

**Remapping the Territory of Victorian Studies:  
Review of Andrew Smith and Anna Barton's *Interventions:  
Rethinking the Nineteenth Century***

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**I**t is a truism to suggest that the nineteenth century and neo-Victorianism have a fraught relationship, but it is less frequently acknowledged that the relationship between Victorian studies and neo-Victorian *criticism* has also been rather vexed. Reviewing the joint North American Victorian Studies Association and British Association of Victorian Studies event, 'Past Versus Present', which took place at Churchill College, Cambridge in 2009, Rohan McWilliam notes that "a spectre is haunting the world of Victorian studies: the spectre of neo-Victorianism" (McWilliam 2009: 106). Whilst the tone of the article is not overtly denigrating of this "new scholarly field" (McWilliam 2009: 106), the writer's Gothicised turn of phrase does imply a certain degree of menace (or, at the very least, disquiet).

Perhaps the way in which we perceive neo-Victorian scholarship's relationship to Victorian studies depends upon individuals' own critical genealogy. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's field-defining study of neo-Victorianism foregrounds their interest in the genre as stemming from their research as Victorianists, stating that "wherever possible [...] we connect our discussion of contemporary cultural debates and modes with similar trends in Victorian studies itself" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 32). This follows Llewellyn's earlier identification of literary academics who are Victorianists and also "addicted" to reading neo-Victorian novels

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(Llewellyn 2009: 28). The notion that Neo-Victorianism is a “guilty pleasure” is sometimes bandied around in commentary about the genre.<sup>1</sup> This speaks to the frequently salacious content of neo-Victorianism – which Marie-Luise Kohlke has identified as the “politically incorrect pleasure” of “enjoy[ing] neo-Victorian fiction at least in part to feel outraged, to revel in degradation and revulsion” (Kohlke 2008: 80). But it also alludes to the sense that the consumption of neo-Victorian culture might be something more self-indulgent, something less ‘serious’ than the weighty tomes of the nineteenth century. Surely, this suspicion is largely due to neo-Victorianism’s relationship to *contemporary* popular culture. As Kohlke has argued, it is “perfectly sensible” for critics to trace the genre’s dealings with Victorian popular culture, such as sensation fiction or pornography, but the ways in which neo-Victorianism might “interface with”, perhaps even have a “debt to” contemporary popular genres such as romantic fiction has seemed to be less palatable for scholarship in the field (Kohlke 2014: 30).

The relationship of neo-Victorianism to popular culture – and attendant concerns about the pressures of the market place – is couched by Heilmann and Llewellyn as a mitigating factor against pop cultural neo-Victorianism “adding anything new to our understanding of how fiction works, what that fiction can do, or possibly what it cannot do” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 23). Indeed, they argue that the “high” and “low” cultural divide between literary and popular neo-Victorian fiction is “clearly there” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 23). For Samantha J. Carroll, this uneasiness about neo-Victorianism’s relationship to the ‘popular’ stems from an overemphasis on the genre’s indebtedness to the Victorian period, and she argues that neo-Victorianism’s connections with postmodernism are equally as important. She suggests that the “anti-intellectual charge against the neo-Victorian novel” means that neo-Victorian fiction “is fast becoming a genre at pains to defend itself” (Carroll 2010: 174; 172). This said, postmodernism is hardly securely located within ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture either. Whether this ‘defensiveness’ about neo-Victorianism’s relationship to popular culture extends to needing to defend critical investment in the movement is a moot point, but the above debates do point towards a certain amount of justification being offered for taking neo-Victorianism as ‘seriously’ as Victorian studies.

