"An Unusual, Trusting Sort of Girl": Queering Compulsory Able-Mindedness in Neo-Victorian Fiction

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Abstract:
This article explores the intersections between queerness and intellectual disability in the representation of two young women in neo-Victorian fiction: Gracie Milne in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and Grace Linton in Victoria Thompson's *Murder on Lenox Hill* (2006). I argue that the late-Victorian anxieties about 'abnormal' minds, identities and desires are perpetuated in both texts. Gracie Milne, although having some potential in offering Nancy Astley an alternative knowledge of the world, is ultimately figured as the Other to Nancy's able-minded version of queerness. Grace Linton's unexplained pregnancy is articulated via eugenicist ideas about who is 'fit' to reproduce, and her sexual agency is figured as unthinkable. I conclude by speculating on the implications of this marginalisation of intellectual disability for the genre of neo-Victorianism more broadly, questioning how intellectual elitism in critical accounts of neo-Victorianism might be queered by a disability studies approach.

Keywords: disability, eugenics, idiocy, intellectual elitism, *Murder on Lenox Hill*, normalcy, queerness, *Tipping the Velvet*, Victoria Thompson, Sarah Waters.

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This article considers the intersections between queerness and intellectual disability in the representation of two 'simple' girls in neo-Victorian novels: Gracie Milne in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and Grace Linton in Victoria Thompson's *Murder on Lenox Hill* (2006). In *Tipping the Velvet,* Nancy Astley briefly lodges with Mrs Milne and her daughter, Gracie, and describes the physical appearance of this "rather extraordinary" young woman in the following terms: "Her features had a strange, smooth quality to them, as if her face was a drawing to which someone had half-heartedly taken a piece of india-rubber" (Waters 1998: 214). Gracie, in Nancy's estimation, is "rather simple" (Waters 1998: 214), and I want to draw attention to Nancy's – and Waters's – use of simile here, for it is an image

Neo-Victorian Studies
13:1 (2020)
pp. 44-74

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

of *erasure*. Critical accounts of Waters's work invariably acknowledge the ways in which her neo-Victorian novels redress the erasure of lesbian and queer identities from patriarchal, heteronormative versions of history (see Jones and O'Callaghan 2016: 1-12; De Groot 2013: 63-74; O'Callaghan 2017: 19-46).[1] However, not only is Gracie's characterisation somewhat 'half-hearted' within the textual world of *Tipping the Velvet*, her representation has not been addressed in extant scholarship on Waters's novel. When the Milnes are mentioned, they are recognised as playing a part in the construction of Nancy's queer identity; Nancy seeks out the Milnes after reading an advertisement for a "*Fe-Male Lodger*", for "there was something very appealing about that *Fe-Male*. I saw myself in it – in the hyphen" (Waters 1998: 211, original emphasis). Rachel Wood notes that Nancy is drawn to the sign due her "performance of both masculinity and femininity, [which] produces her gender as unfixed and contingent" (Wood 2013: 310). Emily Jeremiah identifies the sign's encapsulation of the novel's "challenge to the boundaries between 'male' and 'female'" (Jeremiah 2007: 136), and in a similar vein, Cheryl A. Wilson remarks upon Nancy's "sense of affinity" with the hyphen on the sign (Wilson 2006: 299-300). In short, the advertisement seems to promise a home which will accommodate queerness; the being in-between boundaries of gendered and/or sexual identities. Nevertheless, the connection between Gracie being identified as a "simpleton" (Waters 1998: 338) and the queer themes of the novel remain, as yet, unexplored.

Victoria Thompson's *Murder on Lenox Hill* (2006), volume seven in the *Gaslight Mystery* detective series, features the mysterious pregnancy of Grace Linton, a "simpleminded" young woman (Thompson 2006: 7), who Sarah Brandt, widowed midwife and amateur sleuth, suspects has been raped. As I shall consider in further detail below, the circumstances of Grace's pregnancy prove to be much more complex, yet sexual deviance/difference and intellectual disability become problematically entwined. Although scant attention has been given to intellectual disability and/or cognitive difference in neo-Victorian criticism, such characters do have a presence in various neo-Victorian cultural productions. Novels including Mary Hopper's *Fallen Grace* (2010), Diana Holguín-Balogh's *Rosary Without Beads* (2018), Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (1999), and Diane Setterfield's *Once Upon a River* (2018) all feature characters with some degree of intellectual disability. Francis, son of the widow Cora

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

Seaborne in Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent* (2016) has been interpreted as having traits associated with autism in contemporary reviews of the novel.[2] And, of course, the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010–2017) offers an ongoing flirtation with the possibility of the eponymous hero being autistic, alongside his potential queerness.[3]

This article does not seek to dwell on classifying the cognitive differences showcased in neo-Victorian fictions.[4] Patrick McDonagh has demonstrated that the category of "idiocy"[5] encompassed a vast range of cognitive difference in the first half of the nineteenth century (McDonagh 2008: 1-23), which belies the distinction between different conditions which has been the hallmark of medicine from the late nineteenth century onwards. As I shall demonstrate below, this fin-de-siècle categorisation of 'deviant' minds also coheres with sexology's taxonomies of 'deviant' sexualities.

I begin by offering a historical contextualisation for the connection between non-normative minds, genders, and sexualities in the Victorian era, tracing a nineteenth-century history of attitudes towards intellectual disability that begin with an interest in education but which develop into theories of degeneration, eugenics, and institutionalisation. I argue that the regulatory discourses of gender and sexual norms also apply to privileging normative intelligence, constructing cognitive difference as deviance and otherness, or, put another way, *as queer*. My definition of queerness in this article, although at times encompassing gay and lesbian identities, is influenced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's explanation of queerness as

> an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick 1993: 8)

Both Gracie Milne and Grace Linton reside within these queer "gaps" between normative expectations of gender, sexuality, and intelligence.

Although the characters focused on in this article are white, it is crucial to acknowledge that discourses of degeneration and eugenics are inextricably associated with white, Western, racist, colonial ideologies; those deemed Other on account of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and disability were all subjected to eugenic theories and practice. Sharon L.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

Snyder and David T. Mitchell invoke the concept of the "eugenic Atlantic" to encapsulate the exchanges of racist and ableist medical discourse between practitioners in Britain and North America (Snyder and Mitchell 2006: 100). This conflation is typified by John Langdon Down's 'Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots' (1866), for instance, which introduced the appellation of the 'Mongoloid Idiot' that was to persist in medical discourse well into the twentieth century. Langdon Down's coining of this term solidified a connection between intellectual disability and racialized categorisation, borrowing from the German physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's use of 'Mongolian' as a generalised term to refer to people of north eastern Asian heritage, loaded with implications of racial inferiority to white, Western, nondisabled subjects (Keevak 2011: 62). Langdon Down overtly invokes the concept of degeneration in his work (Down 1866, 262), suggesting that idiocy was symptomatic of the regression of certain white Western people to the supposedly lesser state of racial Others. It was not until the early 1960s that a collective of scientists petitioned to change the name of this condition, now understood as chromosomal, to Down's syndrome (Wright 2011: 115-118).

