Ghosts of Many Shades and Shadings: Review of Mariadele Boccardi, *The Contemporary British Historical Novel*; Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women's Writing*; and Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham (eds.), *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction*

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Following on from the publication of Diane Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (2004) and Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's edited collection *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2007), Palgrave Macmillan is actively expanding its specialist publication in the areas of historical fiction with an emerging focus on neo-Victorianism. The strand shows evident scholarly promise: Mariadele Boccardi's and Tatiana Kontou's monographs and Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's critical collection demonstrate the range of possible theoretical approaches to the intersection of literature and history, as well as the prolific variety of texts – and intertexts – operating within this genre.

Though not promoting itself specifically as neo-Victorian criticism, Boccardi's study is dominated by the neo-Victorian novel. Indeed, her introductory overview of the 'The Novel of History 1969-2005' opens with John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), considered one of the mainsprings of the current cultural obsession with re-imagining the nineteenth century. Of the monograph's twelve subsections (three per chapter), all bar one on single novels, seven are dedicated to outright neo-Victorian texts, including 'classics' like A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), as well as novels that have not yet received much critical attention, such as Philip Hensher's *The Mulberry Empire* (2003), and ones more commonly discussed in other contexts, such as Anglo-Indian literature and postcolonialism, as in the case of J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973). To these might be added Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) as part-Victorian, since one of its time-frames, set in 1900, just prior to Queen Victoria's death, delineates the long term after-effects of nineteenth-century imperialism. The neo-Victorian predominance, however, is addressed only in passing; indeed, the monograph includes just three uses of 'neo-Victorian', all on the same page (p. 62). Boccardi's readers seem expected to accept that the nineteenth-century zenith of Britain's empire building and its Golden Age as dominating world power sufficiently explain the attraction of this particular period above all others for British based writers of historical fiction. Further speculation seemed called for on what exactly differentiates neo-Victorian experimentation with shifting models of nationhood – and their disintegration, fragmentation, and loss – from historical fictions focalising similar subjects through earlier and later temporal settings. Though the author makes a gesture in this direction via the inclusion of four non neo-Victorian novels, the texts' thematic intermingling blurs any real distinctions.

Still, there are many points of interest in Boccardi's study that intersect with neo-Victorian concerns. These include "[q]uestions of continuity and discontinuity" in literary inheritance and practice (p. 3), which are attracting increasing attention with regards to the potential identification of a Modernist as well as postmodernist neo-Victorianism, and the problematisation of the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic limits of postmodern practice with its emphasis on radical uncertainty and historical exhaustion. The latter, Boccardi proposes, increasingly makes writers resort

to romance forms, which in turn are implicated in escapist nostalgia, explored through the prevalent trope of the longed for return to the Edenic 'garden' her study identifies. Though Boccardi credits nostalgia with a "political dimension", she does so only in the conservative sense of an imaginary recourse to former hegemony, which in effect disengages politically with the present: "at a time when Britain's importance on the world stage is steadily decreasing and when, arguably, the nation as a concept or political unit is ever less relevant", she argues, writers' – and readers' – "hankering for the past glory of [Victorian] realist fiction […] may well indicate a displaced and thinly disguised nostalgia for the national glory of the period when that representational form had its apogee" (p. 13). Boccardi's use of nostalgia remains fairly one-dimensional, never fully teasing out its more subversive and politically productive/disruptive implications vis-à-vis ethics, self-fashioning, and community, as explored, for example, by John J. Su's *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge UP, 2005), which is briefly cited, or Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), which is not.

Similarly, the dual screening/exposure purpose of nostalgia, concerning ideological blind spots and historical iniquities, could have been further developed, especially in relation to trauma. The latter term goes curiously unmentioned and un-indexed, though many of the crucial events in the analysed texts are deeply traumatic on both personal and national levels (crises of faith, suicide, loss of children, the Indian Mutiny, genocide). Indeed, Boccardi's brief discussion of a new "representational approach", demanded by the unspeakable horrors of limit-events such as WWI and the Holocaust (p. 27), seems to draw strongly on trauma theory. A more nuanced discussion in these respects might also have drawn out important parallels between cultural anxieties related to our own "millennial conditions" (p. 1) and to the Victorian fin-de-siècle. Though commonly perceived as a crucial topos in neo-Victorian literature, which often deploys themes of decadence and decline, this particular period is significantly underrepresented in Boccardi's chosen texts; except in *The Map of Love*, none of the settings go beyond the 1860s.

