

Institution: Newman University		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 27: English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: <i>Neo-Victorian Culture and the Victorian Freak Show</i>		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Helen Davies	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Head of English	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: November 2016 on
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2019 on		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The Impact is chiefly in the Area: 'Impacts on understanding, learning and participation', and specifically in the type 'Enhanced cultural understanding of issues and phenomena; shaping or informing public attitudes and values'. The work of Dr Helen Davies has contributed to a social change in the perception of diversity and comedy through links made between the Victorian freak show and Neo-Victorian culture in order to discuss contemporary attitudes towards gender, race, sexuality, disability and culture. The longer-term impacts are likely to include helping to break down barriers to positive perceptions of difference.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Joining Newman University from Teesside University in 2016, Dr. Helen Davies has an established record in researching and analysing the ways in which contemporary fiction, film, and television have revisited the lives of nineteenth-century freak show performers. Linking the Victorian and Neo-Victorian she locates the freak show as a crucial forum for debating the politics of disability, gender, sexuality and race within the genre more broadly (evidenced in her monograph <i>Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show</i>, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 239 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-40255-4).</p> <p>Dr Davies's work has long explored the politics of representation in neo-Victorian re-imaginings of freak show performers. The research draws upon work from both freak studies and disability studies to address the issue of bodily difference in a series of nineteenth-century and neo-Victorian texts, which are in danger of re-enacting the historical oppression of 'freak show' performers but, crucially, also have the potential to offer a more empathetic engagement with the figure of the freak. Neo-Victorianism is not a genre which is usually associated with comedy, as the various social power inequalities of the nineteenth century are hardly a laughing matter. However, Davies's research asks to what extent can neo-Victorian comedy be used as a political strategy to challenge Victorian attitudes towards disability, as well as critiquing our own contemporary prejudices?</p> <p>One strand of the research, for example, explores the representation of disability in the neo-Victorian television sitcom <i>Hunderby</i> (2012–2015). Davies argues that <i>Hunderby's</i> depiction of two stereotypes of Victorian disability—the freak show, and the "cripple"—both reiterates and critiques ableist assumptions about desire and pity in relation to bodily diversity. The series pokes fun at the "seriousness" of neo-Victorian representations of the nineteenth century, but ultimately <i>Hunderby</i> tells us more about contemporary anxieties about disability than providing a meaningful challenge to Victorian ideologies of bodily difference.</p>		

In another piece of disseminated research, Davies and Ilott (2018) describe the representational strategies employed by comedy writers, producers and performers by offering Richard Dyer's (1993) characterization: "how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation". Media representations and observational learning also play vital roles in construction of any gender's respect and importance in society. Their edited collection (Davies and Ilott below) interrogates the ways in which "humorous" constructions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, class, and disability raise serious issues about privilege, agency, and oppression in popular culture. Outlining the theories, contexts, and politics pertinent to debate, they demonstrate how questions of representation mediate the triadic relationship between teller, butt, and audience of jokes, and examine the dynamic role that humour plays in making and remaking identity and power relations in culture and society.

The Impact work of Dr Davies rests on "learning about different ways of being and living which can lead us to question our presumptions about 'freakish' Victorians as well as about bodily diversity in our cultural moment" (*Neo-Victorian Freakery* 15).

3. References to the research

Davies, Helen. (2016) 'A Big Neo-Victorian Society? Gender, Austerity, and Conservative Family Values in The Mill' in H. Davies and C. O'Callaghan (eds.) *Gender and Austerity in Popular Culture: Femininity, Masculinity and Recession in Film and TV*. London: I. B. Tauris, (pp. 17-41).

Davies, Helen. (2016) 'Written on the Body: Wounded Men and Ugly Women in *The Little Stranger*' in C. O'Callaghan and A. Jones (ed.) *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave (pp. 155-172).

Davies, Helen (2017) "'I raise the devil in you, not any potion. My touch": The Strange Case of Heterosexuality in Neo-Victorian versions of Jekyll and Hyde' in B. Poore (ed.) *Neo-Victorian Villainy: Adaptations and Transformations in Popular Culture*. Rodopi/BRILL: Amsterdam. (pp.236-51) ISBN: 978-90-04-32225-7

Davies, Helen (2018) 'Saintly Cretins and Ugly Buglys: Laughing at Victorian Disability in Hunderby: Mocking the Weak', in *Comedy and the Politics of Representation* Basingstoke: Palgrave (pp.153-170) DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-90506-8_9

Davies, Helen and Sarah Ilott (2018), 'Mocking the Weak? Contexts, Theories, Politics' in *Comedy and the Politics of Representation* London: Palgrave (pp.1-24). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-90506-8_1

Davies, Helen (2018), 'Gender, sexuality and the body in comedy: performance, reiteration, resistance.' *Comedy Studies* 9(1):1-4. DOI: 10.1080/2040610X.2018.1437163

4. Details of the impact

The Impact is in an early stage and the gathering of data has been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, as has the staging of public engagement events in 2020. Further events were intended for 2020 but the difficulties of public gatherings resulted in only one event being staged in 2020, a virtual one at the George Marshall Medical Museum. Further events are intended for 2021 and beyond, though these again will be virtual for the foreseeable future.