Traces of this pseudo-scientific discourse can be found in neo-Victorianism. For instance, Jonathan Ockwell in Setterfield's *Once Upon a River* is a boy who is "not stupid" but struggles with conventional schooling, has a "peculiar face and strange ways" (Setterfield 2019: 10); another character acknowledges that "some doctors call them Mongol children" (Setterfield 2019: 136). Jonathan's difference is also represented in terms of deviation from gendered norms. Despite being fifteen, "where other boys of his age were looking forward impatiently to manhood, Jonathan was content to believe that he would live at the inn forever with his mother and father, and wished for nothing else" (Setterfield 2019: 8). Although the depiction of Jonathan's life suggests inclusion within domestic life, it also implies that the privileges of "manhood" (i.e. sexuality) will not be part of his future – a eugenic principle discussed further below.

I continue my analysis of Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* by exploring the tensions between repudiation and identification in Nancy's narrative construction of Gracie. Although Nancy herself has been subject to the heteronormative regulation of gender and sexuality, her initial meeting with Gracie stages a projection of such anxieties on the "rather simple" young woman. Despite there being some notable moments of identification

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

between Nancy and Gracie – the potential for them to share an alternative, queer knowledge of the world – Gracie is ultimately marginalised. In Thompson's *Murder on Lenox Hill*, Grace Linton is described as attractive yet "slow" (Thompson 2006: 7). My reading of the novel contextualises the details of Grace's pregnancy against the rise of the eugenics movement in North America, for a central anxiety of the text appears to be who is considered 'fit' to be a parent. I argue that queerness is cast as deviant and pathologised in *Murder on Lenox Hill*, a contaminating presence which leads to Grace's 'abuse'. As I seek to demonstrate, there is significant emphasis on what is 'thinkable' and 'knowable' with regards to sexuality, with the most unthinkable conclusion being that Grace herself might have been a consenting, desiring subject with sexual agency.

Although the degree of impairment that each of these young women experiences remains vague, they are certainly disabled by societal expectations about normative bodies, desires, and minds. Despite some commentators suggesting that patriarchal discourse constructs femininity as a form of disability and thus seeking to challenge the injustice of this association,[6] this link does not question the implicit assumption that disabled minds or bodies are undesirable. As Kim Q. Hall remarks, such discourses imply that "justice requires a reclamation and reevaluation of *woman* at the expense of disabled people" (Hall 2011b: 4, original emphasis), and thus nondisabled women are privileged over women whose minds/bodies are deemed abnormal. Hence the critical approach taken in my article is intersectional: utilising queer, feminist, and disability studies perspectives to "trace the ways in which compulsory […] able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity" (Kafer 2013: 17) in the examples of neo-Victorian representations I examine. Also, it should be noted that I am making a distinction between intellectual disability and disability related to mental illness in the characters discussed. At various points in history it has been the case that idiocy has been conflated with 'madness',[7] and that diagnosis and treatment in both circumstances has been founded on normative discourses of gender and sexuality.[8] However, as cultural histories of intellectual disability have evidenced, the distinction between idiocy and madness was established in terms of diagnosis and treatment prior to the nineteenth century (Wright 2011: 18, 30), although these discourses converge once more with regards to prevention (e.g. eugenics). Again, the racist ideologies of colonialism are

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

deeply entwined with intellectual disability and anxieties about sexuality and racial 'purity'. For instance, Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), a significant reference point for late-Victorian eugenicists, makes various points of comparison between people with intellectual disabilities, animals, and "the barbarous races of mankind" (Darwin 1871: 16).

My conclusion, taking a more personal perspective, considers the implications of this troubling dichotomy of our neo-Victorianism knowingness over these queer girls' simplicity for the politics of the genre more broadly. The intellectual elitism of queer theory has often been noted, yet neo-Victorianism seems to display a comparable orientation towards privileging intelligence – or cultural productions which require the (often scholarly) knowledge of the nineteenth century – over more 'popular' or accessible engagements with the Victorian era. How might intellectual elitism in critical accounts of neo-Victorianism be queered by a disability studies approach?

1. Education, Institutionalisation, Eradication? Victorian Idiocy

McDonagh suggests that the ostensibly stable classification of the "Victorian idiot" belies a complex history of shifting definitions, and also that this designation of intellectual disability as resolutely Other is deeply entwined with normative ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, and class, especially during the course of the nineteenth century (McDonagh 2008: 2). It is the Enlightenment era that marks a decisive shift from idiocy as a matter of "social, legal, and occasionally religious interest" (Wright 2011: 27) to being a compelling concern of both medicine and philosophy. David Wright identifies that Western European medical discourse in the first half of the nineteenth century invested in idiocy as a condition which had the potential to be improved via education. From the 1840s onwards, specialist institutions for the "treatment" of idiocy were being established in Europe and North America that were distinct from "the public lunatic asylum" (Wright 2011: 41). Although such an emphasis on the importance of education might seem progressive, it also represents the beginnings of a formal process of the segregation of people with intellectual disabilities from participation in mainstream society.

Furthermore, as Lennard J. Davis has argued, the period of the 1840s–1860s is also notable for the introduction of the definition of the "normal", in reference to "'constituting, conforming to, not deviating or

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual'", entering European languages (Davis 1995: 24). Evidently this has ideological consequences, for alongside a new emphasis on the significance of 'scientific' statistics and standards for establishing the normal body and mind comes a discursive construction of the abnormal Other; hence the "'problem' of the disabled person is created" (Davis 1995: 24). The ramifications of this (re)definition of the boundaries between normal and abnormal identities are all too familiar. The second half of the Victorian era, influenced by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, is typified by increasing anxiety about the potential for degeneration, giving rise to the eugenicist theories of commentators such as Francis Galton and Karl Pearson. The relationship of degeneration theory to imperial fantasies of white European racial superiority, and of the moral dubiousness of the poor closer to the colonial centre, is well-documented (see Pick 1989; Greenslade 1994), and, as I shall explore in more detail below, norms of gender and sexuality also become integral to deciding which bodies – and minds – are considered to be 'fit' for reproduction. It is crucial to recognise that the concept of intelligence – and its vague, though evocative Other, idiocy – also underpins this investment in the identification and classification of social deviance. Although the establishment of specialist educational homes for those deemed idiots might have originated as a mission of care and edification inspired by Christian charity, Lindsay Brigham highlights a developing emphasis on "the 'idiot' as subhuman, an object of fear and dread and a 'threat to society'" (Brigham 2000: 34). This represents the rise of the eugenicist fear of the reproduction of cognitive difference, now coded as deviant and as menacing the 'healthiness' of European populations. Again, anxieties about sexual and cognitive difference combine with the racist fantasy of white superiority and racial 'purity'.

