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### Article

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## ‘I have every reason to love England’: Black neo-Victorianism and transatlantic radicalism in Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007)

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### Abstract

This paper provides a close reading on post-colonial engagements with American slavery in Belinda Starling’s neo-Victorian novel *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007), particularly on the transoceanic links between Antebellum America and Victorian Britain. Firstly, this article engages with previous feminist criticism on the novel in order to analyse Starling’s stimulating revision of Victorian female abolitionism and interracial relations. Secondly, drawing on recent historical reconstructions on the presence of American slaves in Victorian England and seeking to open new avenues of research within this novel, this paper considers the transatlantic context inherent in Starling’s narration, particularly the interplay between nineteenth-century radical discourses and African-American discourses of liberation.

Key Words: Neo-Victorianism, Belinda Starling, *The Journal of Dora Damage*, Transatlanticism, Abolitionism

“I have now been in this country nineteen months, and I have travelled through the length and breadth of it. I came here a slave. I landed upon your shores a degraded being, lying under the load of odium heaped upon my race by the American press, pulpit, and people. I have gone through the wide extent of this country [ . . . ] Wherever I have gone, I have been treated with the utmost kindness [ . . . ] and I have every reason to love England.” – Frederick Douglass, “Farewell to the British People: At London Tavern, London, England, March 30, 1847.”

### Introduction

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1847 Frederick Douglass delivered his farewell speech to Victorian England. His words, quoted in the above epigraph, indicate what Victorian Britain could have meant to African-Americans in the aftermath of the Slave Emancipation Act of 1833, which arguably put an end to slavery throughout the British Empire. Nevertheless, Douglass and his African-American comrades’ enchantment with Victorian Britain was not free from contradictions since they were appealing to a country

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which at the time was setting the foundations for late-Victorian scientific racism, a project which secured the British Empire's subjugation of non-white races and provided the basis for modern-day racism (Brantlinger 2011: 6-7). The purpose of my paper is analysing the presence of African-Americans in nineteenth century England as well as deconstructing Victorian Britain's role in the post-slavery period and the American Civil War as it is reflected in Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007).

Starling's neo-Victorian narration deals with a bookbindress who, facing the prospect of taking care of her epileptic daughter and her dying husband in mid-Victorian London, gets entangled in the sordid trade of binding Victorian pornography and on the way starts an intimate affair with Din, a former American slave. The centrality of female issues in the novel has naturally spun off manifold analyses focusing on the feminist discourses in the narration (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 131; Muller 2012: 122; Novák 2013: 114) and occasionally on disability studies (Arias 343). Although Dora and Din's relationship has occasionally been negatively criticized as a weak point in the narration by neo-Victorian scholars (Kohlke 2008: 198), my paper however seeks to challenge that assumption in accordance with more recent evaluations of Dora and Din's relationship (Muller 2012: 127) by suggesting that, even if the feminist and postcolonial discourses occasionally clash and contradict each other, the character of Din proves to be a catalyst for the female protagonist's feminist agenda in the face of the patriarchal and racist discourses which over-inhabit the novel. That said, my paper aims firstly to provide a complementary reading to the previous feminist analyses provided by neo-Victorian critics by placing the focus on Dora's relationship with Din. Secondly, this paper seeks to explore further areas of research which have been largely unnoticed in previous criticism on Starling's novel, particularly Din's conflicting relation to Victorian Britain. Regarding this last point, I argue that Starling's novel delves into Din's contradictory appropriation of Victorianism to provide a transoceanic perspective on Britain's role in the American Civil War, on the one hand, and to hybridize our cultural memory of Victorian Britain on the other.

