

Neo-Historical Fiction at 2025

Prized Temporalities and Contested Progress

An International Symposium
@ Freie Universität Berlin
2-4 June 2025

Across the political spectrum, historicity has been mobilised as a prized creative and critical lens to make sense of the present. This finds poignant expression in the plethora of twenty-first-century (neo-)historical novels and TV series that are set in the long eighteenth or nineteenth centuries to reimagine the past through an ostensibly more progressive lens, such as queer neo-Victorian formats or *Bridgerton* as an example of neo-Georgian cultural production. And yet, reimagining pasts in this way is hardly an insulation against reactionary views. Not only have formats such as the above been challenged for their persisting investment in orientalism or for their reluctance to broach the reasons for multifaceted inequality, but the historical has also been channelled in political narratives across the board. For example, Donald Trump's second presidential campaign has been deemed 'historic' and his proposed policies have been viewed as nineteenth-century revenants. Similarly, the Thatcher government in the 1980s and David Cameron's government in the UK both stylised their policies and terms of office as a return to 'Victorian Values'. Even further in the past, the term 'Gothic' emerged during England's Civil War (1642–49) to bolster pro-parliamentarian positions, referring to a mythologized history that ostensibly predated the establishing of the British monarchy. Rendering explicit both such prizing of particular histories and the creative usage to which historicity itself is put, Zadie Smith's recent novel, *The Fraud* (2023), collapses different oppositional political ideologies and temporal contexts into one. Via the Tichborne case, the Victorian legal *cause célèbre* at the centre of the novel, Smith not only challenges Britain's longstanding tradition of abolitionist mythmaking but also illuminates the historical roots of Trump-like populist movements. As these eclectic examples suggest, neo-historicity is a mobile phenomenon malleable and adaptable to a variety of aesthetic practices, historical moments, and to different socio-political agendas.

At twenty-five years into the new century, this conference opens up a forum to discuss these manifold currencies, guises, and usages of historical pasts and historicity as such in neo-historical fictions past and present. Our aim is to further understanding regarding how neo-historicity is deployed in cultural productions of different periods to interact with the



respective *status quo* and how these interactions also produce constellations in which some historical reiterations become more prized than others, their symbolic circuits interconnecting historical moments sometimes decades or centuries apart. Such *prized temporalities* - temporal relations; specific renditions of a particular history - become part of valorising narratives that might be far from progressive, yet rich in aesthetics and political potency. As different historical periods and historical distance/difference collapse in a multiverse of social media, it becomes more pivotal than ever to foster modes of perception that can tease apart the accumulating layers of signification that may point towards progressive futures and yet lead back into the murkiest of pasts.

Submissions for conference papers might touch upon points such as the following:

- neo-historicity across the centuries
- neo-historicity in the 2020s
- eighteenth-century imaginations in the nineteenth century
- neo-Victorian, neo-Georgian, neo-Edwardian fictions, neo-eighteenth century (spectral pasts: haunting & Gothic imaginations)
- affect and/or the desire for history/histories
- (un)prized temporalities/ histories/ neo-historicities
- multiple temporalities/neo-historicities captured in literary textures, aesthetics, and structures
- fake progressions, fake stabilities, false dichotomies
- neo-historicity and neo-futures
- neo-fascism and fascist aesthetics
- ...

Please submit your proposals (250 words) to Caroline Koegler, Claire O'Callaghan, and Marlena Tronicke by January 31st via prizeworthiness@temporal-communities.de.

Organisation: Caroline Koegler, Research Area 4: "Literary Currencies"

Time & Location: June 2- June 4, 2025, Freie Universität Berlin | EXC 2020 "Temporal Communities," Otto-von-Simson-Straße 15, 14195 Berlin, Room 00.05

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