The first chapter, 'Tradition and Renewal', discusses three novels in relation to re-enactments of the 'Fall' into modernity and disillusion, combined with a paradoxical turning-back-to/turning-away-from the compensatory reassurance or false 'innocence' of the realist tradition, which

supposedly embodied a more "culturally homogenous" model of community/nation (p. 31). A few comparative examples from nineteenth-century novels might have been useful here. Nonetheless, Boccardi's general thesis remains persuasive, namely that, whereas historical fiction's "backward glance had once performed the welding of the present with the past made meaningful by being re-cast as a national beginning", following decolonisation that "same backward look dwelt on the structural weakness of the historical joints and showed the ease with which they could come apart" (p. 33). Her finely pointed, individual textual analyses construct micro-macro analogies, reading often deeply fissured, hierarchical, local communities, such as Fowles' socially ritualistic Lyme Regis, as metaphors for the underlying instability of (the myth of) national unity – inevitably disturbed by those who refuse to be incorporated fully into its system of values and norms. For Boccardi, contemporary historical fiction's focus on the transitional nature of any ideological system – as emphasised by new ideas on evolution and sexuality (as per Fowles' novel) or the introduction of new technologies (as embodied in the fascination of Farrell's Collector with the artefacts of the Great Exhibition of 1851) – highlights cultural disparity and incipient fragmentation, as much as uniformity and the longing for phantasmal permanence.

The second chapter, 'The Romance of the Past', shifts from considerations of nationhood grounded in place (or, in the case of Farrell's novel, in dislocation to and/or appropriation of other places) to a sense of nation constructed in/through the space of a textually mediated, shared cultural heritage and capital. The "national past" is approached as "a discursive entity equated with cultural artefacts" (p. 68). This wholly neo-Victorian section posits a further stage in postmodern disillusion, in that loss is not anticipated but has already occurred, with the present moment apprehending itself as the Victorian period's unheroic "epigone" (p. 62). Accordingly, the search for the recovery of hidden and lost texts becomes the primary means of tentatively bridging what Boccardi repeatedly refers to (somewhat misleadingly) as the "chasm" between past and present (p. 64), emphasised by writers' use of double time-frames. This technique stresses rupture and discontinuity in national self-awareness, but simultaneously allows for the construction of deliberate parallels between then and now, which "weaken" (p. 91) – or perhaps more accurately *collapse* – presumed historical difference into likeness, hence re-fashioning the 'lost' impossible

continuity. The author only briefly touches on the Gothic mode, but the uncanny doublings in her selected novels deserved further investigation in terms of their destabilising impact on the slippery realism/romance paradigm that underpins her study. For these ghostly doublings evoke notions of simulacra and a virtual past that would mesh well with the author's analysis of the nation as a textually re-imagined/imaginary community, the holistic fantasy of which supersedes any riven actuality. This chapter and others also evince occasional slippages between the concepts of 'nation' and 'culture'; at times, Boccardi's readings of protagonists' intensely self-involved literary pursuits in terms of wider national interests appear slightly forced. Indeed, she seems aware of this problem when she highlights the "historically sterile" ending of Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* (1989) and the way Swift's protagonist "plays no part in any political event in his life" (pp. 76 and 98).

Boccardi's study comes fully into its own in chapters 3 and 4, where the interconnections between representational strategies and the politics of nation and empire building are never in doubt. Further interest is generated by innovative readings of works still comparatively under-examined in the emerging neo-Victorian canon; of these, her discussion of Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000) is especially sensitive. As opposed to most of the novels discussed in previous chapters, personal experience and witness assume a more overt political dimension, constructing a national narrative that balances public and private desires. Accordingly, Boccardi locates a greater "concern with hybridity" in these later historical fictions (p. 104), not coincidentally underlined by the motif of biological hybridisation in the form of inter-ethnic romances and/or rapes in several texts. In focusing on what Victorian realism tended to occlude, Boccardi suggests, writers are not disavowing realism as such, "but rather its ideological complicity with colonialism" (p. 105). Hence, their revisionary romances not only mourn Britain's one-time empire and the possibilities for heroic national self-definition it seemed to afford, but also elegise other peoples' resulting losses of national territories, histories, and identities. Later British historical fictions, especially post 9/11, Boccardi argues, evince an increasing ethical and "political commitment" on the part of their authors to engage with the present historical moment (p. 136). She specifically cites Hensher's metafictional 'Anthropological Interlude' in *The Mulberry Empire* in this respect, which represents an unidentified traveller's

visit to Soviet occupied Afghanistan, constructing implicit parallels with the twenty-first century operations of NATO forces in the country. (Likewise, however, she might have linked the themes of cultural dispossession and stolen women and children in Kneale's *English Passengers* with on-going contemporary Australian debates surrounding the so-called 'lost generations'.) Boccardi's conclusion intimates that protagonists' quests for personal deliverance gradually transmute into a broader search for forms of national redemption, which both acknowledge collective historical culpability and anticipate alternative models of national identity, ones based on diversity rather than uniform wholeness and concomitant exclusion.