McDonagh locates anxieties about normative gender as intrinsically associated with the history of idiocy. Even prior to the Victorian era, there was a deeply entrenched patriarchal construction of femininity as the irrational Other of masculine reason (McDonagh 2008: 104), and of idiots, like women, being positioned as closer to "nature" (Brigham 2000: 35). In Brigham's analysis, the Victorian era's emphasis on the domestic sphere as the proper location of respectable femininity is cast as a strategy of "women [being] increasingly segregated in the private institution of the family", forming a parallel with the intensified separation of cognitive difference

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

from broader society (Brigham 2000: 31). Moreover, the scrutiny of women's sexual behaviour is also at the heart of the eugenicist vision of perpetuating the normal and eradicating the abnormal, a sentiment exemplified by the following statement from the superintendent of the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded, writing in 1912:

> *Feeble-minded women are almost invariably immoral and if at large usually become carriers of disease or give birth to children who are as defective as themselves. The feeble minded woman who marries is twice as prolific as the normal woman.* (qtd. in Brigham 2000: 35, original italics)

This quotation demonstrates the pervasiveness of eugenic attention to women's role in the potential reproductive of cognitive 'abnormality' on both sides of the Atlantic, as comparable attitudes in Britain would culminate in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.

The second half of the Victorian era, undoubtedly influenced by imperial anxieties over racial degeneration, manifested a fresh urgency in more closely defining the various identities encompassed by the broad concept of idiocy. Writing from the later 1840s onwards, the American physician Samuel Gridley Howe would identify three classifications of idiocy, "pure" idiots, "fools", and "simpletons", noting that this latter group were known as "imbeciles" in Britain (Howe qtd. in McDonagh 2008: 2-3); others such as P. Martin Duncan (1861) and W. W. Ireland (1872) would expand and refine these categorisations further (McDonagh 2008: 2-3). Furthermore, the Victorian zeal for taxonomising intellectual disability, with its palpable ideological debt to degeneration theories, casts a long shadow into the twentieth century in other ways; the Mental Deficiency Act substituted the concept of 'mental defectives' as the umbrella term for intellectual disability, with idiots, imbeciles, the feeble-minded, and moral imbeciles becoming the standardised sub-classifications for aberrations of intelligence. The terminology of the Act is worth quoting at length:

> a) *Idiots*. Those so deeply defective as to be unable to guard themselves against common physical dangers.
> b) *Imbeciles*. Whose defectiveness does not amount to idiocy, but is so pronounced that they are incapable of

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

> managing themselves or their affairs or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so.
> c) *Feeble-minded persons*. Whose weakness does not amount to imbecility, yet who require care, supervision, or control, for their protection or for the protection of others, or, in the case of children, are incapable of receiving benefit from the instruction in ordinary schools.
> d) *Moral Imbeciles*. Displaying mental weakness coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities, and on whom punishment has little or no deterrent effect. (Leach 1914: 5-7)

Despite the introduction of supposedly objective intelligence testing, such distinctions are evidently highly subjective and biased, especially when considering the white, middle-class, nondisabled medical professionals making these value judgements. The range of traits and behaviours covered by the Act suggest a need for mental defectives to be protected from society (and perhaps more tellingly, vice versa), and conflates disability with social deviancy as well. The Act, a product of the "discursive ferment" (Foucault 1998: 18) of the gendered, racialised, classist, and ableist ideologies of Victorian forays into the medicalisation of idiocy, had far-reaching consequences in the service of eugenics, not least enforced, institutionalisation, and often compulsory sterilisation (see Brigham 2000: 28, 31).

I am purposefully borrowing Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of Victorian debates about sexuality as a "discursive ferment" to highlight a connection between the construction of the Victorian idiot with the construction of another deviant other: the homosexual as "a species" (Foucault 1998: 18, 43). Furthermore, Foucault's use of the term "species" is also reminiscent of imperialist discourse that justified Western colonial exploitation and abuse on the grounds that colonised people were sub-human, closer to the state of the bestial, and ultimately in need of eugenic control as well (Snyder and Mitchell 2006: 101). It should be remembered that Foucault designates the "*legitimate* [heterosexual] couple" as the norm by which deviance is measured in Victorian sexology (Foucault 1998: 38, added emphasis). Although the homosexual is Foucault's most famous example of sexual aberration, the eugenicist discourses of who is 'fit' to

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

reproduce most certainly concerns itself with classifying what is *not* legitimate reproduction, or indeed inappropriate gendered/sexual behaviour more broadly for those deemed feeble-minded. On this theme, it is worthy of note that the research of Alfred Binet, inventor of the first IQ test in 1904, was also preoccupied with non-normative sexual identities and behaviours, writing on homosexuality (Greenberg 1988: 422) and fetishism (Goux 2004: 71-82). David F. Greenberg also identifies the anxious debates around the potential hereditary causes of non-normative sexuality in sexological writings of the fin de siècle. For example, although Richard von Krafft-Ebing did not suggest that sexual orientation in and of itself was inherited, he examined the "physical and mental peculiarities of the ancestors and blood relations" of his case studies where possible and surmised that "degenerative signs" were routine in such family histories (Greenberg 1988: 414). Writing from a disability studies perspective, Robert McRuer identifies that the Victorian heterosexual matrix of normative gender and sexuality also produces disabled bodies/minds as aberrant, "failures", and "other" to the heteronormative "non-identity" of able-bodiedness (McRuer 2006: 1, 92). Put another way, compulsory heterosexuality is also compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, and the construction of physical and cognitive disability thus aligns with queerness as abnormality. I now turn to the cultural afterlife of the late-Victorian conflation of idiocy with gendered/sexual aberration in neo-Victorianism.

