



MIDWEST VICTORIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Call for Papers: "The Underground: Prohibition, Abolition, Expression"

Inspired by Cincinnati's historic role in the Underground Railroad and its National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the theme of this year's conference is "The Underground: Prohibition, Abolition, Expression." The conference seeks to investigate the relationship between the literal underground — the built and geological spaces beneath our feet — and the metaphorical and political "undergrounds" of Victorian Britain. Prohibitions and abolitions can drive things underground, but the underground can also be a place of fecundity and growth. What kinds of expression result from conditions of prohibition or abolition? What grows underground?

Papers might take up issues including, but not limited to:

- * Colonial uprisings and revolutions; underground newspapers, publications, and circulations
- * Abolition: legacies of abolishing the slave trade, emancipation, reactions to the U.S. Civil War
- * Race science and racial passing as modes of concealment or subversion
- * Seeds, literal and figurative: underground forms of botanical life (e.g. roots, fungi, rhizomatic species)
- * Closed sessions, private meetings, clubs, secret societies
- * Prohibition and temperance movements
- * Bans, embargos, vetoes, boycotts, bars, disbarment, erasure
- * Imperial underground diplomacy and intelligence networks
- * Censorship and archives that exist due to censorship
- * Marginal religious sects and spiritualist circles
- (e.g. Lord Chamberlain's Plays)
- * Scientific and subterranean imaginaries, e.g. geological time, fossil records, stratigraphy
- * Laboring "underground": mining, sex work, child labor, informal or clandestine earnings
- * Discarded, suppressed, or "low" cultural forms (e.g. ephemera and scrapbooks)
- * Forms of resistance: labor regulations, union efforts, grassroots political movements
- * Anthems and protest music
- * Substitution, coding, improvisation
- * Underground railways in London and elsewhere
- * Fairy tales and underground worlds
- * Finding one's voice in a repressive atmosphere
- * "Underground" sexualities and gender expressions
- * Technologies of concealment and exposure (e.g. x-rays, coding, telegraphy)



Baker Street Station on the Metropolitan Railway, 1863 – 1869. Lithograph, unknown artist. London Transport Museum.

Remote Participation in Keyword Roundtable

The majority of the conference will be devoted to in-person sessions. In lieu of seminars, we will offer a hybrid roundtable session for lightning talks on a keyword. Thus a subset of our call for papers is a call for proposals for the keyword roundtable, which includes the opportunity for remote participation.

If you would like to participate in this session, please propose a keyword and plan to give a six-minute talk about how it illuminates and raises questions about the Victorian period and our contemporary interactions with it. Talks that engage with teaching, research process, and other types of work are welcome. These short presentations will be followed by a moderated discussion of these topics' intersections, conceptual or practical.

All other panels will be in-person only. Remote participants (presenters and attendees) will have access to this keyword session solely at a separate, much reduced, conference rate. This hybrid format offers space to surface terms and concepts that resist easy consensus and to reflect critically on what language could or could not do in the nineteenth century — and what it still can't do today.

Conference Highlights

- * Stedman Lecture by Nathan K. Hensley, Professor, Georgetown University.
- * MVSA Lifetime Achievement Award honoring Linda K. Hughes, Professor Emerita, Texas Christian University.
- * Conference runs from noon, Friday, April 10 to noon, Sunday, April 12. The Board Meeting is in the morning of April 10.

How to Apply

Please submit an abstract (~350 words) and a brief CV for individual papers or keyword submissions. To propose an in-person panel or roundtable, submit a brief overview, plus individual paper abstracts and brief CVs for all participants.

Please apply by November 15, 2025, through [this Google form](https://bit.ly/MVSA2026) (<https://bit.ly/MVSA2026>). The committee aims to return decisions by the end of the calendar year.