Re-forming the Transnational Victorian Archive
Introduction

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In 2017, Ted Underwood observed that the Digital Humanities had become 'a semi-normal thing', and, today, digital tools, methods and outputs seem increasingly commonplace.[1] As the integration of digital methods in humanities scholarship has continued, the rhetoric used about those methods has become more moderate. Heady claims about the inherently progressive and transformative nature of DH methods have largely fallen away, and so have claims that those methods are an extension of the neoliberal university and state. Instead, scholars have attempted more granular and nuanced accounts of how DH's promised radical reinvention of scholarship sits discomfortingly with a lack of diversity among the field's practitioners and subjects, the origin of some of its tools in state violence and repression, and its reliance on unacknowledged, unwaged, and precarious labour.[2] The essays in this Digital Forum continue these debates as they examine how re-forming the materials of three very different kinds of nineteenth-century reform work – penal correction, protest literature, and the development of women's education – into digital databases and archives allows an examination of that work at new scales. Zooming in and zooming out on collections related to Victorian reform, the essays ask three interrelated questions. First, how can re-forming nineteenth-century print, manuscripts, and institutional records as digital artefacts open new,

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[1] Ted Underwood, 'Digital humanities as a semi-normal thing?', *The Stone and the Shell*, 30 March 2017 <https://tedunderwood.com/2017/03/> [accessed 7 December 2021].

[2] See, indicatively, Christina Boyles et al., 'Precarious Labor and the Digital Humanities', *American Quarterly*, 70.3 (2018), 693–700; [accessed 7 December 2021]; Dorothy Kim, 'Introduction: Media Histories, Media Archaeologies, and the Politics and Genealogies of the Digital Humanities.' *Alternative Historiographies of the Digital Humanities*, ed. by Dorothy Kim and Adeline Koh. Punctum: 2021; Adeline Koh, 'Inspecting the Nineteenth-Century Literary Digital Archive: Omissions of Empire', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19.3 (2014), 385-395; Anna Mukamal et al, 'Student Labour and Major Research Projects', *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* 11(1):2 (2021), 1-33 <https://www.digitalstudies.org/article/id/7368/> [accessed 7 December 2021].

transnational vistas on Victorian reform work, its achievements, and its failings? Second, how does re-forming these artefacts and recovering these histories allow us to reflect on the ideological commitments of nineteenth and twenty-first century archives of reform? And what responsibilities does globalized digital humanities research bear to local communities and marginalized populations, and to the ethical management of digital labour?

The three very different projects from which these essays emerge extend a growing commitment within Victorian Studies to exploring the nineteenth century at a variety of scales, and at the intersections of the local, national, and global. The subjects for their digital archives include: a local micro-genre of poetry produced in response to a global supply crisis; the personal, transnational friendships of a lynchpin of reform culture; and a prison in colonial Australia with a multi-ethnic population. In their engagement with the writings and lives of subjects marginalized by their social class, gender, or race, all three projects are indebted to traditions of recovery work and history from below. Yet they also interrogate these traditions by exploring how digital searching, database structures, and remediation simultaneously expand and deconstruct the object of recovery to ask how top-down methods can facilitate bottom-up narratives. All three essays show that digital re-formations can challenge identity-based categories such as labouring-class literature, women's movements, and indigenous histories, and instead foreground entanglements of geographical, cultural and social belonging. Nor do any of the authors assume that digitization projects are inherently progressive because they recover marginalized voices, and potentially open nineteenth-century archives to new publics. Instead, these essays reflect on the political complexities of recovery projects. The digital archives they discuss testify to compromise, expediency, and pragmatism, as much as a commitment to radical ideals and a politics of liberation, in the present as well as in the past.

In '[Re-]forming Cotton Famine Poetry – Some Implications', Simon Rennie describes his attempts to recover and create a digital archive of newspaper poetry produced in response to the suffering that a lack of US cotton imports during the Civil War caused in Lancashire. Rennie argues that the search and curation methodologies his team employed expanded and problematized the geographic, temporal, and class boundaries of the Cotton Famine tradition, revealing that a poetic tradition traditionally thought to be localized and produced by labouring-class writers, might also include, for example, poems from the United States and Australia, that intersected the textile workers' struggles with abolitionist politics and pro-emigration rhetoric. Like Rennie, Katie McGettigan proposes that re-forming a corpus of reform texts can reveal connections, but also conflicts between political movements

operating at various scales. Her essay 'University Work: Re-Forming Manuscripts in Elizabeth Jesser Reid's Correspondence Networks' places a collection of letters about the founding of Bedford College in conversation with Sara Ahmed's work on the contemporary university. McGettigan thus explore how productive frictions between the material object and the digital artefact expose frictions between reform causes, and between the values placed on various forms of labour, then and now. In contrast, Katie Roscoe suggests that illusion of openness created by re-forming records into digital datasets disguises the ways that both those records and the digitization obscure the Indigenous, Indian, Chinese and African lives documented in nineteenth-century Australian convict records. Beginning with her own database of convicts held on Cockatoo Island, she argues for the difficult, but necessary task of decolonizing physical and digital archives that have been shaped by nineteenth-century power structures, and by the demands of a user community of largely white amateur genealogists, who may be unwilling to confront the role their ancestors played in perpetuating imperial violence and dispossession.

Together, the essays document how digital re-forming foregrounds some stories and suppresses others, and encourage scholars to be alert to the ways in which digital artefacts and their archiving can reproduce the structures and logics of their nineteenth-century sources. Moreover, the essays explore how digital archives and their politics can be formed, reformed, and re-formed by the archive's users, volunteers, and collaborators. Rennie and Roscoe show how musical collaborators and genealogical researchers respectively reconfigured the archives that they themselves have created, producing new collections of sources and records that themselves reshape the politics the collection as a whole. McGettigan, on the other hand, examines how creating a community of volunteers to work on a project replicated gendered disparities in the value of labour articulated within its source materials themselves.

In reflecting on the possibilities for embedding the archives of a globalized histories of Victorian reform work within the communities represented in and obscured by those archives, and within twenty-first century communities that produce and uses digital resources, these essays implicitly respond to Talia Schaffer's proposal for a new kind of recovery work. Schaffer suggests that rather than 'prioritiz[ing] rebelliousness,' recovery work should be shaped by an ethics of care that is 'largely indifferent to political expressions

as such, but instead is interested in social relations among people.'[3] We find this care ethics in Roscoe's call to relocate recovery work and the production of digital crime archives within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is also present in Rennie's reflections on how the affective expectations placed on recipients of charity within economies of care might have muted the rebellious anger of Cotton Famine poetry. McGettigan's essay reflects on the need to recuperate not only the care work of the past, but the care work of the contemporary university, and thus echoes Claire Warwick's call for a Digital Humanities that 'can learn from [Library and Information Sciences] how to be a field that is co-operative, collaborative, respectful and willing to value the quiet, selfless service of others'.[4] The essays in this forum seek to exemplify this re-forming of academic cultures to prioritise care for communities, lost voices, and each other.

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[3] Talia Schaffer, 'Victorian Feminist Criticism: Recovery Work and the Care Community', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 47.1 (2019), 63–91 (pp. 71–72).

[4] Claire Warwick, '"They Also Serve": What DH Might Learn about Controversy and Service from Disciplinary Analogies', *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/projects/debates-in-the-digital-humanities-2019> [accessed 7 December 2021].