2. Deviance, or Alternative Knowledge? *Tipping the Velvet's* Gracie

As demonstrated by the critical analyses of *Tipping the Velvet* discussed above, Nancy is drawn to the room for rent due to a potential for queerness – of seeing herself in the hyphen, crossing the boundaries between female and male. Nevertheless, she still brings patriarchal, heteronormative expectations to the Milne's house. Mrs Milne articulates anxiety about whether her prospective lodger has a "young man" and is relieved by Nancy's response to the contrary: "'I am glad. You see, it is just myself and my daughter here, and she is rather an unusual, trusting sort of girl. I wouldn't like to have young fellers, coming in and out…'" (Waters 1998: 212, original ellipses). Mrs Milne's use of the term "unusual" could be interpreted as invoking the register of queerness; it suggests a deviation from the norm, yet in a narrative which foregrounds Nancy's experiences of being different from societal expectations of gender and sexuality, this

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

should not necessarily carry negative connotations. However, Nancy's response relies upon normative assumptions: "This daughter must be a beauty and a half, I thought – or else a complete erotomaniac – if the mother is so eager to keep her safe and close, away from young men's eyes" (Waters 1998: 213). Nancy implicitly places the responsibility for Mrs Milne's disquiet about "young fellers" upon the as-yet-unknown daughter in this situation: Gracie is either too attractive and/or too sexualised for young men to be around. But why does Nancy not anticipate that it is the men who are liable to be at fault? By this stage of her story, Nancy is well aware of the consequences of heteronormative patriarchal privilege, especially around the power dynamics of the gaze: "I had first donned trousers to avoid men's eyes" (Waters 1998: 201).

Furthermore, Nancy's use of the term "erotomaniac" deserves pause for thought. The earliest uses of this concept date from Ancient Greece and from this period up until the mid-eighteenth century it was considered as "unrequited love leading to general disease", essentially a form of "love sickness" (Berrios and Kennedy 2002: 383). However, redefinitions of the condition in mid-eighteenth-century France placed an increased focus on erotomania as an "'*excess of sexual appetite*'" (Diderot and D'Alambert qtd. in Berrios and Kennedy 2002: 385, original emphasis), and the concept of the erotomaniac as female nymphomaniac would persist into the early twentieth century. Hypersexuality as a concept was also racialised, associated with both black women and men, and utilised as further justification for enslavement, oppression, exploitation and abuse (hooks 2015: 61-76, 87-114). Unsurprisingly, erotomaniacs/nymphomaniacs feature prominently in late Victorian sexological writing, and equally predictably, the ideologies underpinning the abnormality of women's sexual desire informed such pathologisation (Berrios and Kennedy 2002: 387-389). The role that erotomania plays in early twentieth-century psychiatric discourse will be discussed further below, as this is relevant to my reading of *Murder on Lenox Hill*; for now, it is evident that Nancy's application of the concept to Mrs Milne's daughter borrows from the sexological tradition. This is inauspicious, especially considering that it is a sexological text that will literally – and symbolically – wound Nancy's body in her final, explosive evening with her upper-class lover, Diana Lethaby, at Felicity Place (Waters 1998: 316). In summary, before we even meet Gracie, Nancy's narrative casts her as a sexual Other, a move which is ironic given

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

the way in which Nancy's own gender identities and sexuality are also marginalised from mainstream Victorian society.

Our first introduction to Gracie indicates that her cognitive difference is not mental illness but intellectual disability. However, the way in which Nancy determines this potential impairment is notable: Gracie is described as being "anything between seventeen and thirty"; as wearing brightly coloured, mismatched clothes; as having facial features with that "strange, smooth quality to them", discussed in this article's introduction; and Nancy notes that "[w]hen she spoke her voice was thick and slightly braying. I realised then, what I might have guessed before: that she was rather simple" (Waters 1998: 214). Although it is Gracie's unusual voice which finally consolidates Nancy's suspicions, the other clues of Gracie's difference reside in her physical appearance: her failure to present as average, standard, the expected, the *norm*. The notion that cognitive disability might be read via appearance connects to degeneration theory, but also finds resonance in late Victorian sexology's theorisation that sexual aberration will also have a physical burden of proof, "written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away" (Foucault 1998: 42-43). Down's use of the word 'Observations' in his article discussed above is also telling in this respect; his 'Ethnic Classification of Idiots' was concerned with identifying "Mongolian Idiocy" via facial features (Down 1866: 121-122). Rather incongruously, given her own vulnerability to pathologisation due to gender nonconformity, Nancy thus becomes an envoy of compulsory able-mindedness, representing the means by which "norms of gendered behaviour – proper masculinity and femininity – are based on nondisabled bodies" and minds (Kafer 2013: 17).

This said, Nancy and Gracie get on well; Gracie is attracted to the bright colours of Nancy's renter's clothing (Waters 1998: 214), and as their relationship develops, Nancy's interactions with Gracie are not dissimilar to a suitor wooing an eligible match: she brings home pictures and clothes that she knows Gracie will enjoy, choosing flowers and presenting them to her "with a flourish":

> Mrs Milne would look on, pleased as anything, but shaking her head and pretending to chide. '*Tut!'* she would say to me. 'You will turn that girl's head right round, one of these days, I swear it!' And I would think for a second how queer it was

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

> that she – who had been so careful to keep her daughter from the covetous glances of fresh young men – should encourage Grace and me to play at sweethearts, so blithely, and with such seeming unconcern. (Waters 1998: 216, original emphasis)

Nancy's and Gracie's association does not involve sexual contact, yet Nancy herself acknowledges the queerness of their connection. It seems poignant that Nancy conceptualises these exchanges with Gracie as "play", with connotations of childishness and lack of seriousness, for her relationship with Kitty Butler was similarly dismissed by Walter Bliss as being "sweethearts, of a kind" (Waters 1998: 173). The implication of Walter's remark is that queer connections are insubstantial, inauthentic, a mere copy of cis-gendered and/or heterosexual desire.[9] Mrs Milne's denial of queer potential in her daughter – and her lodger – is not cast as oppressive as such, but Mrs Milne, in her own way, enforces compulsory heterosexuality upon her daughter by not being able to see queer potential in Gracie and Nancy's relationship. Nevertheless, neither can Nancy quite imagine Gracie as a queer, desiring subject, which I suggest is due to the latter's classification as simple.