Though the thematic groupings in *The Contemporary Historical Novel* work reasonably well, the organisation of the monograph relies somewhat too rigidly on chronology, with texts arranged in order of first publication dates and proximity of appearance, the four parts covering the 1960-70s, the late 1980s to early 1990s, the turn of the century, and the post-millennial. Some novels, especially *The Siege of Krishnapur*, *The Map of Love*, and *The Mulberry Empire*, could readily have fit into alternative sections. Another quibble is the occasional missing out of cited critical sources from the bibliography (e.g. Pittock and Orel); so too the overlooking of important earlier, relevant critical work on some of the novels, such as Stef Craps' *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (Sussex Academic Press, 2005), or Michael L. Ross' chapter on Kneale's novel in his *Race Riots: Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction* (McGill-Queen's UP, 2006). It would also have been useful to reflect, however briefly, on how contemporary approaches to British nationhood in historical fiction compare and contrast with models of collective identity in other national literatures, e.g. the U.S. neo-slavery narrative. Yet in spite of the 'roads not taken' and the study's reluctance to theorise the neo-Victorian *per se*, Boccardi's text will likely become an important reference point for future neo-Victorian scholarship on national identities and re-imaginings of empire.

Whereas Boccardi inevitably sacrifices some depth for breadth of discussion, Tatiana Kontou's *Spiritualism and Women's Writing* does the opposite, focusing in detail on four neo-Victorian texts that develop the spiritualist trope, following two historical background chapters on the nineteenth-century craze for encounters with the spirit world and its reflection in the literature of the time. At the outset, drawing on Iain

Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987), Kontou asserts an essential link between fiction writing and mediumship. She suggests that the writer's role is analogous to channelling or being possessed by the spirits of earlier writers and texts, while his/her own voice and literary productions will in turn emanate through the echo chambers of future writers and their works (p. 1). Her main concern, however, is less with (inter)textuality's Gothic potential "as a materialized spirit – an embodied entity summoned from the netherworld" – and more with how the present conversely speaks itself through the conjured past (p. 2). Implicitly, contact with the 'afterlife' functions both as recognition and contestation of the nineteenth century's haunting influence over our present-day literature and our sense of cultural posteriority.

The first two chapters provide an accessible overview of the development of spiritualism as a social phenomenon and delineate the extent of the impact of psychical research and spiritualist practice on the Victorian and Edwardian cultural and literary imaginaries. Kontou builds a convincing case for acknowledging spiritualism's contribution to the development of theories of the mind, personality, and human evolution, and to experimentation in the arts. The author makes productive connections with the theatre and the profession of female acting in this respect. Of special interest is her suggestion that spiritualism, analogous to 'authentic' or 'sensitive' acting, constructs "human personality as essentially polymorphous", complicating binary notions of the Victorian split self à la Jekyll and Hyde and arguably prefiguring postmodern notions of subjectivity as inherently performative: "Self and the other merge into a series of substitutions and transformations, 'whole' psychical entities […] as opposed to the pathologized units (produced by trauma) of the fragmentary model" (p. 28). The notion of the medium as a "phantasmal historian" (p. 7), as well as her themes of performativity and theatricality resonate particularly strongly with the wider neo-Victorian project's self-conscious dramatisation of history. This re-enactment, Kontou's study highlights, is also always a staged self-analysis of fractured and traumatised postmodern subjectivity (with its sense of no-longer 'authentic', 'essential', or 'unifiable' being) via mimicry and doubling of its myriad Victorian 'Others'.

Equally fascinating is Kontou's discussion of the 'Palm Sunday' case (1901-1936) and the questions it raised about authority and authorship,

about the selectivity involved in conveying and interpreting messages from the past. Though never referencing Hayden White outright, her discussion calls to mind his work on the narrativisation of history and historians' 'emplotment' of events, analogous to fictional practice: "What to include and what to omit, what to interpret and what to discard are based on the editorial and creative capacities of the investigative group [read: historians/writers] rather than the medium [read: sources/documents] or the spirit [read: unmediated past]" (p. 52). Further food for thought is afforded by the comparison of automatic writing to modernist literary experimentation and by suggestive links made between the stream of consciousness technique and the mediumistic self's continuous substitution for/by other psychical entities. However, the direct relevance of these discussions to the following analysis of contemporary neo-Victorian as opposed to modernist writing deserved further explication.

Early on, Kontou dismisses the facile assumption that psychical research constituted "an analgesic response to scientific materialism and rising agnosticism" (p. 19), much as historical fiction continues to attract accusations of nostalgic escapism (see Boccardi above). Instead, she reads the conjunction of spiritualism and neo-Victorian practice as a form of feminist intervention into the realm of cultural memory, especially the conflicted, still evolving history of gender relations and female exploitation and oppression. Chapter 3 on Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* (1999) explores the novel's "ghostly looping effect" (p. 82), whereby incest and women's sexual abuse by male authority figures repeat themselves between ancient, Victorian, and modern epochs. Within this pattern of trans-historical victimisation, Roberts' novel traces both the historical silencing of women's voices and their re-claiming of the power of the word – namely through mediumistic practice, which grants them access to the public sphere, albeit mediated by male patrons. (Kontou specifically notes how the personal life of the real-life Victorian medium Florence Cook, on whom Roberts based her protagonist Flora Milk, "is conspicuously blank when we juxtapose it to the plethora of [male-authored] documentation on the materialized Katie King" [p. 83], Florence's spirit guide.) Kontou adeptly complicates notions of female agency, noting how the entranced medium epitomised the popular Victorian aesthetic and erotic trope of "woman beatified in death" (p. 95), which facilitated male liberties taken with her 'spirit-endowed' corporeality. Indeed, Kontou might have gone further here:

for arguably, neo-Victorian readers are invited to partake in the prurient voyeurism of Flora's admirers/abusers, rendering our empathic role vis-à-vis Roberts' female victims and their traumas highly ambiguous. Kontou pertinently identifies Roberts' heroines as both subjects and objects, "ventriloquists and dummies", on occasion not only "srambl[ing]" the messages relayed between the women, but Roberts' feminist 'message' also (p. 99); as evidenced by Princess Hat or Hattie King, the Egyptian spirit channelled by Flora, Roberts' female protagonists never achieve full 'presence' in the symbolic realm. While "offer[ing] an occult resistance to extinction and loss" (p. 108), Kontou asserts, Roberts' novel also reinscribes the same. Her conclusion might usefully sum up the neo-Victorian project more generally, where attempted recuperation commonly runs up against the impossibility of fully recovering/representing the past's enigmatic plenitude.

The gender theme of female cultural spectrality continues through subsequent chapters. Chapter 4 explores spiritualism's dialogue not just with women's social evolution but with natural history, via A.S. Byatt's two novellas in *Angels and Insects* (1992), while Chapter 5 investigates the phenomenon's links with the new technical wonders of scientific progress, as well as the heroine's personal actualisation, in Victoria Glendinning's *Electricity* (1995). The three texts involve falls from innocence into knowledge and disillusionment, paradoxically predicated on both spiritualism and science functioning as "platform[s] for creative expression" (p. 116). One of *Spiritualism and Women's Writing*'s most valuable insights emerges within this context:

> the Darwinist moment, far from being an 'ahistorical' moment of disenchantment, reintroduced ways of magical thinking through allegory and metaphor – transcribing the spirits back into the natural world at the same time as they were banished. (p. 130)

In Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia', the social liminality of Matty Crompton, the Alabaster family's seemingly sexless governess, mirrors that of the household's invisible servants, deemed individually inconsequential but essential like a body of worker-insects; secretly, she writes insect stories, which secure her financial independence. She materialises herself as

historical subject, as though medium and powerful spirit in one, growing in stature – Kontou revealingly links her to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) (p. 122) – and eventually rescuing the naturalist William Adamson from his untenable marital situation. For in 'Morpho Eugenia', the male self too takes on ghostly overtones, not only because of his role as a textual echo chamber for the ideas of the Victorian natural historian Alfred Russell Wallace, as Kontou ably demonstrates, but also because of William's frustrated longing for definition through public recognition, familial belonging, and biological continuity. Forced to realise that 'his' children are not, in fact, his own, he further recognises that the 'survival of the fittest' might result not just in the 'natural' progress of the species, but also facilitate deeply unethical and degenerative practices, such as incest and the rape of unseen/unheard female servants.

If Byatt's first novella spectralises the naturalist, in 'The Conjugial Angel', Kontou asserts, "naturalist evolution [itself] is spectralised" (p. 133). Here spiritualism conflates outright with Mrs Papagay's "study [of] the workings of human nature" (p. 132), revealed in her drawing room séances that act as another version of Adamson's glass enclosed ant-hive. Though women's plight (as an economically vulnerable 'species', as mothers mourning lost children, as widows) is again analysed, it is once more a *male* ghost that haunts Byatt's text – that of Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson's brother-in-law memorialised in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1849), who resists "'evol[ution]' to some higher place of being" (p. 140), in contrast to the female characters, who continue to adapt and develop. This is one of the (albeit not explicitly noted) delicious ironies that emerge from Kontou's study: in spite of their social liminality, it is conversely *women* who 'materialise' *men*, rather than vice versa. Meanwhile the ambiguously diverse messages that come through during Mrs Papagay's sessions of spirit channelling and automatic writing might be said to reflect the multiplicity of possible competing (re-)interpretations of the nineteenth century, its personages and literature in neo-Victorian fiction. As Kontou notes, the unforeseen return from presumed death of Mrs Papagay's lost seafaring husband, for instance, overturns the tragic conclusion of another Tennyson poem, 'Enoch Arden' (1864), positing a more regenerative, life-affirming neo-Victorian mode than the elegiac one, predicated on loss, emphasised by Boccardi.

