

Friedman, Dustin, and Mahoney, Kristin, eds. *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. v + 366 pp. £90.00.

‘Undisciplining’ is in vogue across the arts and humanities, especially in nineteenth-century studies. It is necessary and vital to introduce new texts, new research methods and new contexts into the much-studied 1890s, and Christina Sharpe’s call to ‘become undisciplined’ underpins Dustin Friedman and Kristin Mahoney’s collection of essays, *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s*, the second volume in the Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition series.¹ In their editors’ introduction, ‘The 1890s: Decade of a Thousand Movements’, Friedman and Mahoney argue for a reappraisal of the 1890s, one that moves away from the ‘nationally siloed treatment of Victorian literature and attends to the cross-currents that made this period so cosmopolitan in tone’ (p. 4). As a result, many of the sixteen essays in this volume are refreshingly unusual and include references to authors who are obscure even to specialists – E. Pauline Johnson, Marie Corelli, and Yone Noguchi, to name just three. The collection also reflects contemporary cultural and political concerns – climate change, sexuality, gender, Conservatism, cosmopolitanism, performance, and race – and although the contributors are primarily literary scholars, the essays illustrate how the field of fin-de-siècle studies is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary.

As scholars of global decadence, such as Robert Stilling, Matthew Potolsky, and Regenia Gagnier, have shown, Victorian imperialism, orientalism, and racism are not new areas of inquiry. However, by choosing to open the volume with Zarena Aslami’s chapter ‘Race and Empire in the 1890s’, Friedman and Mahoney emphasise their approach to selecting the essays for this volume. Drawing upon Black Studies and postcolonial theory, Aslami demonstrates how racialisation is fundamental to the formation of empire and how race and empire cannot be separated, either from each other or from other issues underpinning nineteenth-century studies. Her chapter is unusual in its impassioned self-questioning of the act of writing about, and beginning this collection with, a separate discussion of race at all. In doing so, Aslami asks, ‘are we implicitly arguing that [race] is a detachable structure that can be analysed separately and thus, perhaps, addressed and settled or, even worse, ignored in discussions of other topics?’ (p. 35). The following chapters provide some answers to this question and aptly illustrate what approaches, methods, and texts might be in keeping with a more global and racially aware “Victorian Studies” – Lindsay Wilhelm’s discussion of Hawaiian dandies and transpacific decadence, Stefano Evangelista’s comparison of the representation of East Asian cultures in Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kokoro* (1896) and Wo Chang’s *England Through Chinese Spectacles* (1897), and Sukanya Banerjee’s reading of O. Chandumenon’s *Indulekha* (1889-90) through the lens of late-nineteenth-century realism, are fascinating examples of the fruitful possibilities of this kind of transnational research and inquiry.

The theme of environmentalism runs parallel to the global focus of this volume, and Dennis Denisoff’s formation of ‘weird ecology’ (p. 189), an idea that acknowledges the strangeness and uncertainty of nature, provides a provocative framework through which to re-read works such as M. P. Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* (1901). An environmentalist stance also recasts more mainstream 1890s genres such as the nocturne which, Emily Harrington argues, reflects an international concern with the radical transformation of the urban night and its gas-lit streets. The extent to which writers such as Arthur Symons would have been concerned about the impact of fossil fuels on London’s air quality index is debatable, but the proposed connection between decadent aesthetics and the manipulation and abuse of nature is

an interesting counterpart to ‘the Green 1890s’ (p. 133) discussed by Ana Parejo Vadillo in the following chapter. The work of women poets in the 1890s is interpreted differently, Vadillo argues, when it is viewed through the lens of ecocriticism and the environmental politics of the time. For example, alongside the subversion of nature and market capitalism in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862), A. Mary F. Robinson’s *The New Arcadia* (1884), described by Vadillo as ‘Emile Zola on steroids’ (p. 143), speaks to the contemporary idea of ‘dark ecology’, defined by Timothy Morton as an ecological consciousness that takes the form of a Möbius strip. Ecology appears to have two sides – nature and the countryside on one side, and artificiality and the city on the other – but there is no distinction or division in an environmentally damaged world.

Many of the chapters are commendable not only for their radical reframing of late-nineteenth-century texts and contexts, but for their interdisciplinary perspectives. Adam Alston’s reformulation of the relationship between decadence and theatre, Anne Stiles’ consideration of the blending of science and religion in fin-de-siècle spirituality, and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller’s discussion of the 1890s as ‘a hothouse of the Anthropocene’ (p. 171), all break new ground. The volume also raises questions about human, non-human, and post-human relations, concluding with two chapters that consider the use of technology in our present moment. Rebecca N. Michell asks how the digitisation of certain resources and images from the 1890s, as found on archive.org and *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, might reinvigorate or constrain our notions of fin-de-siècle textuality and visuality, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra’s chapter illustrates how extensive online networks and databases have transformed the originally niche ‘little magazine’ into a defining cultural form of the period – a digitisation that has unsettled and reframed our understanding of this originally countercultural media. In his chapter on Conservatism and Patriotism, Alex Murray describes the commingling of various aesthetic-political dispositions that circulated in the 1890s, as ‘hydra-headed creatures [that] can disrupt our comfortable categories for reading the past’ (p. 260), and this is an apt way of describing not just Victorian politics but the many other fascinatingly complex hybrids, chimeras, and cyborgs that emerge from ‘undisciplined’ and unbounded study.

In *The Romantic ’90s* (1925), Richard Le Gallienne reflects on how the 1890s is often spoken about of as if it ‘had only one colour: the “yellow” ’90s; or the “naughty” ’90s; or the “decadent” ’90s’, epithets that still cling to many discussions of the period.² However, as *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s* successfully demonstrates, there was much more to the spirit of the 1890s than libidinousness, sinful abandon, and self-conscious dandyism. In keeping with the aims of the series, this volume not only challenges preconceived notions about the decade, but also foregrounds the fascinating interconnections, complexities, and multiplicities of the 1890s, which, in their striking similarity to our current geopolitical and cultural crisis, remind us why this period is still relevant today.

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¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 13.

See, for example, Ronjaanee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong’s, ‘Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies’, *Victorian Studies*, 62.3 (2020), 369-91; Sukanya Banerjee, Ryan D. Fong, and Helena Michie’s introductory essay for a special issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture*, ‘Widening the Nineteenth Century’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), 1-26; the ongoing digital humanities project *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, <https://undiscipliningvc.org>; and the newly launched Global

Decadence Lab at the Decadence Research Centre, Goldsmiths, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/decadence-research-centre/global-decadence-lab/>.

² Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, & Company, 1925), p. 162.