However, Nancy's queerness also allows space for Gracie's cognitive differences, especially around her routines for certain colours on set days:

> After three days there I began to sense a kind of system to her mania which, if I had had routines of my own, like an ordinary girl, might have proved rather maddening […]. I didn't mind, it came to seem a kind of game; and Gracie's way was quite as valid a philosophy, I thought, as many others […]. For there *were* so many lovely colours in the city; and in a sense she tutored me to look at them anew. (Waters 1998: 215-216, original emphasis)

It is due to both Nancy and Grace being "extraordinary" (Waters 1998: 214), albeit in different ways, that they are able to coexist so smoothly. If Gracie's potential desire is infantilised by the notion of "play[ing] at sweethearts", then Nancy is also susceptible to the child-like concept of

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

"games", another point of connection between queerness and intellectual disability.[10] That Nancy admits to "understanding" Gracie is important; moreover, there is surely import in the image of Nancy being "tutored" by Gracie's perspective on the world. Both women are in possession of alternative knowledge which runs counter to the mainstream. For Nancy, this takes the form of her knowledge of the queer potential of the music hall, and the renter's trade on the streets of London. For Grace, it is her uncommon perspective on the potential joy that vibrant colours can bring. Foucault writes of "subjugated knowledges" that have been "buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations", otherwise known as "naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition" (Foucault 2003: 7 qtd. in Halberstam 2011: 11). Judith (now Jack) Halberstam's subsequent interpretation of such subjugated knowledges tends to emphasise the productive 'failure' of queer genders and sexuality to meet heteronormative, patriarchal standards, but Foucault's concept is just as relevant to Gracie's "cripistemology" (Johnson and McRuer 2014: 127), her unashamedly Other, different, yet productive way of perceiving the world.[11]

Despite Nancy's casual pathologisation of Grace at their first meeting, there is also a broader narrative doubling which takes place between them. There are multiple references throughout the novel to Nancy's "foolishness": at her ignorance of the relationship between Kitty and Walter (Waters 1998: 170; 188); Diana's mocking admonishment of her on their first encounter (Waters 1998: 234); on her "sink […] into stupidity" in the lazy days waiting for Diana to return to Felicity Place (Waters 1998: 264). In fact, the dichotomisation of stupidity/cleverness is heightened in the novel's depiction of Nancy's and Diana's relationship, for the latter is "so devilishly clever" yet seems to prefer Nancy to be kept ignorant (Waters 1998: 282); at Diana's club, if Nancy attempts to look into the assembled documents for the publication of the women's suffrage journal, *Shafts*, Diana "would take the sheet away, as if gazing too hard at too many words might tire me" (Waters 1998: 280). The cartoons of *Punch* are considered to be preferable, a queer echo of the infantilisation of Gracie. Although Florence gently makes fun of Nancy's lack of interest in serious reading material (Waters 1998: 392), her anger is real when she feels that Nancy does not understand or appreciate the socialist sentiments of the speech she delivers with Ralph: "'I should like it very much […] if I thought that

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

Nancy really meant her speeches, and wasn't just repeating them like a – like a dam' parrot!'" (Waters 1998: 461). While it is class identity that informs Diana's disparagement of Nancy's intelligence – and class consciousness that causes Florence to worry about Nancy's lack of interest in learning – the characterisation of Gracie provides a different lens through which to view Nancy's oft-cited foolishness.

Although there are points in the novel where Nancy's and Gracie's alternative knowledges – and vulnerability to being deemed abnormal within the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality and able-mindedness – converge, it is difficult to dismiss the ultimate conclusion that Gracie is the marginalised Other to *Tipping the Velvet*'s able-minded version of queerness. Nancy's abrupt departure from the Milnes' home is, of course, orchestrated by Diana and the final encounter with Gracie is presented in sinister terms. Gracie is not present when Nancy's delivers the news of her leave-taking, but later in the Milnes' parlour Gracie is described as letting out "something like a yelp" and "thrust[ing]" Nancy's hand away when the latter attempts to reach out to comfort her. On Nancy's departure, Gracie stares impassively from a window as Nancy "waved and blew kisses": "[Gracie's] gaze – cold and hard as alabaster, piercing as a pin – pursued me […] it seemed to prick and worry the flesh upon my back" (Waters 1998: 258). Elsewhere in the novel the queer gaze is productive, especially in the space of the music hall, where Nancy wills Kitty to return her stare "burning into [Kitty's] forehead like a brand" (Waters 1998: 18), but Gracie's look is framed as *violently* penetrative. The trajectory of Nancy and Gracie's relationship thus forms a microcosm of the general shift in the ideologies attached to idiocy in the course of the nineteenth century: it begins with the figure of the simple girl in need of protection, and ends with her being cast as animalistic in her non-verbal communication (another invocation of the link between intellectual disability and the supposedly bestial tendencies of enslaved and colonised peoples), and as potentially vicious and menacing as well. Nancy's exit is selfish, and Gracie's sense of anger and disappointment is understandable. Nevertheless, I argue that the representation of Gracie's conduct still invokes ableist anxieties about the "vicious […] propensities" of "moral imbeciles" (Leach 1914: 7).

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3. Unthinkable Desires: Thompson's *Murder on Lenox Hill*

If *Tipping the Velvet* initially introduces Gracie Milne as in need of protection from men, then the plot of *Murder on Lenox Hill* begins with a scenario that appears to justify such anxieties: Grace Linton, the "simple-minded" daughter of doting, middle-class parents, is pregnant, and her family fear that this is the result of a sexual assault (Thompson 2006: 7). Sarah Brandt is called out to investigate; she is a wealthy widow from a high society family, but also a midwife, and carer to a mute child, Aggie, found on the doorstep of the local Prodigal Son mission. Sarah is friends with Detective Sergeant Frank Malloy – the latter being involved in an ongoing investigation about the murder of Dr Tom Brandt, Sarah's husband – but Malloy is also keen to seek out Sarah's talent for amateur sleuthing when a relevant case arises. The conclusion to this article will address some issues around genre and the politics of representing intellectual disability more broadly, but for now it is relevant to note the traditional nineteenth-century role of the detective as arbiter of reason and rationality – *intelligence* – in the face of the chaos of crime and deviance. Jack Scaggs argues that the development of modern police work in the Victorian era, grounded in post-Enlightenment values such as knowledge, science, and reason, produced fictionalised representations of notably intelligent detectives, typified by Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (Scaggs 2005: loc. 372-380). Furthermore, in Scagg's analysis, these traits are necessarily coded as being part of – and perpetuating – the patriarchal social order of the period (Scaggs 2005: loc. 410).

The trope of neo-Victorian women detectives has transparent potential to redress the normative gendering of intelligent, rational deduction, none more so than the widow, as Nadine Muller has identified:

> this character strives to break, or at least occasionally transgress, the boundaries of respectable femininity, not only through her investigative association with the crimes of others but also through her own deviant (if not criminal) intellectual pursuits (usually in the form of certain reading and/or writing activities) as well as her partial disregard for […] other matters of social etiquette. (Muller 2012: 99)

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In this vein, Sarah Brandt is an archetypal neo-Victorian widow detective: her profession as a midwife – alongside her widow status – provides her with otherwise forbidden knowledge of and access to matters of women's sexuality, and she pursues this work in spite of her father's disapproval. Nor does Sarah shy away from becoming embroiled in investigations into seedy sexualised crimes, and thus, as the plot of *Murder on Lenox Hill* develops, she is increasingly enlisted by Malloy to aid in determining who might have assaulted Grace. In case we needed any further evidence of Sarah's neo-Victorian feminist heroine credentials, she offers employment and shelter to "misfit girls" from the streets of New York (Thompson 2006: 42), most notably her maid Maeve and, of course, the silent Aggie.