For female characters like Glendinning's Charlotte Mortimer, Kontou argues, what is at stake is not just spiritualism "as a sham" or "as a metaphysical reality", but its function "as a means of releasing innermost desires through speaking and listening, absorbing the vocabularies of others in the process" to create a richer and subversive language of "'mix[ed]' metaphors" for women's self-expression (pp. 148 and 165). Particularly, electricity and the discourse used to describe it provide charged metaphors for sexual desire as a natural force (p. 166). Kontou's reading of Glendinning's novel through the lens of H.G. Well's *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900) works well, creating an intertextual network analogous to electrical networking and tracing the instrumentalism of spiritualist practice, the way it both mirrored and appropriated technological development: "The voices of technology and the voices of the dead became increasingly intertwined during the fin de siècle" (p. 155). Again the author's speculations could have been pushed further here. Besides feminist politics, might our present-day obsession with technology – with streams, transfers, and processing of masses of information and images – contribute crucially to the predominance of the spiritualist trope in neo-Victorianism and its resurgence, via film and television, in the mainstream also? Kontou herself briefly references the latter (see p. 155), going on to note the paradox by which the emergent "reproductive technologies" of the nineteenth century, in enabling "images and voices" to quite literally "survive" their physical embodiments, imbue neo-Victorian fictional "reproduction[s] of people and their lives" with seemingly greater plausibility (p. 157). Significantly, Charlotte's journal writing, combined with her mediumship, renders her "author rather than [mere] apparatus" (p. 164); hence, the novel's version of the past, though mediated/accessed through her, becomes doubly and self-consciously *female* 'authored'.

In Chapter 6, Kontou further explores the links between spiritualism and sexuality, bringing the neo-Victorian part of the monograph full circle. Yet readers may be left unpersuaded by her attempt to read Waters' *Affinity* (1999) as a liberating text, "valorizing lesbian desire" by supposedly "free[ing] the lesbian" from her pathologisation in medical discourse (pp. 186 and 173). For arguably, both the opiate-addicted, suicidal Margaret Prior and the fraudulent, imprisoned Selina Dawes remain immured within classifications of psychological and/or criminal deviancy. Even Selina's final escape to Italy will likely only secure her a re-enactment of her life as a

con-artist and of her servitude to Ruth Vigers. Excepting the insightful notion of Ruth Viger's/Peter Quick's "spectral rebellion against Mrs Brink" (Selina's previous wealthy patron), which Kontou reads as a revolt against the Victorian mother as repressive 'Angel of the House', strictly policing the daughter's desires (p. 194), the proffered reading of Waters' novel is not particularly original. What *is* ground-breaking, however, is Kontou's identification of *Affinity*'s likely intertextuality (albeit never specified by Waters herself) with Susan Willis Fletcher's *Twelve Months in an English Prison* (1884), as well as other nineteenth-century spiritualist texts, from which it "draw[s] 'vital energy'", not least in its linking of spiritualism with free love (pp. 175 and 176). According to Kontou, then, Waters' text is not just *about* mediumship, but itself functions as a medium, channelling actual nineteenth-century voices and lives. *Affinity*'s representation of lesbian sexuality, the author concludes, is more than 'fictional', in the sense that it replicates the actual socio-cultural sites – of séances, 'dark rooms' and earlier spiritualist texts – where such desire was first "able to 'materialize'" (p. 188).

A few underlying weaknesses detract from Kontou's otherwise confident handling of her subject. There is the odd outright error, such as the claim that, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857), one of the titular heroine's "relative[s] refuses to marry her friend Marian Erle", when it is actually Marian who refuses to wed Aurora's cousin Romney, nor do "Aurora and Marian run away to Florence together" (p. 195), as Aurora re-encounters the fallen Marian in France, while already on her way to Italy. Apart from Glendinning's *Electricity* (1995), Kontou limits her neo-Victorian investigation to the usual suspects, only covering a publication span of less than a decade, namely from 1990-1999. A broader overview of the neo-Victorian 'spiritualist novel' would have been preferable, ideally bringing the discussion into the twenty-first century rather than ending with Waters' *Affinity*. Too many significant texts mining similar veins go wholly unmentioned, including Isabel Colegate's *The Summer of the Royal Visit* (1991), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Nora Hague's *Letters from an Age of Reason* (2001), Marge Piercy's *Sex Wars* (2005), Carol Goodman's *The Ghost Orchid* (2007), and John Harwood's *The Séance* (2008). A further 'haunting by absence', so to speak, marks the study: the failure to engage in critical debate with earlier research on the subject of spectrality in relation to individual novels. The chapter on *In the Red*

Kitchen disregards important critical precedents on Roberts's novel by Sarah Gamble and Lucie Armitt. Similarly, the chapter on *Affinity* makes no reference to earlier critical groundwork on Waters' novel by Mark Llewellyn, Rosario Arias Doblas, and myself, among others. Yet much of the already published criticism specifically addresses the renegotiation of women's cultural position through mediumship as a subversive form of quasi political activism, the séance as a performative space of erotic transgression, and/or the deployment of the spiritualist trope for a feminist critique and recovery of occluded women's voices, gender histories, and sexual politics – the very themes that constitute the building blocks of Kontou's own analysis. Equally troubling is the Eurocentric focus on white mediums and spirits, which needed to be widened to address literary ghosts and summoners of other colours, especially to problematise the role of the ancient Egyptian spirit Hat in Roberts' novel. Not even to mention Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) – arguably *the* most extensively discussed spectral historical fiction set in the nineteenth century – seems a rather bizarre related oversight, signalling a wider problem with current neo-Victorian scholarship, which I will return to below. Nonetheless, Kontou's work will provide a useful basis for further research into neo-Victorian continuities across the Modernist/postmodernist 'divide', and for launching further explorations into existing and future neo-Victorian fictions channelling 'real' or fraudulent spirits.