The Impact is chiefly in the Area: 'Impacts on understanding, learning and participation', and specifically in the type 'Enhanced cultural understanding of issues and phenomena; shaping or informing public attitudes and values'.

Impact to date draws on public appearances made by Dr Davies to engage people with the findings of her research over previous years. Examples of this engagement are given here:

1) Dr Davies contributed to Lucy Worsley's 'Encounters with Victoria' series aired on BBC Radio 4 in May 2019. Dr Davies was interviewed about the life of Charles Stratton, otherwise known as General Tom Thumb, who was a Victorian freak show performer and the subject of previous work, published in *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show*, but also in current research towards her forthcoming monograph on *Re-Reading the Victorian Freak Show: Texts, Contexts, Politics*. You can listen to the podcast entitled Encounters with Victoria, 5: American Idols on the [BBC website](#). **See sources marked * below.**

2) On February 27th 2019, Dr Davies gave a public talk at Liverpool Hope University's International Network of Literary and Cultural Disability Scholars on 'Reading Down Syndrome. Past, Present, Future?' The talk argued that we are at a crucial moment for thinking about the future of people with Down syndrome, considering that 2018 has seen the introduction of non-invasive pre-natal testing via the NHS. Evidence from countries such as Iceland suggests that the availability of NIPTs leads to very high percentages of terminations, and disability rights groups have argued that this trend is tantamount to a strategy of modern eugenics (Burch 2017, pp. 1085-1089). Drawing on her work on bodily constructions in literature and history, the talk explored the way in which various 'futures' of characters with Down syndrome are constructed in contemporary culture and how certain often still-unchallenged stereotypes of the condition were established by Victorian medical discourses. Drawing on Dr Davies' studies of the Victorian Freak Show, the talk ends by examining how some contemporary artists more positively deploy aesthetic and political innovation to imagine futures with agency, dignity, and inclusion for their characters. Advertised and discussed on the Centre's Twitter feed (609 followers), the talk was recorded on video and uploaded to YouTube where it has had over 250 views. **See sources marked ** below.**

3) Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr Davies staged a Zoom talk on October 27, 2020: The Freak Show and Victorian Medicine (The Strange Case of Millie and Chris) at the George Marshall Medical Museum in October: <https://medicalmuseum.org.uk/whats-on/2020/10/27/zoom-talk-the-freak-show-and-victorian-medicine-the-strange-case-of-millie-and-chris> The aim of the talk was to reveal a hidden history of local significance and bring it to people's attention alongside an attempt to raise public awareness of the Victorian Freak Show and the light the story can cast on contemporary attitudes. The talk focused on Millie and Christine McCoy, who were African American conjoined twins, born into slavery in America's Deep South in 1851. They were stolen from their family at an early age, and trafficked around North America and Europe until being discovered on exhibition in Birmingham. This talk by Dr Davies explores their extraordinary life, and focuses upon the sensational coverage of their rescue in the Birmingham local press. What can the strange case of Millie and Christine tell us about attitudes towards gender, race, and bodily difference in the context of medicine and the Victorian freak show? Despite the need to stage the talk online, all 100 tickets for the event were taken, with the actual attendance well over 60. The feedback survey established that many people had not visited the George Marshall Medical Museum before. Feedback through survey monkey was invited after the event, with 17 responses. Nearly 80% thought the event was 'Excellent', with all others rating it as 'Very Good'. 83% rated the talk as 'thought-provoking' and 60% said it encouraged them to find out more about the subject with 70% saying it had increased their awareness of the subject. Feedback was also sought directly through email forms: nearly a dozen responses were received, with a majority of respondents confirming that the event was 'thought provoking', 'gave a new perspective on the topic', and 'Increased my understanding of the subject's relevance to everyday life'. **See sources marked *** below.**

All of Dr Davies's research examines the cultural construction of bodily difference and her engagement work seeks to make plain both Victorian and contemporary ambivalences towards alterity as well as raise public understanding of this construction.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

* [BBC website](#). Noting recorded appearance of Dr Davies on 'Encounters with Victoria'. Radio 4 broadcast. Episode 5 'American Idols'

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004sg1>

** Youtube video recording of public lecture at Liverpool Hope University's International Network of Literary and Cultural Disability Scholars [Dr. Helen Davis: Reading Down Syndrome. Past, Present, Future? - YouTube](#)

** Twitter account of Liverpool Hope University's International Network of Literary and Cultural Disability Scholars announcing CCDS seminar by Dr Davies

<https://twitter.com/inlcds/status/1101123793106300928?lang=en>

** Centre for Culture and Disability Studies Facebook page discussing disability and CCDS seminar by Dr Davies

<https://m.facebook.com/CentreforCultureandDisabilityStudies/posts/1226212467503480>

*** Webpage details and booking form for Medical Museum event

<https://medicalmuseum.org.uk/whats-on/2020/10/27/zoom-talk-the-freak-show-and-victorian-medicine-the-strange-case-of-millie-and-chris>

*** Event feedback via questionnaires and SurveyMonkey responses. Events Organiser, George Marshall Medical Museum