But when it comes to solving a case involving a pregnant young woman with some degree of intellectual disability, other influences are brought to bear on Sarah's narrative function. She is linked to the medical profession by marriage and employment, and her feminist sensibilities would not have precluded her from the late nineteenth-century eugenics movement in North America. As Sharon Lamp and W. Carol Cleigh have argued:

> many feminist[s] […] agreed that there was a category of "defectives" that should be subject to social control, but they argued against women being included in this "defective" class by virtue of their sex […]. The move by feminists to separate women from the devalued group of "defectives" without challenging the hierarchy that produced it served to make disability central to feminism as a negative trope. (Lamp and Cleigh 2011: 176)

More precisely, Licia Carlson's research on the nineteenth-century gendered history of intellectual disability in North America identifies that certain white middle-class feminists were instrumental as advocates and practitioners of eugenic policies: "[t]hus we find a dichotomy in motherhood as well as in womanhood, between the good, free woman working to improve the race, and the feebleminded, deficient woman for whom motherhood must be avoided" (Carlson 2010: loc. 1120). Sarah's estimation of Grace's pregnancy undoubtedly echoes such ideologies, and although Grace Linton has the privilege of whiteness, the conflation of

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intellectual disability, sexuality, and racial Otherness arguably informs Sarah's discomfort.

Sarah's first meeting with Grace emphasises the latter's child-like behaviour. Grace is located in the nursery, serving her dolls an afternoon tea, and is described as pretty: "She wore her corn-silk hair down in curls and her skirts short, as if she were still young enough to play with dolls, and Sarah would have guessed her age at closer to twelve than seventeen" (Thompson 2006: 15). Grace has a childish understanding of the absence of her menstrual cycle (see Thompson 2006: 18), and the reader has already heard of her intellectual limitations from her parents: Mrs Linton, whilst "dabbing a tear" on her face, explains that Grace "never really learned to read properly, and sums are beyond her", to which her husband responds "defensively": "'She sews beautifully,' […] as if to say she wasn't completely worthless" (Thompson 2006: 7). Ironically, therefore, there is much about Grace which accords with nineteenth-century normative femininity for white middle-class girls, aside from the matter of her pregnancy. There is no question in the minds of either the Lintons or Sarah that this pregnancy is a result of rape; as Sarah relates to Malloy, "no one would ever believe a girl like Grace was involved in a romance of any kind" (Thompson 2006: 48). Sexual desire, or sexual desirability, is thus figured as an absolute impossibility for "a girl like Grace", and given the secluded nature of Grace's life (she only attends church or is supervised with friends), Sarah sets out to discover the identity of the perpetrator. Very early on in the narrative she is introduced to the son of a family friend, Percy York, whom Sarah briefly considers as a suspect:

> but just as quickly she rejected the idea. Percy might feel the first stirrings of desire, but he was too young to know what to do about it. Since Grace would have been even more innocent, whoever had impregnated her had to know exactly what he was doing. (Thompson 2006: 54)

From Sarah's perspective, it is *knowledge* (or lack thereof) which precludes either Percy or Grace from blame. Percy's lack of knowledge is transitory; he is an adolescent boy, and will presumably eventually learn of such matters. Grace's state of 'innocence' is perpetual, and we should note that this term was routinely used as a synonym for idiocy (Wright 2011: 24).

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However, Sarah is mistaken: at the plot's dénouement it is revealed that Percy is indeed the father of Grace's child. His knowledge of sexual matters has come from the sexual abuse inflicted upon him and other boys by the Reverend Oliver Upchurch from the local church. Initially, Sarah suspects that Upchurch himself might be responsible for Grace's condition, and a meeting with the Reverend's wife, Rachel, seems to confirm this. Rachel is not a popular woman in the church community due to her sarcastic bitter manner. The couple have no children, and Rachel explains: "'He didn't even *try* to give me a child […] he found me repulsive. He told me so. He prefers… *different* flesh. Younger and… and innocent'" (Thompson 2006: 133-134, original emphasis and ellipses). Sarah's interpretation is telling: "*Younger*. *Innocent*. She'd known men like Oliver Upchurch before, men whose sexual desire could only be slaked on children. Sarah was very much afraid she had finally discovered Grace Linton's rapist" (Thompson 2006: 134, original emphasis). Alongside the unfeasibility of Grace's sexual agency, there is something else here which is also unthinkable for Sarah: same-sex abuse. The widow detective is depicted as a knowing woman of the world, and yet heterosexual paedophilia is the limit of her imagination. This, in turn, limits the investigation for some time, despite regular interjections from various characters that Grace's rapist must be stopped before he strikes again. Put another way, it is Sarah's *ignorance* (or should that be innocence?) which hinders this stage of the case and actually allows Upchurch to continue in his abuse of the boys. Yet it is crucial to identify that this is not how the narrative presents Sarah's input. In conversation with another detective, Malloy is keen to let his colleague "know that Sarah wasn't just a brainless female" (Thompson 2006: 206), and the overwhelming subtext of the novel seems to be: *how could she have known?*

The revelation of Percy's paternity also comes with the conclusion that he "didn't know what he was doing was wrong […]. Upchurch twisted the boys' minds as well as assaulting their bodies" (Thompson 2006: 277). The implicit message is that Upchurch's criminal sexual deviance inadvertently produced Percy's and Grace's child. Nevertheless, the scene of Grace's admission of her relationship with Percy deserves careful scrutiny. After the twists and turns of the pursuit of Upchurch – culminating in his suicide – Sarah begins to reflect on how the Reverend's sinister assurances to the boys that their sexual contact was not wrong might also have been used to persuade Grace. Explaining to Malloy that she was not

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explicit with Grace about the mechanics of what might have happened to her, Sarah admits:

> I guess I didn't want to make myself uncomfortable by talking about what I assumed had been a horrible and frightening experience for her. I thought she would've been terrified and that it would have been painful, but if it wasn't… (Thompson 2006: 275, original ellipsis)

Sarah is "feeling stupid" (Thompson 2006: 275), an especially loaded turn of phrase given the circumstances, but her acknowledgement here is significant; it is her embarrassment, and the limitations of her understanding of Grace's potential for desire, that has led to this possibility being overlooked. Furthermore, on the final visit to the Lintons, when Sarah is specific about what actions might produce a pregnancy, Grace "covered her mouth with both hands to hide an impish grin […] her eyes dancing with a delicious secret" (Thompson 2006: 279). Grace's smile and the glint in her eyes speaks volumes, and Grace also confirms that Percy is her "beau" (Thompson 2006: 282).

