 24). Thus, the main objective of the perpetrator's confession should not be to obtain society's forgiveness and a subsequent sense of closure —as Mousoutzanis suggests that Delaney achieves when he embarks on his ship bound for America (2020: 8)— but, rather, to help society move forward. However, Delaney does not really intend to make reparations to the African people or to help British society move beyond the horrors of slavery with his confession, as he is not really a repented criminal. He merely wants to implicate Sir Stuart Strange and the EIC in the illegal slave trade in order to secure the Nootka Sound territory for his own capitalist venture.

Indeed, despite Delaney's post-traumatic symptoms and his numbed guilt throughout Season 1, his main objective ever since he returned from Africa was to acquire a ship that would take him to the North-West coast of America, where he could benefit from the strategic position of the Nootka Sound land for trading purposes. As he himself admits: "I will cede sovereignty of Nootka Sound to whichever nation offers me their monopoly on the trade of furs for tea from Fort George to Canton. That's what I want. All the tea in China" (Steven, Hardy and Hardy 2017: episode 3, min. 6). This business enterprise on the Pacific Coast could be considered as a colonial appropriation of the natural resources of the land that once belonged to the Native American Nootka tribe. As Mousoutzanis points out, "[t]his new beginning [...] represents an imperialist project that is not unlike those of the EIC: Delaney embodies both the trauma of colonialism and its very epitome" (2020: 8). As a result, Delaney is both perpetuating and contesting the imperial and colonialist practices of the EIC that he was seemingly trying to expose over the course of Season 1. Moreover, in presenting him as both a mixed-race traumatised perpetrator that has learnt African languages and rituals, but also as a



willing English coloniser that intends to capitalise on a tea monopoly by exploiting the Natives’ land, Delaney —and by extension, *Taboo*— encapsulates the very essence of neo-Victorian postcolonial narratives on screen: they first offer a promising critique of imperial ideologies and policies, only to ultimately replicate and perpetuate them with their conservative, clichéd and Othering adaptation of the long nineteenth century.

## 5. Conclusion

As has been discussed throughout the article, Trauma Studies have traditionally focused on the victim’s perspective, but there is currently a growing interest in the perpetrator’s trauma and experience, particularly in its representation at a cinematic level. This is the case of some neo-Victorian postcolonial screen texts, such as *Taboo*, which attempt to expose the imperial atrocities of slavery, colonialism and the Middle Passage through the trauma and unresolved guilt of the mass perpetrator. Nevertheless, neo-Victorian postcolonialism on screen is characterised by its ambivalent representations of the empire, including its expansionist policies and Orientalising stereotypes of the ethnic Other.

*Taboo* follows this contradictory pattern, as it attempts to denounce the imperial crimes of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade through the trauma of the imperial perpetrator, James Delaney —who is also a biracial individual. However, the stereotyped portrayal of non-white communities, both in the case of African and Native American characters, actually reproduces imperial Othering ideologies. This is the case of the mixed-race protagonist, who is ascribed with occult powers on account of his Native American heritage, goes native in Africa and whose return to London threatens the collapse of the EIC —Othering traits that replicate the typical tropes of late Victorian imperial Gothic narratives. Furthermore, in casting a white actor to play the role of a biracial character and his identity struggles, *Taboo* is culturally appropriating the trauma and marginalisation experienced by mixed-race individuals. In doing so, the series is reproducing the colonising practices whereby the empire seized and expropriated the cultural heritage, natural resources and indigenous territories of ethnic communities outside Europe for the profit of white individuals.

Likewise, the trauma of the perpetrator fails to convey a sustained critique of the empire and its colonial atrocities in *Taboo*, given that Delaney is not really a repentant criminal and his confession is not meant to help society move beyond the horrors of slavery, but rather to secure land in the American continent for imperialist and capitalist purposes. Consequently, as an independent agent, Delaney ends up repeating and spreading —rather than denouncing and

preventing—the very same crimes against ethnic subjects that he was once forced to commit by the EIC.

To conclude, both the character of James Delaney and the TV series *Taboo* embody the contradictions of neo-Victorian postcolonial screen texts. The imperial expansionist practices of the former and the stereotypical representations of colonial subjects present in the latter—despite their seemingly progressive and restorative agendas towards the racial Other—reflect the inconsistencies of this neo-Victorian subgenre. Given that Season 1 ends with Delaney’s transatlantic trip to the Americas for capitalist and colonising purposes, it seems that *Taboo* is perpetuating and celebrating imperial policies, instead of challenging them.

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## Notes

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1. These Israeli films include *To See if I'm Smiling* (Yarom 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman 2008) and *Z32* (Mograbi 2008), whose objective was to focus on the trauma and unresolved guilt of Israeli soldiers in the second intifada, so as to make the—mostly Israeli—audience reflect on their level of complicity and responsibility for the atrocities perpetrated against the ethnic Other (Morag 2013).

2. The horrors of the Middle Passage have also been adapted in other neo-Victorian screen texts, most notably in the TV series *Carnival Row* (2019-present) through the fantasy genre, where a scene of a sinking ship that transported war refugees to a reimagined Victorian-style metropolis called The Burgue shares with *Taboo* “the same spatial semantics of surface and submersion, of visible imperial culture and repressed, even

erased, memories of imperial crime” (Espinoza Garrido 2020: 219).

3. PTSD is an umbrella term that comprises the varying responses to personal and collective traumas, such as “rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on” (Caruth 1996: 11). Traumatized patients suffering from PTSD might experience a number of symptoms, most notably “memory gaps, but also repeatedly re-experienced extreme events in flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations months or even years afterwards” (Freud and Breuer 2004: 500).

4. The perpetrator’s empathic unsettlement is based on LaCapra’s theory that witnesses need to develop empathy towards the victim without appropriating or fully identifying with their experience, so as not to become traumatized by it (2001:40).

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