*“Charming nigger philanthropy”: British female abolitionism, feminism and interracialism*

*The Journal of Dora Damage* deals with a Victorian lower-class woman who must take up the family business, a bookbindery, because her husband suffers from rheumatism. Little by little Dora gets entangled in the sordid trade of binding Victorian pornography in the hands of a pseudo-scientific group called Les Sauvages Nobles, in which the pornographer Mr Diprose and the scientist Sir Jocelyn Knightley are its most infamous participants. To complicate the plot, Dora is obliged to take as an apprentice Din Nelson, a former slave fleeing the American Civil War, with whom she enters into an intimate relationship and who has been brought to Britain by Lady Knightley and her Ladies’ Society for Fugitive Slaves. Lady Knightley’s “charming nigger philanthropy” (Starling 2007: 105), as it is referred to derogatorily by Sir Knightley, conceals dark motives though: Sir Knightley’s wife and her fellow female abolitionists sexually exploit freed slaves by compelling them to pose semi-nude in order to enact rape fantasies.

Starling’s racy account of female abolitionism pinpoints the sexual innuendo which filtered, on the one hand, into nineteenth-century abolitionist writings and slave narratives, and on the other into the tales of white women raped by black slaves which circulated in the British press, illustrated by one of the volumes which Dora is set to bind in the workshop: “The Negro’s Revenge. Young wife violated by Negro in revenge for cruelties by master” (Starling 2007: 204).<sup>1</sup> Regarding the former, Victorian readers were for sure familiar with slave narratives from African Americans, which depicted highly-sexualised images of torture,

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<sup>1</sup> The trope of the black male abusing the white female proves a problematic point in the novel. Starling’s sardonic portrayal of Lady Knightley’s Society for Fugitive Slaves, in its re-enactment of rape fantasies, seems aimed at contesting tales of black males abusing white women which pervaded the Victorian press. The novel seems to provide in this sub-plot an exponent of what Celia R. Daileader has called *Othellophilia*, or the English myth about the black male’s sexual rapacity which sought to perpetuate sexist and racist hegemonies (Daileader 2005: 1-8). However, as it is suggested by Caterina Novák, once it is revealed that Sir Knightley is of mixed parentage after his mother was raped by a black man in Algeria, the novel thwarts its critique on Victorian racism by suggesting that tales of violent black males abusing white women were actually true (Novák 2013: 132).

flagellation, abuse and sadism. Colette Colligan puts it bluntly: “Information about the graphic violence and corrupt sexuality of the slave system produced sympathy and disgust among many British citizens, but for some it also elicited sexual arousal and fantasy” (2005: 68). Lady Knightley’s philanthropic work in the assistance of fugitive slaves, which takes a veneer of respectability in her attendance to lectures by former American slaves, serves only to cloak her prurient gaze over the sordid aspects of American slavery and in broader terms, to underscore mid-Victorian thirst for titillation and sensationalist details of sex and violence in the American slave system which concerned the Victorian press.<sup>2</sup>

If the Ladies’ Society for Fugitive Slaves in general and Lady Knightley in particular, in their sexual objectification of slaves, provide an instance of female agency within colonial power, so it does the eponymous protagonist Dora, who also seems temporarily tainted by the all-pervasive racism which is exhibited by the remaining male and female characters and which finds its most extreme exponent in the sexually racist literature that she feels compelled to bind in order to support her family. On request by Lady Knightley and her Society, Dora takes Din Nelson, a former African American slave, as an apprentice in her business and on his arrival to the workshop, Victorian racist prejudices come to light in Dora’s perception of the ex-slave. Not only does she misattribute the awful smell of burnt milk on her stove to the presence of Din in her home (Starling 2007: 174) but additionally she expects to see in the ex-slave “everything I had heard about the African; he would, I feared, be idle, servile, lacking in loyalty and discipline, and, in short, nothing but trouble in the workshop” (Starling 2007: 176). As the pornographic volumes in the commissions from Les Savauges Nobles turn increasingly more racist and offensive, Dora is pressed by Sir Knightley and his assistant Charles