How the reader interprets this revelation depends upon their capacity to accept that a young woman with intellectual disability might still have sexual agency. In the world of the novel, this disclosure is a further source of horror:

> A scripture verse echoed in her head, something about the sins of the fathers being visited on the children. So many children, so many lives scarred by his evil. Some of them weren't even born yet […]. Sarah prayed [Grace would] never be able to understand the evil that had touched her. (Thompson 2006: 282)

Despite being articulated via a religious framework, it is the discourse of degeneracy – the hereditary taint of queerness and defective procreation – which concludes Grace's story.

The matter of who should be allowed to have children is a compelling subplot of *Murder on Lenox Hill*'s central narrative. We learn in the opening pages of the novel that Sarah "had never been able to bear

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Tom" the children they so desperately wanted (Thompson 2006: 4). Although Rachel Upchurch could not have children with her husband due to his lack of sexual interest in women, her story concludes with another unexpected and sensational pregnancy; she has been having an affair with Isaiah, one of Upchurch's slightly older victims, as a sort of revenge for her husband's sexual rejection (Thompson 2006: 248). The novel states that Isaiah is "probably sixteen or so" (Thompson 2006: 95); in the period setting of the novel, therefore, she has not committed a crime, but her relationship with Isaiah is nonetheless represented as a transgression and suggests an abuse of power.[12] However, Rachel's admission that the sexual attention was "intoxicating" (Thompson 2006: 248) places her on an uncomfortable continuum with Grace: both express sexuality that is deemed non-normative yet both are procreative, making Sarah's suffering childlessness seem all the more poignant. The narrative repeatedly implies that Sarah is a deserving motherly figure. She cares deeply for Malloy's deaf son, Brian, and was also responsible for helping Malloy understand that Brian is not "just a simpleminded cripple" (Thompson 2006: 25). Moreover, she was even able to ensure that Brian's "crippled foot" is "fix[ed]" by one of her medical contacts (Thompson 2006: 25). The final pages of the novel end with Aggie, Sarah's silent ward, eventually finding her voice and announcing that her name is actually Catherine (Thompson 2006: 290). Both physical and cognitive disabilities are thus deployed as a foil to Sarah's credentials as a 'good' woman, and alongside the Grace plot, indicate an investment in a medical model of disability: difference should be cured or overcome, or at the very least, not perpetuated by undesirable defectives such as Grace Linton.

There is yet another spectre of sexual impropriety haunting *Murder on Lenox Hill*. Malloy is employed by Sarah's father to investigate the possibility that Tom Brandt was murdered by a male relative of one of his patients. On further investigation, it seems that Tom had treated several single women who developed a romantic fixation upon him. Dr Quinn, Tom's former colleague, describes such passions as a medical condition: "Old Maid's disease […] a form of mental disease in which the sufferer imagines herself in a love affair with a man who has no feelings for her at all and may hardly even know her" (Thompson 2006: 106). We should remember that the diagnosis of this condition is the endgame of Victorian sexology's forays into women's erotomania, invoked by Nancy in relation

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to Gracie Milne. On first reading, such a plot ostensibly seems to lend itself to a neo-Victorian "medical sensationalism" narrative, in which a deviant, perverse or exploitative medical professional is exposed (Rieger 2014: 153). Nevertheless, this volume of the *Gaslight Murders* series offers no such resolution, and the subsequent investigation into these allegations in Thompson's *Murder on Bank Street* (2008) confirms that the women were, in fact, hysterical, and Tom is innocent. Ultimately, the series reiterates that some women's desires are more acceptable than others, and restores patriarchal, heteronormative, and medical authority.

4. Conclusion: The Ideologies of Neo-Victorian Knowledge

The two novels considered in this article have very different attitudes towards queerness: in *Tipping the Velvet*, non-normative gender and sexuality are largely celebrated; in *Murder on Lenox Hill*, non-normative sexuality is linked to abuse. Yet the texts are united in their hesitancy to ascribe sexual desire or agency to young women with intellectual disabilities. Both texts demonstrate an unquestioned investment in nineteenth-century anxieties about idiocy in relation to gender and sexuality, and are also haunted by the racialised ideologies of eugenics as well. Although *Tipping the Velvet* does acknowledge the potential for alternative, subjugated knowledge to be exchanged between Nancy and Gracie, the ultimate Othering of Gracie seems to indicate that some queer desires are more valid than others. Despite *Murder on Lenox Hill*'s positioning of Sarah as a feminist neo-Victorian heroine, her heteronormative, patriarchal, and ableist knowledge is privileged over Grace's experience of sexual desire, in a troubling replication of nineteenth-century discourses advocating the need for eugenic containment of feeble-minded women's sexuality.

Neo-Victorianism's interest in progressive identity politics via the recuperation of nineteenth-century Others does not, in the case studies offered here, extend to representations of intellectual disability; indeed, I would be drawing a similar conclusion had I selected several of the other examples of neo-Victorian 'idiot' girls in the overview provided in the article's introduction. For instance, Mary Hooper's *Fallen Grace* depicts Grace Parkes's sister Lily as "simple-minded" (Hooper 2010: 101) and, despite being sixteen, Lily is figured as a perpetual child, deeply attached to her doll, unable to read, vulnerable to the tricks of con-artists and sexual assault on the streets of Victorian London (see Hooper 2010: 23, 25, 27,

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64-65), and a general burden to Grace. Set in nineteenth-century New Mexico, Diana Holguín-Balogh's *Rosary Without Beads* (2018) follows a very similar pattern in its characterisation of Garita, sister to the first-person narrator, Ambrosia Salazar. Garita is also a drain on her sister's physical, economic, and emotional reserves – "the baby of the family […] her mind was not right" (Holguín-Balogh 2018: 11) – which renders her a liability in terms of inappropriate and attention-seeking behaviour, and in need of protection from predatory men (see Holguín-Balogh 2018: 152-153). Although race has not been the primary focus of this article, my initial overview of nineteenth-century attitudes to idiocy has demonstrated that anxieties about racial 'purity' are always already embroiled in eugenic discourses of intellectual disability, gender, and sexuality. All of these 'girls', albeit in different ways, are infantilised and depicted as in need of protection and/or correction in relation to their sexuality, in an echo of the treatment of enslaved and colonised people of colour (King 2011: loc. 145).

