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New Directions in Nineteenth-Century French Studies

Larry Duffy^a, Andrew Watts^b and Masha Belenky^c

^aSchool of Cultures and Languages, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; ^bDepartment of Modern Languages, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; ^cDepartment of Romance, German, and Slavic Languages and Literatures, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

ABSTRACT

This introduction presents an overview of key critical developments arising in nineteenth-century French and francophone studies over the two decades since the inception of *Dix-neuf*, and then provides synopses of the articles in the special issue it introduces in terms of their engagement with and advancement of those developments. It identifies further areas of inquiry that fall within the scope of research by *dix-neuviémistes*: those already existing which are sufficiently broad and significant to warrant special issues of their own, and those newly emerging that offer new opportunities for scholars in this constantly evolving and vibrant disciplinary field.

KEYWORDS

adaptation;
cosmopolitanism;
historicism; gender;
sexuality; trans; eco-criticism;
visual arts

Introduction

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the creation of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes, which was followed two years later by the launch of the journal *Dix-Neuf*. The journal's mission was to be interdisciplinary in its approaches and methods, wide-ranging in its thematic and critical scope, and international in its reach. In striving to fulfil these aims, *Dix-Neuf* has continued to showcase the originality and rich variety of research in nineteenth-century French studies. Recent special issues reflect the broad intellectual scope of the field, addressing specific themes such as *Flânerie* and the Senses, Théodore de Banville, *Ecopoetics/L'Écopoétique*, World Fairs, and Intimacy. As editors, we thought the time was right to reflect on some of the key dialogues initiated within the pages of the journal, and to take stock of the current state of the field – or fields, as it were – of nineteenth-century French and Francophone studies. In so doing, this issue offers a snapshot of agenda-setting critical, contextual and thematic emphases that have emerged over the past two decades.

The current issue is particularly true to the spirit of interdisciplinarity that has been the hallmark of *Dix-Neuf*, for as well as articles by scholars from various related disciplines encompassing French and Francophone studies today – literary studies, history, art history – it also includes articles deeply rooted in interdisciplinary approaches to their subject matter and material. Hence, on the one hand, exciting new emphases on

established subjects of inquiry, such as materiality in the visual arts or dialogical approaches to George Sand, that sit alongside, on the other, highly innovative critical and theoretical (re)modelling frameworks such as trans, ecocriticism, and post-historicism. Ultimately these approaches reflect a field that has been expanding its scope considerably over the last twenty years, through incorporation of wider critical trends as critical tools for the specific interrogation of nineteenth-century French and Francophone culture. Nineteenth-century French and Francophone studies has for some decades been particularly concerned with the complexity of a nascent modernity and of the forms of cultural production grounded in it, representing it and indeed shaping it. It is therefore unsurprising that critical developments grounded in the similar complexities of our own more recent modernity and in recognition of further complexities in the past should be of vital importance to the field. These include emerging areas of scholarship concerned with acknowledging and reckoning with the past, such as critical postcolonial studies and interrogations of nineteenth-century constructions of race and other forms of difference in the French and Francophone world. Acknowledgement of and adjustment to new realities, coupled with recognition of the relevance of the past in opening new perspectives upon them, have also found expression in a variety of areas: ecocriticism, a vast critical field including the even more recently opened domain of 'blue humanities' interrogating the sea and human engagement with it; animal studies, in which a similar concern for the natural world which also has social dimensions is explored; critical medical humanities, to which nineteenth-century scholars bring a unique perspective afforded by the significance of France as a key context for medical history; critical disability studies, to which normative discourses produced in nineteenth-century France are crucial; critical sexology, drawing not only on a particular French intellectual tradition but also on the proliferation of French discourses of sexuality emerging under modernity; gender studies, queer studies, trans studies, again, all with their own grounding in French and French-informed thought and benefitting from the richness of discourses about difference circulating in the French nineteenth-century social and cultural imaginary. Overlooked areas of everyday experience, such as the domestic interior, have also become significant subjects of critical inquiry for scholars. The everyday also figures largely in similarly burgeoning areas of the study of popular culture, such as advertising and the press. Finally, the study of the posthumous and intercultural development and dissemination of cultural artefacts and discourses has found expression in the increasingly important fields of adaptation studies and translation studies.