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<sup>2</sup> In *American Slaves in Victorian England* (2001), Audrey Fisch exemplifies the worries of the Victorian press over the ‘sexsensationalising’ details in American slave narratives and African-American lecture tours in Britain in the persona of J.B Estlin, a white abolitionist from Bristol who refused to circulate Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* on grounds of English taste and protection over British young women until certain sexually explicit sections were omitted (Fisch 2009: 1-2). Fisch rightly indicates that Estlin’s attempt to bowdlerize Douglass’s *Narrative* seemed an idiosyncratic drive to maintain personal respectability and social values, in sharp contrast with the sensationalism which permeated Victorian reading habits in the mid-nineteenth century (Fisch 2009: 3).

Diprose to secure Din's loyalty in their illegal trade of binding and circulating pornography, which translates in Dora's appropriation of the language and role of the coloniser. As she looks determined to find out why Din leaves the bindery earlier on Fridays (he participates in bare-knuckle fights), she rehearses the coloniser-colonised dynamics: "he was my slave [. . .] I would have power over him. I believe now that that was what I wanted most: power over the man" (Starling 2007: 267).

To further complicate the strained links between feminist and racial discourses as it is illustrated in the novel, Dora and Din transcend their initial coloniser-colonised relationship to enter into an intimate inter-racial love affair, letting their mutual attraction for each other run free. Failing to accomplish the one-year mourning period expected to be fulfilled by Victorian widows, Dora's sexual entanglement with Din clashes with the widespread Victorian abhorrence on miscegenation, as it is exhibited in Dora's shame right after they have consummated their attraction (Starling 2007: 365). As Marie-Luise Kohlke points out, Starling's neo-Victorian novel illustrates in Dora and Din's relationship a salient under-represented topic in Victorian literature, that of interracial love affairs (Kohlke 2008: 198), 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.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, some neo-Victorian scholars have taken Dora and Din's intimation as a target of criticism rather than as an attempt to re-inscribe interracialism in Victorian culture. In particular, Kohlke affirms that "Dora and Din's relationship proves one of the weak points of Starling's novel, inevitably recycling the black man/white woman fantasy it critiques" (Kohlke 2008: 198), a criticism seemingly endorsed by Caterina Novák (Novák 2013: 132), although neither of them actually reveal the specific nature of such fantasy. In the novel Mr Diprose hints at the arguable morbid nuances in Dora's infatuation with the ex-slave, as it is indicated

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<sup>3</sup> In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Heathcliff is repeatedly referred to as a 'gypsy' and the manifold 'blackening' references to his physical features indicate that he is definitely not white (Daileader 2005: 143-147). For an overview on the 'contagion' overtones of Victorian perceptions on miscegenation, the demonization and gothicization of interracial relations in Victorian popular fiction and their resonance in the Victorian press see Malchow (1996) (Malchow 1996: 168-171, 239-243).

in his disgusting teasing of the protagonist: “It is quite extraordinary, the number of seemingly respectable women who lose all sense of decorum at the smell of black meat [. . .] Is it true, then, Mrs Damage, what they say about the nether parts of monkeys?” (Starling 2007: 221).<sup>4</sup> However, a closer scrutiny of Dora’s relationship with “Dinjerous Din” (Starling 2007: 275), as Din’s fellow ex-slaves call him, reveals a more positive view on its function in the novel. Specifically I contend that it catalyses the female protagonist’s feminist agenda, following Nadine Muller’s telling affirmation that Dora’s attainment of sexual pleasure with Din, in contrast with her sexless marriage, marks the female protagonist’s disregard of the racist, sexist and sadomasochistic practices which are illustrated in the pornographic volumes she is compelled to bind every day (Muller 2012: 127).