However, more recent developments suggest that neo-Victorianism is no longer the spectre at the Victorian studies feast. BAVS now regularly

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includes neo-Victorianism in its annual conference calls for papers. There are special issues on neo-Victorianism in international Victorian studies journals such as *Victoriographies* ('Neo-Victorian Masculinities' in 2015, 'Victorian Television' and 'Neo-Victorian Experiments', both in 2016) and the *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* ('Neo-Victorianism', 2013); and in 2017, the Scottish Centre for Victorian and Neo-Victorian Studies was established, involving academics from the universities of Strathclyde, Glasgow, and Stirling. Andrew Smith and Anna Barton's *Interventions: Rethinking the Nineteenth Century* seems to be a welcome addition to this reconfigured territory of Victorian studies. The edited collection is a calling card for the new book series of the same name – published by Manchester University Press – which seeks to intervene in the “critical narratives which dominate conventional and established understandings of nineteenth-century literature” (Smith and Barton 2017: n.p.). Other publications in the series include an edited collection on Richard Marsh, a study of nature and nurture in sensation fiction, a source book about the Great Exhibition of 1851, an exploration of nineteenth-century Spain, and a collection on the legacies and afterlives of Charlotte Brontë. This title list indicates the series' commitment to investigating Victorian popular culture and literature, to re-imagining its geographical parameters, and most significantly for neo-Victorian scholars, to embracing the cultural afterlife of the Victorian era as well.

Smith and Barton's introduction to *Interventions* identifies their investment in “exploring how the critical map of the nineteenth century is being redrawn” and explains how the collection seeks to “foster unorthodox approaches to the nineteenth century which challenge and problematise conventional models of the Victorians” (Smith and Barton 2017: 2, 4). Both of these aims encourage neo-Victorian critical approaches, and Part III of the volume – entitled 'Afterlives' – is dedicated to neo-Victorian perspectives. This review essay will focus primarily on these neo-Victorian chapters, but I will also highlight other contributions that speak to neo-Victorian interests as well. Whilst it is heartening to see that the chapters from a Victorian studies perspective are thinking beyond the confines of 'the Victorian' in a variety of ways, it does seem unfortunate that the focus on neo-Victorianism is confined to a separate section at the end of the book. In the light of McWilliam's comment above, the structure of *Inventions*

appears to confirm that in this context neo-Victorianism still might be the spectral ‘other’ to Victorian studies.

However, there is evidence that the contributors writing on Victorian studies for *Interventions* are just as attuned to the difficulties of periodisation as neo-Victorianists. John Schad’s opening essay, ‘On Measuring the Nineteenth Century’ is a philosophical meditation on what the “long nineteenth century, longer than a century” might be (Schad 2017: 15). His speculations on this quandary engage substantially with the writing of Walter Benjamin’s ‘Arcades Project’ (written between 1927-1940) – a significant device, considering that Benjamin is looking back on life in nineteenth-century Paris, and also because at various junctures Schad associates his own task of defining the nineteenth century with that of Benjamin’s “most peculiar clerk” (Schad 2017: 15). What emerges, therefore, is a blurring of the voices, perceptions, and identities of past, present and future when it comes to conceptualising the Victorian era, a recognition of multiple and shifting temporalities, which is especially meaningful for neo-Victorianism. Schad observes that “Marxists, Anarchists, Utopians [are] still awaiting revolution. For them, the nineteenth century is not finished, its revolutionary work not completed” (Schad 2017: 17), and this sense of the work of the Victorian era not being finished is surely congruent with neo-Victorianism’s returns to the past to make meaning of the present, and the future as well.

The perception of the shifting boundaries of the ‘timing’ of the Victorian age is also relevant to several other chapters in the collection. David Amigoni’s ‘Literature and Science’ explores Arnold Bennett as a “transitional” writer (between the Victorian and the modern age) in relation to the representation of science in his work, and thus positions Bennett as an overlooked element of the “construction of a complex ‘Victorian’ periodicity” (Amigoni 2017: 40). The editor Anna Barton’s ‘Locke in Pentameters: Victorian Poetry after (or before) Posthumousness’ offers possibilities for thinking about how Victorian poetry has been misrepresented by Modernism, and thus how we might rethink our own perceptions of Victorian verse, as well neo-Victorian reworkings and adaptations, for instance of the dramatic monologue. Such nuanced reconsiderations of periodisation – and conceptualisations– of the Victorian era implicitly underscore the important connections between Victorian and neo-Victorian studies; these chapters benefit from their willingness to

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question what it means to be ‘Victorian’ in literature, culture, and scholarship too.