The ground covered by nineteenth-century French studies is therefore varied and vast indeed, and while we aim to present a broad overview of some of its key recent developments, often reflecting similar trends in French and Francophone studies more generally, we must at the same time acknowledge that this special issue does not – indeed, arguably by definition cannot – claim to offer a fully comprehensive vision of the field. Rather, it offers an overview of some significant recent trends within it. Readers may notice, for example, an absence of articles related to the study of key areas among some of those above-mentioned – colonialism, race, medical humanities, disability studies – which have emerged as important fields in their own right, with their own internal dynamics and debates; they may likewise notice a dearth of discussion of theatre, poetry and other non-prose genres. Plans are in the works for future special issues of the journal

that will address central themes and forms such as these in a manner that gives them the full attention they deserve. Accordingly, the articles gathered here reflect the richness and diversity both of methodological approaches and of the source materials that scholars of nineteenth-century France have pursued in recent years. At the same time, this issue is also forward-looking, as each of the contributions here anticipates future stages in the development of nineteenth-century French studies. We expect that the research presented here will set the trends in our field(s) in the years to come.

This special issue, then, highlights a broad range of themes and approaches that are pivotal and forward-looking in today's nineteenth-century French studies. It is organized in four parts. Part One, 'Remapping the Nineteenth Century,' focuses on the interdisciplinarity of the field and offers new understandings of intersections among its different currents. In 'The Laboratorium: Nineteenth-Century French Studies in the Anglophone Sphere', Susan Harrow presents the first instalment of a two-part review article that considers the evolution of research in the field over the past twenty years. Focusing mainly on scholarship produced in the Anglophone world, Harrow structures her discussion around seven thematic categories or mappings: biography, body, and earth, which she addresses in this first instalment, and emotion, experiment, movement, and thing, which will be covered in a future issue of *Dix-Neuf*. As Harrow explains, her aim here is not to produce a traditional *état présent*, but to reflect on the 'extraordinary interdisciplinary adventure' that continues to shape the field, and to speculate on how this journey might unfold as we move towards the mid-point of the twenty-first century. By organising this exploration around themes, she recognises, too, that these are not self-contained silos, but rather areas of scholarship that overlap and intersect with each other. Starting with biography, she traces the development of life and biography studies from the 1970s and 80s, when scholars including Josef Kovitz and Pierre Nora began to reject the 'death of the author' in favour of more nuanced attempts at situating artistic figures within social and cultural history. Similar scope and intellectual depth have underpinned research on the body, which from its roots in gender studies in the 1980s and 90s, has inspired major studies of the body as object to analyses of the body in relation to the senses, movement, gastronomy, race and ethnicity, and physical and mental illness. Finally, Harrow turns to the category of earth, and to research in nineteenth-century French studies that has responded to an array of global, environmental, and social concerns. Eco-criticism, in particular, has gained significant momentum over the past twenty years. Through her discussion of the themes of biography, body, and earth, Harrow establishes a clear understanding of nineteenth-century French studies as a laboratorium – a site of work – that is richly varied, ever evolving, and productively porous in connecting different disciplines and fields of scholarly inquiry. This understanding is evident in numerous contributions to the current issue.

Shifting gears toward a different disciplinary perspective, in 'Sensing, Measuring, Writing: on Recent French Historiography of the Nineteenth Century,' historian Thomas Dodman offers a rich and enticing overview of important works of French history published in France over the past twenty years. Conceived as a tribute to the work of the late path-breaking French historian Dominique Kalifa, this essay surveys French historical scholarship that is largely unfamiliar to the Anglophone academy. Dodman presents what he calls 'non-exhaustive sampling' of historiography focused in particular on three specific areas: *l'histoire des sensibilités*, a field adjacent to the

history of emotions; studies that ‘grapple with time, space, and scales of analysis’; and, finally, works of historians interested in the relationship between history and literature, and the poetics of historical writing. Dodman’s survey presents a carefully curated selection of the most innovative recent historiographical scholarship in France. What unites this impressive array of works is what Dodman calls ‘its uncanny contemporaneity’ – or how the past continues to affect the present.