In effect, on her first sexual encounter with Din (Starling 2007: 361), Dora tries unsuccessfully to reproduce what she has observed in Sir Knightley’s pornographic books, failing to see that Victorian pornographic narratives are targeted simultaneously for the delectation of males and the subjugation of females and non-white Others rather than for female sexual pleasure. It is only when she lets her attraction for Din grow naturally, in their subsequent sexual encounters, that she truly acquires sexual knowledge: “I learnt more over those five days about the inner workings of our hearts and bodies that I had done in over a year of binding erotic texts” (Starling 2007: 371). Dora’s sexual intimation with Din, therefore, marks the neo-Victorian heroine’s sexual awakening but most importantly, her personal challenge to the sexual and racist discourses from which ironically she profits to feed her family. Far from being a weak point in the narration, Dora and Din’s mutual affection for each other articulates their personal reaction against the sexual and racial strictures imposed upon them by Victorian society before they may embark on their personal/political projects: female liberation and a financially independent

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<sup>4</sup> Stereotypes about black males’ sexual potency are also referred in Nora Hague’s *Letters from an Age of Reason* (2001), another neo-Victorian text dealing with interracial affairs. The protagonist Aubrey, an African-American former slave, tells how a Unionist soldier in the aftermath of the American antebellum was “perversely curious about my habits as a Negro. He took specific interest in my relations with women, having heard amazing tales of black stamina and black female promiscuity from his Northern cohorts” (Hague 2001: 154).

life in the case of Dora and in the case of Din, the emancipation of his race in the American Civil War.

*'Dinjerous Din': Black (neo)Victorians and transatlantic radicalism*

As a neo-Victorian novel written in a post-colonial mode, *The Journal of Dora Damage* provides a remediation on a significant loophole in Victorian literature, which is the absence of race as an explicit subject in nineteenth-century fiction. Celia R. Daileader affirms that “talking about race in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American canon often feels like navigating around a black hole. With the obvious exception of abolitionist literature [. . .] black characters are either simply not there at all, or so brutally abjected, demonized or stereotyped as to seem unworthy of intelligent critical comment” (Daileader 2005: 75). Considering this, part of the revisionist drive which informs Starling’s novel (together with an interrogation on Victorian feminism, gender and sexuality) is linked to constructions of race, subalternity and the memory of the British Empire. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> the novel interrogates the role of Victorian Britain in the abolitionist movement via Sir Knightley’s voice: “Does it strike you as strange that, having so benefited from slavery for centuries, our conscience should only stir when more profitable methods of sugar production are discovered?” (Starling 2007: 105). In parallel to Dora, who becomes an anachronistic Third-Wave feminist (Novák 2013: 133), Sir Knightley assumes a contemporary post-colonial guise (Kohlke 2008: 198), contradictorily articulating an ‘Empire-Strikes-Back’ discourse to underscore the economic reasons underlying British abolitionism: “it was market forces, rather than morality, that led to the abolition of the British slave trade” (Starling 2007: 105).

Sir Knightley’s anti-imperialist words are in tune with historical analyses on the West Indies which point out an economic background in British abolitionism: “Although in the eighteenth century West Indian sugar was a one-way ticket to economic prosperity, it was fighting a losing battle against foreign competition by the early years of the nineteenth century. Many British sugar producers were losing money in the years which led up to abolition. The compensation offered by the British

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<sup>6</sup> I provide a brief reading of Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* in the context of British imperial history and postcolonial thought in Martín-González (2015: 116-118).

government gave the slave owners an easy way to escape from what was already looking like a bleak economic future” (McDonough 1994: 17). Additionally, from a historical point of view, two additional facts problematise the role of British Abolitionism in effectively fighting slavery. Firstly, right after the abolition of slavery in 1833, the British Empire secured its economic interests by means of the Apprenticeship system and indentureship, whose workers led a living not very different from slaves before the emancipation (Ramdim 1999: 49-52). Secondly, despite the fact that eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Britons prided themselves on starting the abolitionist movement by means of acts in parliament, imperial historians highlight equally the role of black resistance: “In practice [. . .] it can be argued that slavery disappeared in England ‘sometime between the 1760s and 1790s’ not so much through the processes of law but as a consequence of the resistance and escape of the slaves themselves” (Holmes 1988: 9-10).