It is fitting that Marie-Luise Kohlke’s contribution should begin Part III of the collection, considering her crucial role in establishing neo-Victorian studies as a field of scholarly study in *Neo-Victorian Studies* and in her co-editorship (with Christian Gutleben) of Brill | Rodopi’s Neo-Victorian series, which is at the forefront of mapping the developing aesthetics, ethics and politics of the genre. Her chapter, ‘Adaptive/Appropriative Reuse in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Having One’s Cake and Eating It Too’, serves as an overview of neo-Victorianism’s various impulses and ideologies for readers who might not be so familiar with the topic. It also offers food for thought for neo-Victorianists. For Kohlke identifies how some existing definitions of the genre have emphasised its homogeneity at the expense of acknowledging neo-Victorianism’s “heterogenisation”, explaining that “neo-Victorianism produces an accumulation of incongruous elements – according to whichever aspect of the present the past’s adaptive reuse is intended to reflect or illuminate” (Kohlke 2017: 172). The insight reminds us that neo-Victorianism is just as much about the present as it is about the past, which should caution us against a too easy conflation of ‘the Victorian’ and ‘our’ contemporary concerns. It also reminds us that ‘neo-Victorianism’ incorporates diverse – often divergent – intentions and agendas in its dealings with the nineteenth century.

Her use of the term “adaptive reuse” is taken from the vocabulary of urban redevelopment, referring to “the reutilisation of old sites and structures for purposes and functions other than those for which they were originally intended, constructed, and used in the past” (Kohlke 2017: 169). This metaphor is apt considering the recent interest in neo-Victorian space and place (for example, the conference on this topic which took place at Lancaster University in June 2017, and Kohlke and Gutleben’s edited collection *Neo-Victorian Cities* published in 2015). The significance of space and place also becomes apparent in Kohlke’s detailing of what neo-Victorian might be for different authors, critics, and readers: “A lumber room of historical curiosities [...] a spiritualist ‘dark circle’ [...] A therapist’s office/couch [...] A combined theatre/brothel [...] A classroom [...] A fun-house-cum-freak-show” (Kohlke 2017: 172). These strangely familiar (though always ‘Other’) sites of neo-Victorian “adaptive reuse”

emphasise the uncanny terrain of the genre, and also the ways in which neo-Victorianism becomes a space in which certain ‘Victorian’ places, or rather their imagined occupants, are repurposed to negotiate our contemporary fears about and fascinations with the nineteenth century.

It is thus telling that Kohlke comments on how the loss of material reference points for the nineteenth century may result in the “confusion of the nineteenth-century ‘real’ with its fictional recreations”, as “fantasy maps of the period increasingly being mistaken for the territory” (Kohlke 2017: 175). Of course, this invokes Jorge Luis Borges’s fable of the map which takes up the space of the material land in ‘On Exactitude in Science’ (1946), appropriated by Baudrillard as indicative of the “precession of simulacra” in the era of postmodernity (Baudrillard 1994: 1). If *Interventions* seeks to redraw the ‘critical map’ of Victorian studies, then Kohlke’s commentary demonstrates that maps are often difficult to navigate, and also might lead us away from the discovery of the ‘real’. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Ho has argued, the concept of the ‘map’ is ideologically loaded in neo-Victorian studies; cartography is, of course, one of the tools of imperialism, but neo-Victorianism might run the risk of its own empire-building by “coloniz[ing] all historical fiction set in the nineteenth century, regardless of geographical or cultural differences, for academic and non-academic consumers” (Ho 2012: 10). If previously Victorian Studies might have been seen as the ‘centre’ of the map, with neo-Victorianism as a peripheral ‘outpost’, then neo-Victorian’s ever-expanding “fantasy maps” might manifest its own, equally problematic, colonising impulse.