The second section, ‘New Theoretical Angles,’ features cutting-edge research in areas that only recently have begun to emerge in nineteenth-century French studies – eco-criticism and trans studies. Andrea Goulet’s ‘Anthropocene Under Paris? Rethinking the Quarries and Catacombs’ is an excellent example of the kind of interdisciplinarity Susan Harrow discusses in her essay. Here Goulet connects two lines of methodological inquiry – Earth Science and modern urbanism – in order to explore nineteenth-century representations of the Parisian underground through the lens of the concept of the Anthropocene. Building on extensive scholarship on urbanism and on recent theoretical studies in eco-criticism, Goulet offers a fresh perspective on the nineteenth-century imaginary of the Parisian underground. She frames her discussion with an in-depth overview of how the field of French studies more broadly, and nineteenth-century French studies in particular, have engaged with environmental humanities in recent years. An *aperçu* of recent scholarship that brings French studies into dialogue with such key figures of *l’éco-pensée* as Michel Serres and Bruno Latour testifies to the central place this approach occupies in the field. For her case studies, Goulet first reads the photographer Nadar’s essay ‘Paris souterrain: le dessus et le dessous de Paris’ in tandem with mining engineer Louis Simonin’s ‘Les carrières et les carrières.’ Both works appear in the 1867 *Paris-Guide par les principaux écrivains et artistes de France*, a literary guidebook meant to glorify the city of Paris ahead of the upcoming *Exposition universelle*. By bringing these two generically disparate texts into a dialogue with each other, Goulet emphasizes their shared focus on the encounter between the human and the non-human. Goulet then turns her attention to two texts by Balzac that engage with what she refers to as Anthropocene awareness – the ‘Ode à Cuvier’ from *La Peau de chagrin*, and one of his juvenile novels, *Le Centenaire* (1824). Both of these texts, as Goulet argues, grapple with ‘deep geological time’ and ‘envisage a much wider scale of being.’

In ‘Trans Rachilde: A Roadmap for Recovering the Gender Creative Past and Rehumanizing the Nineteenth Century,’ Rachel Mesch takes discussion about gender in nineteenth-century French culture in a highly innovative direction through the use of trans studies, and strategic deployment of terminology associated with it. She offers a case study of Rachilde’s work, with implications that go far beyond one author and their work. Mesch argues that a Foucauldian emphasis on discourse has inhibited consideration of a ‘full array of gender diversity.’ This is especially unfortunate since gender issues are unavoidably within the ambit of all *dix-neuviémistes*’ work, which covers such a rich period and place for their exploration. For Mesch, then, scholarship has ‘focused on the intellectual, scientific, and discursive history of sexuality while largely ignoring the history of its human experience.’ The result is a gap in knowledge, bridgeable through a trans frame of reference, which Mesch establishes by problematising the overlap between feminist, queer and trans approaches to gender. A trans approach places gender and the challenges it poses at the centre of its analysis while exploring

‘intersections of gender with sexuality and other modes of identity and behaviours.’ Mesch proposes four axioms for trans criticism: acknowledgment of instability and anachronism in language; a focus on individual self-expression over influential discourses, and over depersonalised ‘reverse-discourse;’ consideration of gender as ‘story’ in order to avoid imposition of formal taxonomies or hierarchies; sensitivity to covert transmission of trans experience and expression, understandable in terms of seeing (with José Estaban Muñoz) ‘ephemera as evidence.’ Accordingly, *dix-neuviémistes* have much to learn from theories conceptualised by marginalised voices if they are to ‘recover the histories of people who could be endangered by speaking directly or explicitly against dominant knowledge systems.’ As such, an ‘empathic, affect-driven reading of Rachilde’ such as that enacted by Mesch here allows greater understanding of a person that study of an author function might overlook. Ultimately, ‘[i]f to read for trans is to read for affect, then, to read with trans is to read with affect.’

Section three, ‘Discursive Turns,’ comprises three case studies ranging from a fresh, materially grounded approach to Degas (Kessler) and an examination of the relationship between literature and sciences (Orr) to a fascinating look at the concept of cosmopolitanism (Wettlaufer). In ‘Degas’s Breath and the Im/materiality of Pastel Veils,’ Marni Reva Kessler uses breath as a critical lens through which to reconsider the artist’s 1885 pastel drawing *Three Women at the Races*. Kessler begins her analysis with an evocative depiction of Degas working at his sheet of light brown paper, pressing, rubbing, and blowing away the excess pastel dust as it settles on the picture. By inviting us to contemplate the artist at work, she calls our attention to the materiality of artistic creativity, and to the meanings that can be garnered from understanding art as a process rather than an exclusively visual experience. Over the past fifteen years, Kessler explains, art history as a discipline has engaged in a ‘material turn’ in which scholars have focused increasingly on the material elements of artistic production, extending from its physical aspects such as paints and paper to broader questions of medium specificity and historical context. As this article argues, however, materiality cannot easily be separated from the immaterial and often unseen components of art – including the breath exhaled gently but purposefully over the paper – which become as much a part of the finished work as the scratches and burnishes made by the artist’s fingers. Through her reading of *Three Women at the Races*, Kessler demonstrates how careful attentiveness to both the material and immaterial aspects of this work can enable us to experience it differently and more profoundly.