What has been largely unnoticed by the criticism on *The Journal of Dora Damage* is the potential of the text to hybridize our cultural memory of the Victorian age. Starling’s narration provides an imaginative act of fictional recovery coalescing with historical reconstructions on the presence of black citizens in Victorian Britain, which according to Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, feature as a gap in the historiography of Black British history (Holbrook Gerzina 2003: 5). Vanessa D. Dickerson points out an increase in the flux of black immigrants into Victorian Britain between the 1830s and the years approaching the American Civil War (Dickerson 2008: 53). Focusing on nineteenth-century London, Judith Bryan establishes a visible presence of dark subjects at the turn of the nineteenth-century and throughout the Victorian age (Bryan 2004: 66-68). The multicultural character of London in the first half of the Victorian age was already noted by Thomas Carlyle, a Victorian social critic infamously known for his imperialistic and racist essay “An Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question” (1853) and who fiercely opposed black liberation and abolitionism. In a letter to his brother in 1824, Carlyle refers disdainfully to the multicultural nature of Victorian London, alluding to “a thousand pigmies, and the innumerable jinglings and rollings and crashings of manycoloured labour” (cited in Dickerson 2008: 81). A more positive observation on Victorian London’s polycultural character was provided by William Wells Brown, a runaway African-American slave who on a visit to Victorian London wrote: “In an hour’s walk through the

Strand, Regent-street or Piccadilly, one may meet half a dozen coloured men, who are inmates of the various colleges in the metropolis. These are all signs of progress in the cause of the sons of Africa” (cited in Bryan 2004: 65). Dora’s words on the arrival of Din in the workshop, “none of us was unfamiliar with the sight of black people” (Starling 2007: 178) and her later observation on the manifold non-white subjects populating Whitechapel streets (Starling 2007: 271) showcases Starling’s fictional reconstruction of the multiculturalism inherent to mid-Victorian London.

Din’s words in describing English people are revealing: “Mighty helpful, ma’am. Civil as they could be. They do not trouble me while I walk the streets. When I hail an omnibus it stops [. . .] That never happened at home, even before I was caught” (Starling 2007: 193). The inherent contradictions of associating the Victorian age, the epitome of imperialism and colonial domination, with the liberation of African American slaves only reveals the complexities of the term ‘Victorianism’ and what it has meant to past and present generations. To Din, and by extension to nineteenth-century African Americans, Victorian Britain represents a model of respectability, democracy and modernity, the very values of citizenship that black slaves were denied by the American slave system. Hence that Din’s ‘reason to love England’, to quote Douglass again, illustrated touchingly by Starling as Din sings and plays with street children or politely raises his hat to women in the neighbourhood on his way to the bookbindery (Starling 2007: 178,187), far exceeds the Victorian racism embodied by the Knightley couple. Din’s close status as a citizen in his free wandering around Victorian London coalesces with the tolerance he enjoys in the bookbindery, not only from Dora but also from Jack, Dora’s helper in the bookbindery and later imprisoned for homosexual practices. Ironically, it is in the bookbindery, surrounded by volumes of racist and sexist Victorian pornography, where Din enjoys more tolerance and respect, increasingly mastering the craft and participating in the artistic process of binding books, “making something beautiful out of something ugly” (Starling 2007: 163). The bookbindery then becomes the site where racist and sexist prejudices are bound in paper and ready to circulate and simultaneously the very locus of subalternity where those prejudices are debunked.