By its nature as an edited collection, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction* manages to circumvent the somewhat restricted focus of Kontou's study, ranging much more widely within the neo-Victorian literary and occasionally cinematic oeuvre also. The editors describe their volume as "focusing on the neo-Victorian novel against the backdrop of the master trope of spectrality and haunting" (p. xi), implicitly signalling the possibility that, in spite of its links to postmodernism, the neo-Victorian may become complicit in contributing to new 'master narratives' as much as deconstructing old ones. Several pages are spent on complicating the notion of neo-Victorian nostalgia, productively linking it to a yearning for return and 'home' and, thence, to Freud's 'uncanny' also, with the Victorian functioning as a quasi "'maternal' body", the object/destination of longing (pp. xiv-v). (As in Boccardi's study, however, nostalgia's ethical and political implications are largely neglected in favour of psychologising the concept.) If Kontou reads

the neo-Victorian novel as medium, Arias and Pulham read it predominantly as spirit guide, "as a form of revenant, a ghostly visitor from the past that infiltrates our present" (p. xv). The editors proceed to problematise the nature of the neo-Victorian revenant by offering two very different theoretical frames of interpretation. Jacques Derrida's notions of 'hauntology' and the 'spectre' as a temporal dislocation facilitate liminal states amenable to disrupting fixed subject positions and meanings; in this sense the neo-Victorian anticipates their re-making in an as yet unrealised future, *inviting* spectral encounters as culturally constructive and regenerative (see pp. xvi-xvii). In contrast, Nicola Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of the 'phantom' and the psychic 'crypt' of trauma, lodged within subjectivity, views haunting as destructive; the ghost needs to be exorcised – not kept 'alive', continually revisited or dialogically engaged – in order to break the vicious circle of transgenerational fixation on past suffering, thus enabling an individual and/or collective moving on (see pp. xvii-xviii). Both frameworks promote an understanding of the neo-Victorian as an echo chamber of past influences and the processes of their transmission, perpetuation, and transformation, as well as their formative role for present-day subjectivities. What is less clear is which view of the spectral, if any, the editors see as dominating neo-Victorian literary practice. A wider evocation of trauma theory might have been useful here, especially David Lloyd's extensive work on the Irish famine and its cultural commemoration (or lack thereof), which highlights the risky politics of exorcism as a form of renewed collective forgetting, very much at odds with Arias and Pulham's explicit linking of spectrality to self-conscious cultural critique (see p. xix).

Eight chapters, subdivided into four sections, follow, many of these covering two or more neo-Victorian texts, a plus point that generates useful comparisons and contrasts and a wider survey of the spectral trope across the genre. Francis Gorman's opening chapter on Salley Vickers' *Miss Garnet's Angel* (2000) – though not a neo-Victorian text in the conventional sense – is thought-provoking in its focus on Venice as a *lieu de memoire* which, even for contemporary observers, remains inextricably mediated through John Ruskin's readings of the city. The essay engages with what Gorman calls "the livingness of the nineteenth century" (p. 4), as well as recuperating some of the sensual appeal of the writings of Ruskin, who is now so often mocked for his supposed aversion to physicality – as in the

recent television series on the Pre-Raphaelites, *Desperate Romantics* (BBC Two, 2009) – while his works remain largely unread by today's general public. This adds weight to Gorman's repeated stress on the recognition of the 'Victorian' as partly dependent "on what the reader knows to be Victorian" (p. 5), that is, the prior knowledge and frames of references s/he brings to any text and its decoding. This will likely become increasingly important in neo-Victorian practice, as the reading public's and even academic students' familiarity with the substantial body of nineteenth-century writing continues to diminish.

Later in the collection, Silvana Colella's chapter echoes the concern with the reproduction of the nineteenth-century 'life of the senses', albeit in its cruder forms, via her investigation of the "olfactory modality" of haunting (p. 86) in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Depictions of often disgusting former smells, Collela proposes, constitute a paradox: while seemingly rendering the past more "tangible", immediate, and referential to readers, via powerful evocations of "the material reality of Victorian lives", such re-imagined odours simultaneously efface and *dematerialise* the past, functioning as they do as "mute signs, or silent traces of an object world receding into an unbridgeable distance", like elusive "relic[s] without an archive" (pp. 86 and 94). Collela's argument provides a useful supplement to criticism's tendency to focus primarily on the visual, textual, and intellectual dimensions of neo-Victorian novels, with the reader invited instead to "sense" the past differently "in order to make sense of it" (p. 87). As Collela convincingly demonstrates, questions of phenomenology may prove as productive as those of ontology and epistemology for neo-Victorianism's relation with the past.