Interestingly, the matter of remapping the Victorians is also addressed in Part II of *Interventions*, ‘Rethinking National Contexts and Exchanges’. In this section, Regina Gagnier’s ‘The Global Circulation of Victorian Actants and Ideas: Liberalism and Liberalisation in the Niche of Nature, Culture, and Technology’ considers how the legacies of Victorian philosophy and politics have informed, and have been transformed by, cultural productions in twentieth-century China, India, and Vietnam. Churnjeet Mahn’s ‘Literary Folk: Writing Popular Culture in Colonial Punjab, 1885-1905’ is in part concerned with the politics of how cultures become adapted/appropriated in translation (for neo-Victorianists, surely a temporal concern as well as a geographical one). Both of these contributions expand the geographical borders of the Victorian era. Gagnier demonstrates how the circulation of Victorian ideologies outside of Britain – a tendency

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which might be understood as an indicator of cultural imperialism – actually has unstable yet generative consequences. Mahn offers a more cautionary example of what might have been lost in translation in cultural colonisation, so that his chapter functions as a salutary warning for the cartographies of neo-Victorianism.

Returning to Kohlke’s chapter, another rich metaphor deployed to articulate the genre’s highly selective dealings with the past is the notion that “[n]eo-Victorian fiction likes to have its cake and eat it too” (Kohlke 2017: 171). The emphasis here is upon neo-Victorian consumption, a concept which might refer to the ways in which the past is ‘served up’ to us to ingest the morsels we see fit, or more broadly it alludes to the backdrop of capitalist consumption that informs the marketability of the Victorians in contemporary culture, as discussed above. Images of neo-Victorian consumption are especially loaded when we consider Fredric Jameson’s condemnation of postmodernism as the “random cannibalisation of [...] the past” (Jameson 1984: 70), a predatory impulse which connects to Kohlke’s observation elsewhere that neo-Victorian biofiction can become “a vampiric and cannibalistic enterprise” (Kohlke 2013: 13). Indeed, her chapter explores various biofictional portrayals in neo-Victorianism as a way of exemplifying the fraught politics and ethics of reimagining actual historical subjects. Amongst other examples, she revisits Barbara Chase-Riboud’s fictionalisation of Sarah Baartman in *The Hottentot Venus* (2003), and observes how the novel’s “highly pejorative” depiction of the naturalist George Cuvier raises vital questions about the ethics of neo-Victorian biofiction, “with real-life subjects defamatorily repurposed and the past potentially distorted in the service of writers’ narrative politics” (Kohlke 2017: 179). There is much critical work still to be done on theorising the politics of neo-Victorian biofiction, and Kohlke’s chapter thus serves as a timely ‘taster’ of the forthcoming Brill | Rodopi volume, edited by Kohlke and Gutleben, on this very topic.

Richard J. Hand’s ‘Populism and Ideology: Nineteenth-century Fiction and the Cinema’ discusses adaptations of the nineteenth-century texts *Frankenstein* (1818), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Hand remarks that “the interplay between media versions of nineteenth-century fiction is as rich and revealing as the more ‘obvious’ relationship between the original source texts and dramatised versions” (Hand 2017: 189). Hand deploys the term

“re-thought culture” to conceptualise the ways in which visual media adapting nineteenth-century prose fiction not only stage aesthetic interventions but become important carriers of ideology as well (Hand 2017: 189-190). Crucially, the ideologies circulated by neo-Victorian adaptations “interrogate the issues of an evolved world” (Hand 2017: 190). In a comparable vein to Kohlke, then, he implies that the ideologies of neo-Victorian adaptations speak just as much to ‘our’ concerns as to Victorian preoccupations. For readers already familiar with the critical debates of neo-Victorianism, this might seem to be an unsurprising conclusion. However, Hand’s observation, which underpins his concept of “rethought culture” – that the nineteenth-century fiction he explores in his chapter was produced for the “bourgeois” reader, and that the adaptations in “performance media” have the potential to reach a broader audience (Hand 2017: 189) – is worth emphasising in the light of the debates around ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in neo-Victorianism summarised at the beginning of this review. The popular cultural aspects of neo-Victorian do not always sit comfortably with claims about the genre’s aesthetic innovation or political progressiveness. Nevertheless, Hand’s analysis of neo-Victorian adaptations demonstrates that the popular can still be very much political.