Din’s stay on Victorian soil provides him not only with the possibility of rehearsing his citizenship rights, but also with a channel for verbalizing his experiences in captivity to secure his political agenda of black

liberation in nineteenth-century America. Indeed Starling's narrative wants the reader to associate Din with the African-American abolitionist campaign (Fisch 2009: 5), a term used by Audrey Fisch to refer to the international and transatlantic phenomenon of African-American (ex)slaves who wrote slave narratives, delivered lectures on their experiences or showed personal bodily scars to reveal the atrocities of American slavery in Victorian Britain in the years leading to the American Civil War. The novel alludes to the manifold activities of African-Americans in nineteenth-century Britain through the abolitionist activities of Lady Knightley: "You may have heard of Mr Frederick Douglass, Mr William Wells Brown, Mr Josiah Henson & many others [. . .] Many is the lecture I have attended given by these eminent former slaves, and I wish I could share with you now the eloquence with which they captivate their audience: they terrify & enthral, & elicit copious tears, reverent anger, & inspired action!" (Starling 2007: 206). In a parallel way, Din's private retelling to Dora about his experience as a slave, about how his father and Mother, a preacher and nurse respectively, enjoyed free life with their children until they were ambushed and auctioned in Virginia (Starling 2007: 195) not only transforms Dora's perception about the slavery experience in America, vanishing "the images I had envisaged of a small boy being transported from the tropics in the fetid hold of a vast ship" (Starling 2007: 194), but also reveals Din as an agent in his own liberation beyond Lady Knightley's self-gratifying abolitionist activities.

Starling's narration seems indeed driven to make Din participant in the political agenda of the African-American abolitionist campaign. When Dora is asked by Lady Knightley to bind several copies of Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, with the specific requirement that an engraving of Douglass's profile is put on the cover, it turns out that, as Dora draws some sketches of Douglass's profile by using several recent portraits for reference, "every face on every scrap of paper bore little resemblance to Frederick Douglass, with his large hair, and straight nose, and looked every inch like our own Din Nelson" (Starling 2007: 211). The novel's motivation in establishing an association between Din and Douglass seems evident: Din's agency in revealing the horrors of American slavery through his personal experiences must be equated with that of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Alexander Crummell, Martin Delaney, or Ida B. Wells, to name a just a few African Americans

who crossed the Atlantic Ocean to bring their transoceanic testimonies on the horrors of American slavery to Victorian Britons.

The transatlantic interplay between Black America and Victorian Britain reveals a double drive, a conduit for mutual influence which finds resonance in the recovery of the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy's term for the hybrid, fractal and transcultural circulation of subjects and ideas across the Atlantic ocean as a result of the slave trade which unearths black subjects as historical agents with an intellectual history (Gilroy 1993: 4-6).<sup>7</sup> Belinda Starling's narration aims at making Din participant in this transatlantic fluidity when Dora finds out that the ex-slave is plotting against the American Confederacy during his stay in the Victorian metropolis. In one of the most imaginative sections in the novel, Dora secretly follows Din through Whitechapel up to a public-house in a basement, where she learns that Din gathers with some fellow African-Americans and other white activists, both male and female, to organise resistance against the American South at the other side of the Atlantic, up to the point of planning to kidnap Jefferson Davis, president of the seceded Southern states in the years leading to the American Civil War (Starling 2007: 273-75). As Dora listens behind her mourning veil while sitting furtively in a dark corner of the cellar, Din and his companions start using war-like vocabulary, planning to use their 'scouts' in Mississippi to 'strike' in South Carolina and on the way they mention names and places which, at this point in the narration, Dora is unaware of: "Quickly the discussion grew, and the atmosphere in the room was as serious as death. Most of what they said passed me by completely; names of people and places were tossed around, some I'd heard of before, others which were completely new to me. Someone mentioned Freddie: Freddie Douglass. Harpers Ferry. John Brown. The conversation heated up [. . .] What was it then? An abominable brotherhood? A satanic sect?" (Starling 2007: 273). As the conversation continues, Dora finds out the true nature on the transgression she is witnessing: "I was sharing a room with a renegade group of fugitives in a tiny corner of an unimportant district of London, yet here the plans to overthrow the entire remaining centuries-old institution of slavery were being laid down" (Starling 2007: 276).