There is a further tangential echo of sensory overload in the editor Arias' own chapter on Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992) and Clare Clarke's *The Great Stink* (2005), two novels about the sanitation movement and the modernisation of London's sewage system. In the main, however, Arias perceptively treats the sewer topography as a subterranean, second capital city: haunting and doubling the city above, it serves as a resonant metaphor for the sordid underbelly of Victorian respectability and the neo-Victorian's 'tunnelling out' of our nineteenth-century predecessors' secrets, vices, perversions, and illicit desires. "The Victorian age is haunted by that which it has managed to hide and repress, namely, filth and contamination", Arias asserts, which is exactly what neo-Victorianism "relishes" in exposing

as part of its deconstruction of "sanctioned versions of a sanitized past" (pp. 136, 138, and 154). It is doubly ironic that the Victorians' sanitation reform project should serve to reveal their social hypocrisy, malaise, and corruption. Yet just as ironically, since the "journey to the underworld is […] also a journey into the repressed unconscious, where fears, desires, and traumatized [sic] events are held at bay" (p. 142), present-day readers, participating in this journey, are called into question as the progressive liberated subjects they believe themselves to be. Though never explicitly stated by Arias, the Victorian sewers, and the re-imagined nineteenth century more generally, seem to function as the embodiment of our own collective cultural unconscious.

Mark Llewellyn's chapter on works by Sarah Waters, Charles Palliser, Jem Poster, and John Harwood addresses similar issues. Llewellyn reads novelistic encounters with spirits in "the historical mirror, whether intact or 'crack'd'" (p. 25), as a refraction of contemporary concerns with religious belief versus secularity, faith (or the *desire* to believe) versus loss of faith, spiritual/narrative plenitude and consolation versus paucity and disillusion. This angle is highly topical in view of the perceived threat to cultural cohesion posed by various resurgent religious fundamentalisms – Llewellyn's notion of "our own post-Christian contexts" (p. 25) is perhaps somewhat premature, especially if we look to Christian communities beyond 'Western' borders. The chapter's topicality also relates to the recent bicentenary of Darwin's birth, the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and a flurry of related commemorative events, exhibitions, and even a biopic (Jon Amiel's *Creation* [2009]), all of which, in a sense, *celebrate* the postmodern crisis of faith as a fall into enlightenment. Llewellyn posits an opposite movement towards "wanting to be fooled" (p. 41). His mirror metaphor emphasises the liminality of the neo-Victorian text as reflective – but just as importantly *projective* – surface, imag(in)ing both ourselves and our Victorian 'Others'. As the nineteenth century's frame, mirror-glass, and reflection in one, neo-Victorian novels themselves become "shadows, spectres and written ghosts which never quite materialize into substantive presences" (p. 26), permanently suspended between historical referentiality and consummate illusion/fabrication. Analogous to Gorman, Llewellyn asks: "What is it we want to see and in what do we desire to believe?" (p. 28) The chapter opens up a fruitful line of further enquiry into reader investments in and responses

to neo-Victorian textuality. For with complicit selectivity, Llewellyn concludes, we perceive only those Victorian ghosts that we *allow* ourselves to glimpse, those, in other words, which we are looking for in the mirror in the first place.

Among the neo-Victorian's favourite looked-for ghosts, of course, are gender oppression and (sexual) self-liberation. Three chapters – by Agnieszka Golda-Derejczk on *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), by Esther Saxey on Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990), and by Ann Heilmann on multiple neo-Victorian adaptations of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) – explore these familiar ghosts via the theme of female subjects beings written out of/into history. Women's erasure is juxtaposed with self-inscription; indeed, as Golda-Derejczk notes, "the Cartesian *cogito* could be transcribed into 'I write therefore I am'" (p. 52). Yet, as Golda-Derejczk also points out, inevitably such writing remains haunted by "a plurality of voices" (p. 54) and alternative historical and/or fictional doubles, which continue to destabilise female subject positions – among others, the 'voice' of Julia Kristeva in Golda-Derejczk's reading of Roberts' novel through the lens of French feminism, or that of the Victorian domestic servant and diarist Hannah Cullwick, whom Saxey identifies as the intertextual "uncanny double" of Atwood and Martin's protagonists (p. 65). Heilmann goes still further, interpreting such doublings not as instances of 'real' double-voicedness, but as Baudrillardean simulacra, producing a 'hyperreality' that disturbs distinctions between 'real-life' and literature, between history and historical fiction. In a sense, the 'fraudulent' neo-Victorian past becomes as 'true' as, if not more so, than what it replaces/speaks in place of. Paradoxically, the indistinguishable simulacra's effacement of reality depends on the increasing palimsestic *density* produced by successive neo-Victorian transformations of James' ghost story, which engage in "a literary game with boundless opportunities for narcissistic authorial and critical pleasure" (p. 129). Related questions of voice, authenticity, and simulation will likely assume increasing importance in future neo-Victorian novels and critical work on the genre, seeking to test the postmodern and historiographic limits of the form.