Mary Orr’s “‘In from the Periphery?’ Re-framing the Nineteenth-Century French Literary-Scientific Imagination’ examines how better understanding of relationships between literature, historiography, and the sciences can help methodologically in advancing interdisciplinary study of the French nineteenth century. Orr offers case studies of three seemingly disparate works: Chateaubriand’s *Atala*, Arcelin’s *Solutré*, and Sand’s *Laura*. What these works share is knowing articulation of ‘critical knowledge gaps [...], references and allusions to the multifarious worlds of nineteenth-century French scientific understanding’. In identifying this shared preoccupation, Orr elucidates two closely related concerns: why such gaps matter, and how *dix-neuviémistes* can address them. A starting point is acknowledgement of the ‘nineteenth-century French literary-scientific imagination as an important mode of reappraising the known world’ going beyond identification of ‘realist-encyclopedic’ tropes and details. Further common

formal, stylistic and contextual features of these case studies offer ‘peripheral visions’ affording ‘innovatively literary perspectives on contemporary French scientific discourses and institutions,’ at a moment when French is ‘the international vernacular of science.’ This last, critical point means that widely circulated ‘French scientific vocabularies, ideas, theories and poetics’ are ‘interwoven intra-culturally into French literatures.’ A key implication here is that ‘literary-scientific critique’ of the kind Orr proposes is potentially more insightful than the ‘centre-periphery’ emphasis dominating (especially Anglophone) discussion of relationships between nineteenth-century cultural and scientific discourses. It can thus call into question, as here, ‘the over-valorization of Enlightenment (*Atala*), positivist (*Solutré*) and chemical (*Laura*) knowledge and value systems for their truth claims, authority and major blind spots,’ and open the way for similar study of ‘literary-scientific (self-)critical standpoints on the Western Colonial nineteenth century.’

Finally, in ‘At Home [and] Abroad: Cosmopolitanism as Political Practice in George Sand and Pauline Viardot-Garcia,’ Alexandra Wettlaufer explores the dialectic of female cosmopolitanism in nineteenth-century France. While cosmopolitanism, a complex concept understood as a coexistence, rather than erasure, of national cultural forms, has been studied extensively within the Anglo-American context, it has not been a topic of considerable interest in French studies. Wettlaufer’s article fills this gap, focusing on the career of celebrated mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot-Garcia (1821-1910), and George Sand’s novel *Consuelo* (1842-43), inspired by Viardot-Garcia and dedicated to her. In doing so, Wettlaufer brings to light the central role cosmopolitanism played in women’s cultural production in nineteenth-century France. Sand and Viardot-Garcia shared a ‘vision of cross-cultural engagement with the politics of difference, mobility, and identity’ in their artistic practices and in their lived experiences. Both novelist and singer participated in constructing female cosmopolitan subjectivity as a way to engage with forms of political and social oppression.

The final section of this special issue, ‘Theoretical Reconfigurations,’ offers new ways of conceptualizing how we approach literature today. In ‘Anxious Influencers – Reading the Nineteenth Century in 2021,’ Patrick Bray uses the notion of anxiety to explore the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in nineteenth-century French fiction. Scholars in this field, Bray contends, are often beset by anxiety, caught between the need to demonstrate their knowledge of the past and their concern to avoid generalisation and over-simplification. At the same time, the strength of nineteenth-century French studies stems precisely from the willingness of researchers to embrace new approaches and methodologies. Bray tracks the evolution of this relationship between anxiety and openness by focusing on the way in which nineteenth-century literature itself has been studied and the challenges it presents to academic scrutiny. After Sainte-Beuve pioneered the biographical method of literary analysis, others – among them Taine and Lanson – urged scholars to move beyond the dichotomy of ‘l’homme et l’œuvre’ and situate texts within their social and historical context – an argument championed more recently by Frederic Jameson in his call to ‘Always historicize!’ However, as Bray explains, attempting to unpick the relationship between literature and other disciplines can generate its own anxieties and uncertainties, not least because literature often interrogates and even subverts the boundaries of discourse. There are similar dangers, Bray argues, in using nineteenth-century literature as a lens through which to read the events of our own

contemporary era. The final part of his article adopts three texts – *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, and *Indiana* – as case studies through which to examine how these works actively destabilised any such attempts to read or categorise them in simple terms. Bray demonstrates how harnessing our anxiety and training ourselves to look for ambiguity can result in far deeper, more productive readings than falling back on the search for certainty.