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Ho points out the surprising reluctance within postcolonial criticism of neo-Victorian fiction to turn to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), despite the big impact and influence of Gilroy's work on literary and cultural studies (Ho 2012: 175).

Din's plotting against the American Confederacy illustrates black resistance to American slavery as a transoceanic force, with black subjects, both free and enslaved, organising resistance on both sides of the Atlantic. Victorian London features as a shelter, a bastion from which African-Americans articulate their liberatory insurrection in the years preceding the American Civil War. In this light, Victorian London does not only provide Din with the possibility of rehearsing his citizenship and his access to modernity, as I have already argued, but also with a sphere of influence from which he can accomplish his political agenda. The narration's portrayal of a group of runaway slaves plotting against the secessionist American South in the heart of Victorian London features a literary exponent of Gilroy's Black Atlantic and additionally it retrieves Black resistance to slavery on Victorian soil from historical oblivion.

It is no coincidence that Din and his fellow renegades invoke the names of Frederick Douglass and John Brown in their plans to fight American Slavery. John Brown was a white abolitionist who unsuccessfully led an armed rebellion against the Southern government by supplying slaves with weapons from the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Regarding Douglass, although his fight against the slave system was carried out through his writings and speeches, he nevertheless justified radical and violent resistance, as it is attested in his defence of the Indian Mutiny or the Jamaican Rebellion (Roediger 2003: 109). Notwithstanding Douglass and Brown's defence of armed rebellion, what is at issue here is that American abolitionists established ideological connections with nineteenth-century European radicalism. David R. Roediger highlights Douglass' contact with Chartist radicals in Britain or Brown's turn to the spirit of the Napoleonic wars for his Pan-African rebellion (Roediger 2003: 102, 105-106) and Judith Bryan draws attention to the considerable degree of black participation in Victorian labour and civil rights movements (Bryan 2004: 68). These fertile intersections between African-American abolitionism and European radical discourses evince on a larger scale, as Fionnghuala Sweeney states, a concurrence between antebellum black resistance and other radical discourses operating in Europe and abroad such as class agitation, women's rights movement or colonial insubordination (Sweeney 2007: 5).

If the appropriation of Victorian ideas and discourses by colonized collectives entailed the infiltration of modernity onto the colonial sphere, as Simon Gikandi argues (Gikandi 2002: 162), Din's access to modernity

via his integration into Victorian society takes the form of a transatlantic radicalism, a procurement of conceptual tools to be used in the liberation of his race back in America. Despite the internal contradictions of associating a discourse of black freedom and liberation with Victorian culture, the epitome of colonial domination, in his embrace of Victorianism Din can be said to embody an Afro-Victorian discourse, Gikandi's term for "the process by which the colonized imagined themselves to be Victorian and the way they adopted the idiom of Victorianism to understand and inscribe their cultural and moral universe" (Gikandi 2002: 159). Din's stay in Victorian England and his appropriation of Victorian radicalism illustrate the transformative potential of geographical mobility and its impact on personal and group identity, as well as the fluid connections between the individual and the nation-state. As the American Civil War breaks out, Din feels compelled to abandon his temporary rehearsal of citizenship on Victorian soil (and the prospect of a romantic happy ending with Dora) to go back to America and fight for the freedom of his race (Starling 2007: 425). Din's transitory exile in Victorian London provides him with the closest he has ever experienced to modern citizenship in contraposition to a homeland that has abused him, a temporary site of renegotiation of his sense of home-belonging and the certainty that black resistance may reach beyond oceanic frontiers.