Further scholarship is needed on why this might be the case, but could it be that there is something about neo-Victorianism – as a cultural mode of reimagining the past – which tends towards privileging certain forms of 'knowledge' or 'intelligence' over others? Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's field-defining study of neo-Victorianism highlights "divided readerships, between the 'ordinary' reader and the more 'knowledgeable' critical reader" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 18), with the latter taking precedence in detecting the metafictional, self-conscious reference points and allusions which typify the more literary, high-cultural end of the genre. Marie-Luise Kohlke has cautioned against privileging neo-Victorian texts that are aimed at "sophisticated (that is 'high culture') readers" (Kohlke 2014: 30). Jessica Cox's recent study of neo-sensation fiction has offered an extended exploration of the extant critical tendency in neo-Victorianism to laud the literary over the popular:

> much also depends on the reader: the critical academic reader approaches a text in a different manner to the general reader whose primary aim may be entertainment or diversion […]. The *meaning* of a text, then, is dependent on the reader's ability to interpret it. (Cox 2019: 9, original emphasis)

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Cox's stressing of the *ability* of the reader is key; to reformulate this slightly, neo-Victorianism has inclined towards valuing certain types of knowledge – intellectual, academic – over others.

McDonagh begins his cultural history of idiocy by observing a tendency to consider the idiot as a "resilient contrast group, a category of people against whom we rational modern (and post-modern) folk can identify ourselves, to affirm our intelligence and to assert our claims to respect and justice" (McDonagh 2008: 2). I posit that this propensity is manifest both within neo-Victorian narratives and on a metatextual level as well; just as Gracie Milne and Grace Linton become Others by which to define the more sophisticated desires of Nancy Astley and the privileged knowledge of Sarah Brandt respectively, so does neo-Victorian criticism assume compulsory able-mindedness in terms of accounts of the genre and its readership. The reader necessarily views these idiot girls through the eyes of the able-minded protagonists, and is implicitly encouraged to find them similarly lacking. Such ideologies actually exceed the literary/popular, high/low cultural binaries of neo-Victorianism, as indicated by the comparable representations of the two Graces in very different manifestations of the genre: *Tipping the Velvet* is most definitely literary, scholarly, canonised neo-Victorian fiction (albeit accessible to a general readership), while *Murder on Lenox Hill* is popular detective fiction. Although, as Cox notes, "detective fiction belongs to the realms of popular culture", she also identifies the neo-Victorian quest to "uncover […] and solve the mysteries of the past" as a mode of detection writ large (Cox 2019: 74, 75).[13] Even a general reader of neo-Victorian fiction, then, could be invited to align themselves with the intelligence of a Victorian detective. From a disability studies perspective, Thompson's writing for a popular audience does little to mitigate the deeply ableist ideologies of the novel.

I am acutely aware of the irony of my critique of privileged knowledge/intelligence in the light of being an academic working within higher education, a system which is historically founded upon and continues to "accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual […] weakness" (Dolmage 2017: 3). However, my exploration of the politics of neo-Victorian representations of intellectual disability – and the wider ramifications for the politics of the cultural phenomenon of neo-Victorianism – is an attempt to expose that which we might take for granted as scholars in the field, the alternative identities and knowledges

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that we might subjugate, and at what cost. For me, the political promise of queer readings is in the exposure of and challenge to that which is expected, standard, common-sense: the *normal*. We must not become complacent that society has moved on from Victorian discourses of eugenics: in February 2020, the Conservative British government was called upon to justify why they employed an adviser, Andrew Sabisky, who holds eugenicist views about race and intelligence, and advocates enforced sterilisation.[14] Neo-Victorian cultural production – and scholarship – is well-placed to be attuned to the cultural afterlife of nineteenth-century regimes of normalcy with regards to gender, sexuality, class and, to some extent, race. However, the intersections between such identities were so often conflated with disability in the Victorian era that we omit disability from neo-Victorian analyses at our peril.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Madge Davies for her thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this article.

Notes

1. It is notable that Nancy's relationship with the Milnes is not discussed in any of these studies.
2. The potential for Francis being read as autistic is highlighted in various reviews of the novel. See, for example, Harrison 2016: n.p.; Kimber 2016: n.p.; Senior 2017: n.p.
3. The potential for Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of Sherlock Holmes to be read as autistic has been widely debated online; for an exploration of the cultural politics of this interpretation of *Sherlock*, see Folsom 2014. Also see Loftis 2014, for a discussion of the potential for reading Conan Doyle's Holmes as an autistic character.
4. See Michael Bérubé's insights upon the limitations of a disability studies approach that "confines itself to determining the disability status of individual characters […] to think that a diagnosis 'solves' the text somehow" (Bérubé 2016: 20).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

5. I will dispense with inverted commas around 'idiocy' and related terms (including 'normalcy'), although these qualifying markers should still be assumed.
6. For a summary of metaphorical connections between femininity and disability, see Garland-Thomson 1997: 19-20.
7. Commentators diverge on the historical connections – and distinctions – between idiocy and 'madness'. For instance, Foucault claims that until the end of the eighteenth century, idiocy was considered to be "nothing other than a species of madness" (Foucault 2006: 203). However, Wright suggests that the distinction between idiocy and "lunacy" can be dated back to at least the thirteenth century in the context of British law (Wright 2011: 18).
8. See, for example, Elaine Showalter's classic study of the gendering of mental illness (Showalter 1985).
9. See Judith Butler on the homophobic concept that queer genders/sexualities are a "copy" of heterosexuality, and her theoretical challenge to the illusion of an "original", heteronormative gender (Butler 1999: 41).
10. The infantilisation of people, particularly women, with intellectual disabilities has a long history, as is made clear in McDonagh's study of idiocy (McDonagh 2008: 118-121), and can also be seen in the traits defined by the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, discussed above. The association between queerness and immaturity has been noted by various scholars, both in terms of its derogatory history and productive/disruptive political potential (see, for example, Scahill 2015: passim).
11. Johnson and McCruer's coining of the term "cripistemologies" borrows from the reappropriation of the insult 'crip' in certain disability studies/activism communities (which obviously follows the LGBTQ+ reclamation of the term 'queer'), and also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's study of queer epistemologies, (Sedgwick 1990: passim).
12. For a discussion of the age of consent in New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Stephen Robertson (Robertson 2002: 781-798).
13. This connection has also been noted by Heilmann and Llewellyn (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 16-17) and Louisa Hadley (Hadley 2010: 59-84), amongst others.
14. For further details of this story, see Mason 2020: n.p. Sabisky's enforced resignation was shortly after followed by that of Dominic Cummings – senior aide to British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson – who has also expressed his

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4317377

support for the selection of embryos to produce children with higher IQs (see Mason and Sample 2020: n.p.)

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