As previously noted, a similar layering of reality, though of a more physical and symbolic rather than textual sort, pervades Arias' chapter on London's subterranean topography. Pulham's closing chapter, however,

shifts to the cityscape above ground. She too reads the neo-Victorian London(s) in Iain Sinclair's *White Chapell, Scarlet Tracings* (1987) and Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) as metaphoric maps of cultural heritage, which occlude as much as they reveal in the course of the novels' explorations of trans-historical violence, evoking the iconic Ripper murders and earlier Ratcliffe Highway killings. Drawing on Amy Elias' notion of 'metahistorical romances', Pulham suggests that neo-Victorian fictions are less concerned with the concrete, empirical, quasi 'forensic' recreation of the past and more with its final unrepresentability (pp. 158-159), with the ways that its elusive shape constantly shifts, golem-like, according to the present-day observer and sought for oracular correspondences between different points in time. In part echoing Gorman's and Llewellyn's concern, the Victorian 'real' becomes not just what readers (already) know it to be, but what they *want* it to be.

Pulham's essay is also particularly interesting because it focuses on the still seriously neglected issue of the ethnic internally colonised, in this case the Jewish people. Although race is gradually becoming a more prominent theme in neo-Victorian creative and critical practice, analogous to those of class, gender, and sexuality, there has been comparatively little figuration or critical discussion of specific nineteenth-century British ethnicities (apart from the Irish, who feature conspicuously on account of the historical impact of the Great Famine). Pulham interprets the mythical golem as a cipher for Jews' historical elision/invisibility, their violent persecution through the ages, and "the unmanageable 'truth' of those histories", which it simultaneously evokes and erases (pp. 176-177). Her analysis thus returns to the issue of trauma raised in the editors' introduction. For in trauma discourse, limit events such as the Holocaust are commonly referred to in terms of the 'unspeakable' or 'unrepresentable'; hence, one might deduce that there is something at work within the neo-Victorian that *resists*, as much as *invites*, 'full exposure'. Or, put differently, in the neo-Victorian, re-mystification goes hand in hand with the genre's commitment to demythologising and deconstruction.

As the foregone non-sequential overview of the essays makes clear, individual chapters resonate with each other in subtle and interesting ways across subsections, and each has something useful to add to the spectrality debate. Arias and Pulham's collection engages its reader on multiple intellectual – and sometimes visceral – levels and sets an important

cornerstone for further theoretical work required on a subject that is clearly too expansive to be covered by a single volume. Yet for all its laudable range and diversity, *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction* also shares a problem with Kontou's study, which I consider indicative of a stumbling block in neo-Victorian criticism more generally. This evinces a curious reluctance to engage head-on in cross-cultural comparisons, which seem essential in order to get fully to grips with exactly how cultural memory of the nineteenth century is mediated and shaped by a genre that is hardly exclusively 'British' in any self-contained sense – after all, Victorian Britain always defined itself in relation to geographical 'elsewheres', be these former or current colonies or political and economic rivals. However unsatisfactory its nationalist and/or imperialist connotations, the 'neo-Victorian', I want to suggest, may be better employed – at least provisionally – as a generic umbrella term for historical fiction of any denomination, regardless of setting or provenance, as long as it engages self-critically with the nineteenth-century from a latter-day perspective. The shared genealogy of spiritualism between Europe and North America, for instance, clearly supports such a comparative and more inclusive approach, which would no doubt throw up insightful cross-pollinations, but also divergences, to supplement the arguments presented by Kontou's and Arias and Pulham's studies. Even Saxey's chapter in the latter's collection, which deals with American and Canadian authored texts, does not attempt to identify or account for possible differences between British and non-British authored tropes of spectrality, nor does Saxey address the issue of ethnicity. Yet Grace Mark's spectral double, Mary Whitney, killed by a botched abortion, is arguably as much as figure of Grace's mother and her death on the voyage to Canada, and hence of the Irish trauma of mass emigration and exile, as she is a manifestation of the untold history of women's sexual and economic exploitation, recuperated via the haunting trope.

Some crucial theoretical precedents on spectrality in contemporary fiction, engaging directly with issues of race and ethnicity, are omitted altogether from both Kontou's and Arias and Pulham's studies. Reference to Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996) and Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (University Press of Virginia, 1998) should have been essential reference points for both projects. As Brogan notes, "Ghosts are not the exclusive

province of any single ethnic group; they figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (p. 29). Inevitably, however, just as historical trauma is always specific, so too will be its belated figuration through retrospective hauntings. The angry, voracious titular ghost of slavery in Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, cannot simply be equated with the spectre of female oppression in *Alias Grace*, although both black and white women may have been sexually abused and had their labour appropriated. Put differently, much as second-wave feminism had to particularise its critique of the patriarchal oppression of 'Woman', by recognising that women, as classed and raced, as well as gendered subjects, suffered injustice in manifold ways, neo-Victorian theory must become far more nuanced and sensitive to spectral difference and multiplicity. Earlier, Brogan describes the "master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another" (p. 6). Yet it seems much more productive to dispense with 'master' tropes altogether, to differentiate – or deconstruct – the singular concept of 'ghost' into diverse *ghosts* of many shades and shadings, colours and creeds, which summon neo-Victorian readers in distinct ways and, quite possibly, for different purposes also.