### *Conclusion*

Amid the convolution of race, gender and class parameters which articulates Starling's narration, sexual hegemonies in which the author implicates her heroine have lured the majority of neo-Victorian criticism of this novel. Feminist analyses of Starling's novel usually highlight the marked conflict between traditional and feminist discourses. With regards to the climactic scene in the novel, in which Dora is kept captive by Mr Diprose and in a trite cliff-hanger Din comes to rescue the protagonist, Novák refers to the heroine as a 'damsel in distress' rescued by her African-American lover in contrast to the resourceful and resolute character who is suggested throughout the narration (Novák 2013: 117). Notwithstanding Starling's conventional attempt to provide a visible role for Din in the resolution of the story, his and Dora's relationship deserves, as I have argued throughout my analysis, a more constructive perspective.

In particular I contend that Dora's entanglement with Din, in contrast to the sexual exploitation carried out by Lady Knightley and her female abolitionists, relies on reciprocal attraction and mutual respect rather than on morbid racial fantasies: "Two human beings met here today, not just a white woman and a black man. You happen to be black and I happen to be white" (Starling 2007: 367). Din is keen to highlight the provocative nature of his relationship with the heroine: "Why is it they think they're bein' dangerous lookin' at a black man with a white woman? [. . .] Cos it's seen to be the wrong way round; the wrong balance of power. White over black, man over woman, that's the right way, ain't it? Black man, white woman, though, stirs it all up, causes bother" (Starling 2007: 365). In short, the author wants the reader to perceive Din and Dora's intimation as a transgressive attack on the hegemony of Victorian racist and sexist structures of power.

Seeking to explore further avenues of research within this novel, I have argued that Starling's text illustrates the transatlantic fluidity between African-American discourses of liberation and Victorian notions of democracy and respectability. I have highlighted different character traits in Din which persuasively indicate that Starling might have modelled her character on black activists such as Frederick Douglass or William Wells Brown, providing a neo-Victorian afterlife to illustrious African-Americans who embraced Victorianism and European discourses of radicalism. Din's simulacrum of citizenship via his immersion in Victorian social milieu articulates a telling contradiction within Victorian culture, as it is summarized by Simon Gikandi: "Colonial subjects were perhaps the furthest removed from the centers of Victorian culture, but they were heavily invested in Victorian values as much, if not more, than the Victorians themselves [. . .] in rehearsing Victorianism and its core values, the colonized were also transforming Victorian categories; they were using the dominant forms of colonialism to express their own experiences" (Gikandi 2002: 159). Colonial subjects' rehearsal of Victorianism referred to by Gikandi appears quite contradictory if we consider the manifold scientific discourses of degeneration which argued against crossbreeding, miscegenation and the equality of races and which proliferated in the second half of the Victorian era (Bolt 2007: 9-11).<sup>8</sup> Din negotiates and

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<sup>8</sup> This contradiction is analogous to Victorian Britain's welcome to mid-nineteenth-century European radicals such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. While their native Germany outlawed them, Victorian Britain provided Marx and

counteracts those racist discourses embodied by the Knightley couple by mobilizing and appropriating mid-Victorian discourses of progress and the freedom of the individual and on the way he situates himself between exclusionary and inclusionary forces, in the gap between deficient American democracy and the pulsing mid-Victorian racism which would later end up in fin-de-siècle jingoism, to build a transoceanic Afro-Victorian discourse of black liberation.

*The Journal of Dora Damage* illustrates Belinda Starling's fictional reconstruction of Victorian interracialism, black resistance and subaltern insurgency on nineteenth-century British soil, exemplifying neo-Victorianism's engagement in postcolonial debates via a creative rewriting of the Victorian age. The representation of the racial Other in the novel displays a "creative challenge to the critical theory concepts of hybridity and the silence of the subaltern" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 69) and modulates English literature's "muted account of [the] presence of the imperial 'periphery' in the 'centre' of empire all through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Khair 2009: 8). Din's subaltern voice is far from being silenced: it sounds loudly from Starling's pages to hybridize our cultural memory of the Victorian age.

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Engels with a shelter from which they could articulate their liberal ideas, including their critique of European capitalism of which, significantly, Britain was a remarkable exponent (Winder 2004: 115).

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