The issue concludes with Andrew Counter's 'Use, Value, Justification: On History and Historicism in Nineteenth-Century French Studies.' Like Mesch's, Counter's contribution is grounded in personal self-reflection on the limitations of previous methodological and critical practice, primarily historicist like that of many *dix-neuviémistes*. Counter makes the bold proposition that *dix-neuviémistes* 'consider taking a break from history and from historicism,' a form of which – characterised by 'anti-canoncity,' 'contextualism' and 'specificity' – remains dominant in the field. Indeed, historicism has become something of an undiscussed and unreflexive habit, potentially limiting the 'pool of interlocutors' of *dix-neuviémiste* scholarship, and, despite its identification and critique of 'the silent political work' of the nineteenth-century canon, hampering engagement with present-day concerns and realities. A potential solution to this is a revisitation of the 'meaning-making' of 'texts read as literature,' avoiding narrow reconstructivism. To demonstrate this approach, Counter invokes – along with Flaubert's musings on art and its referents – Barthes's discussion in *L'effet de réel* of 'la référence obsessionnelle au "concret."' This same obsession grips *dix-neuviémisme*: the ideology shaping nineteenth-century realism is the one shaping nineteenth-century French studies scholarship, just as for Barthes, 'l'idéologie de notre temps' imposed a 'tyranny of the concrete' upon literary studies in the 1960s. The continuity asserted by Barthes between structuralist and realist moments, between scrutiny of humanities and the ideological stakes of Flaubert's aesthetics, plays out in the stakes of *dix-neuviémiste* criticism: a regime of knowledge governs both *l'art pour l'art* and utilitarian characterisations of art and scholarship. A possible way of transcending this regime is through reworking of our understanding of 'context,' a widening of which beyond immediate nineteenth-century contexts may facilitate a productive plurality of transhistorical critical conversations, and potentially more convincing ways of 'justifying' our work.

Taken together, these essays reflect the diversity and intellectual vibrancy that continue to underpin nineteenth-century French and Francophone studies. They present compelling insights into the way in which our field has evolved over the past twenty years by building on established areas of inquiry whilst simultaneously breaking new critical and theoretical ground. Just as pertinently within the context of this special issue, they serve as markers of the evolution of *Dix-Neuf*, tying together many of the conversations that have been initiated within the pages of the journal since its inception. In so doing, these essays provide a launchpad for the next phase of the journal's intellectual development, and point to exciting new directions for its own future as a space for the most innovative research in the field.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Larry Duffy is Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Kent (UK). He is the author of *Le Grand Transit Moderne: Mobility, Modernity and French Naturalist Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005) and *Flaubert, Zola and the Incorporation of Disciplinary Knowledge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), and of numerous articles on Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant, Huysmans, Proust and Houellebecq, particularly in terms of these authors' engagement with contemporary medical and scientific discourses. He is co-editor of *Dix-Neuf: The Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes*, and was co-organiser of the French Studies and Medical Humanities symposium at the Institute for Modern Languages Research in November 2017.

Andrew Watts is Reader in French Studies at the University of Birmingham (UK). His research has focused extensively on nineteenth-century prose fiction, notably Balzac. He is the author of *Preserving the Provinces: Small Town and Countryside in the Work of Honoré de Balzac* (Peter Lang, 2007) and co-editor with Owen Heathcote of *The Cambridge Companion to Balzac* (CUP, 2017). In tandem with his work on Balzac, he has written two books on adaptation with Kate Griffiths, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France* (University of Wales Press, 2013) and, most recently, *The History of French Literature on Film* (Bloomsbury, 2020). He is currently developing a new monograph on the parallels between artistic and biological adaptation, entitled *(Un)natural Selection: Adaptation, Evolution, and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. He is co-director of B-Film: The Birmingham Centre for Film Studies, and was co-editor of *Dix-Neuf: The Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes* between 2017 and 2022.

Masha Belenky is Professor of French at the George Washington University. She is the author of *The Anxiety of Dispossession: Jealousy in Nineteenth-Century French Culture* (Bucknell UP, 2008), and co-editor, with Anne O'Neil-Henry and Kathryn Kleppinger, of *French Cultural Studies in the 21st Century* (University of Delaware Press, 2017). Her most recent publications include *Engine of Modernity: The Omnibus and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (University of Manchester Press, 2019) and *Popular Literature from Nineteenth-Century France* (MLA Text and Translation, 2021), an anthology she co-edited and co-translated with Anne O'Neil-Henry. She serves as co-editor of *Dix-Neuf: The Journal of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes* and is on the executive committee of the MLA's forum for nineteenth-century French literature.