Whilst much has already been written about the ways in which his chosen source texts have been adapted, his inclusion of ‘looser’ adaptations makes for fascinating reading, but also raises questions about how far the territory of neo-Victorianism might be stretched. For example, Hand perceives the legacy of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in an episode of Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror*, namely ‘Be Right Back’ (Channel 4, 2013), in which a bereaved woman takes the opportunity to reconstruct a simulacrum of her dead husband but ultimately abandons this ‘copy’. For Hand, the episode “raises ideological provocations about the contemporary (over)dependence on ubiquitous social media, compelling the audience to think of the ethical issues surrounding technology nearly two hundred years after Mary Shelley did the same” (Hand 2017: 196). The connections drawn between Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the ‘redneck’ horror film *Deliverance* (1970) are also imaginative in tracing a line of association which might be lost to many viewers. In this sense, Hand’s understanding of adaptation has resonance with Andrea Kirchknopf’s concept of the “adaptive map”, a model she invokes to incorporate expanded relationships between adaptations and their source texts that defy more linear



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categorisation (Kirchknopf 2013: 148). The politics of neo-Victorian map-making must again be noted here, however, for neither Shelley, Austen, James nor Conrad are unequivocally ‘Victorian’. In addition, when adaptations are so loose as to potentially pass unnoticed to the general viewer, how meaningful does the designation of neo-Victorianism become? Kohlke has raised a similar question elsewhere: “how should unconscious influence be measured?” (Kohlke 2014: 22). Hand takes as read that it should be, but could have offered more reflection on why, how, and the politics at stake in the alternative map he has drawn of the persistent cultural influence of nineteenth-century novels.

A particular strength of Hand’s chapter is his exemplification of how adapting the novel was also very much a Victorian preoccupation. Despite identifying how the novel has come to dominate our perception of nineteenth-century literary culture, he also outlines how adaptation of the novel was a key component of nineteenth-century theatre (see Hand 2017: 191). As he explains, “adaptation was never far away: stage adaptations were immensely popular forcing many novelists to hurriedly adapt their own novels to deter unscrupulous playwrights who attempted to steal the story first” (Hand 2017: 204). Furthermore, his discussion of the work of Shelley, James, and Conrad demonstrates how these authors – although writing for a bourgeois readership – were themselves adapting ‘popular’ genres of fiction, such as the ghost story and the adventure narrative, for their own purposes. In this context, Hand provides a compelling framework for rethinking simplistic notions of Victorian ‘originals’ and neo-Victorian ‘copies’.

The editor Andrew Smith’s ‘Reading the Gothic and Gothic’ is an important example of the ways in which the ‘popular’ fiction of the Victorian era has been recuperated by Victorian studies in more recent years. Commenting on this trend in relation to the Gothic, he posits that this “indicates a tacit critical acknowledgement that the populist bears complex, because so often ambivalent, witness to the anxieties of an age” (Smith 2017: 72). This insight should encourage pause for thought in critics who are sceptical of the worth of popular neo-Victorianism; however, Smith’s commentary on how the fin-de-siècle Gothic reiterates Victorian discourses of degeneration – fear of the human becoming animal – also exemplifies how popular culture often becomes the carrier of conservative ideologies. In keeping with the earlier essays discussed, which also challenge our received

notions of ‘Victorian’ and ‘neo-Victorian’ boundaries, Smith’s analysis of a palpable self-consciousness about reading practices within fin-de-siècle Gothic texts indicates that self-reflexivity is not just the privilege of postmodernity. In a comparably Gothic vein, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas’s contribution to the volume, ‘Gruesome Models: European Displays of Natural History and Anatomy and Nineteenth-century Literature’ explores how the Victorian culture of exhibiting the body informs the fiction of the period, offering a potential springboard for future work on neo-Victorian freakery.

On this note, Matthew Sweet has written of the need to reclaim Joseph Merrick “as an eminent Victorian” (Sweet 2002: 141), and Benjamin Poore’s chapter, ‘True Histories of the Elephant Man: Storytelling and Theatricality in Adaptations of the Life of Joseph Merrick’, offers an excellent case for positioning Merrick alongside other much-mythologised figures of late Victorian London, including Jack the Ripper and Oscar Wilde. As I have explored elsewhere, Merrick’s life story is especially ripe for neo-Victorian biofictional treatment, considering the degree to which he was narrativised (yet, ironically, still silenced) by the dominant medical discourses of his day (see Davies 2015: 159-196). Frederick Treves’s memoir, *The Elephant Man and other Reminiscences* (1923) offers a highly subjective – and frequently inaccurate – account of Merrick’s ‘saviour’ by medicine from the ostensible horrors of the Victorian freak show. However, as Poore demonstrates, it is Treves’s emotive narrative in particular that has served as the source text for subsequent adaptations of Merrick’s life, most famously Bernard Pomerance’s *The Elephant Man* (1977) and David Lynch’s film of the same name (1980). In this sense, Poore argues, “prior adaptations often become mistaken for, or blended with, the historical record” (Poore 2017: 208). Merrick’s cultural afterlife can be understood as a microcosm of the ways in which neo-Victorianism’s ‘map’ might supplement the ‘real’ territory of the Victorian era, following on from Kohlke’s chapter discussed above.

Pomerance’s play is the most famous theatrical version of Merrick’s life, but Poore is covering new ground in his account of more recent dramas such as Keiran Gillespie’s *The Elephant Man* (performed in 1995), Laurent Petitgirard’s opera *Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man* (2002), and Tuirenn Hursfield and Gwydaf Tomos-Evans’s *The Elephant Man* (performed in 2005), amongst others. What emerges from Poore’s analysis is a complex

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intertextual web of references between neo-Victorian versions, and the sense that some of Merrick's neo-Victorian afterlives remain more palatable than others for popular audiences. In Poore's terms, "[i]t seems that we prefer, as a culture, to keep retreading the same brightly lit urban thoroughfares, rather than to explore the dark, disturbing byways of the imagination that Pomerance's original play offers us" (Poore 2017: 222). Poore's metaphor is apt in the context of 'remapping' the territory of the Victorians that *Interventions* offers, and serves as a salutary warning of what might go amiss if neo-Victorianism completely loses its nineteenth-century coordinates. To use Kohlke's turn of phrase, these neo-Victorian versions of Merrick offer "fantasy maps" determined to locate Merrick as always the victim, but never the agent.

Poore's account of the high moral seriousness of Lynch's film is persuasive, and he suggests that an unexpected consequence of this view of Merrick's story has been a side-line in Merrick-related cameos in comedy films, sitcoms, and sketches (see Poore 2017: 211-212). If we follow this line of argument, comedic neo-Victorian versions of Merrick become an example of neo-Victorianism laughing at itself; potentially an attack upon "present-day complacencies" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 9). This said, Merrick's role in contemporary comedy could be just as easily perceived as a free-floating signifier of 'ugliness' that bears little relation to meta-commentary on the limitations of neo-Victorianism, let alone engages with neo-Victorianism's ethical or political progressiveness. As ever, the meaning of the joke lies in the audience's interpretation.

And this leads me, albeit via a circuitous route, back to the fraught politics (or lack thereof) of the popular when it comes to neo-Victorianism, and the fraying of its "fantasy maps". In the comedic cameos of Merrick examined by Poore, the 'real' Merrick has disappeared from view, and his neo-Victorian "simulacra" has supplanted his historical identity. His popular cultural afterlife in this context is reduced to his appearance – a far cry from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's call to represent Victorian freak show performers in an ethical manner, when we need to engage with them as "always particular people in particular lives at particular moments in particular places" (Garland-Thomson 2008: xi). Her commentary is surely relevant to our dealings with *all* Victorian subjects, whether from a Victorian or neo-Victorian perspective. The chapters in this collection demonstrate that the popular is definitely worth further critical scrutiny,

with a careful eye on what might be added to the map, what might be deliberately or inadvertently left out, and to what purposes. Although neo-Victorian criticism never quite makes it out of its separate territory in *Interventions*, the book offers further evidence that Victorianists and neo-Victorianists pursue shared routes of critical investigation.

### **Notes**

1. See, for example, the cfp for a panel at the 2016 Northeast Modern Language Association conference entitled 'Neo-Victorian? Pop Culture, Lowbrow, and Genre Victoriana', which makes reference to "guilty pleasures", and the repetition of this terminology in a post by Barbara Franchi about neo-Victorian television for 'The Victorianist' BAVS postgraduates blog (Franchi 2016: n.p.).

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