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Climate Change and Victorian Studies: Introduction

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Frances Ferguson has memorably described “the sharp, sudden consciousness” of climate change as one that “comes upon us like the ominous tones of an intruder bent on murder when the babysitter picks up the telephone receiver in a horror film: ‘I’m in the house’” (33). There is no refuge from this stranger within, nor from the feelings of panic his phone call incites. As I write these words, in the summer of 2018, the phone is ringing off the hook: above the Arctic Circle, record highs of 33°C/92°F were measured in Finland; a new record was set in Oman when the temperature did not drop below 42°C/108°F for twenty-four hours.¹ Closer to home, outside my window, California is on fire. Extreme heat and dryness brought an early, vicious start to fire season, and in the Carr Fire near Redding, more than a thousand homes have burned down and seven people have died.² The sky outside my office is thick and gray, and the air quality is poor—a reminder of these nearby conflagrations and the fiery future they portend.

Our climate is changing, but must Victorian studies change too? The real question is, how could it not? For scholarship depends on scholars, and no matter how hard we try to inhabit a detached critical perspective, none of us are writing from Mars. Heatwaves, smoky skies, an incessant phone ringing in the background: these are the conditions in which we work. Sometimes these conditions take on an aspect of cosmic irony; in September 2017, members of the Vcologies working group met at the University of Houston to exchange work-in-progress on Victorian ecologies and ecological thought, and as it turned out, our meeting would take place in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, a record-breaking storm that drew its strength from record-high ocean temperatures. Institutional and economic advantages mean, of course, that

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Fig. 1. Kashmere Gardens, Houston, September 16, 2017. Photograph by Nathan K. Hensley.

many academics have been relatively well protected from the ravages of climate change so far—my office window keeps the smoke outside, the University of Houston did not flood—but five miles north of the university, in a historically Black neighborhood with a high flood risk, house after house was turned inside out: the sodden, wrecked contents of homes were piled in the street, pianos next to baby dolls next to lampshades (fig. 1).

If these circumstances dictate—and I think they do—that climate change must move into every field of academic debate and every part of the university curriculum, it is equally the case that unique aspects of nineteenth-century Britain and its Empire make our field particularly connected to the topic of climate change. For one thing, the geographies of climate change, including urban flood plain maps, bear a historical relation to European and American imperialism, and in a devastating turn of imperial modernity’s screw, the impacts of climate change are now being borne disproportionately by those least responsible for them and least able to weather them. Thus Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee begins *Natural Disasters and Victorian Empire* with a discussion of Hurricane Katrina, arguing that ideas about natural disaster today “grew out, in important ways, of the British imperial experience in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia” (2). Similarly, while it would be too simplistic to say

that Victorian England is answerable for the climate crisis, it would also be an error to discount its unique historical role in cultivating the fossil fuel economy and the resulting surge in greenhouse gas emissions.³ The “workshop of the world,” as Benjamin Disraeli famously referred to industrial England, relied on coal combustion to accelerate production and speed transportation, forever transforming the scope of consumption habits, global trade, and imperial market-making (Disraeli n. p.).

Just as the climate has changed, then, our understanding of the past must transform along with it, and indeed, conventional notions of past, present, and future are troubled in any account of anthropogenic climate change. Conventional notions of agency are troubled too, and mental life in the era of climate change can feel like a constant reckoning with the temporal paradoxes of time-travel stories: can something happen today to reverse the course laid by the past, or for the future? New understandings of geological and evolutionary time that emerged in the nineteenth century are, of course, crucial to our capacity to think in such terms at all.⁴ As the articles in this special issue establish, developments in nineteenth-century science, narrative, and representation meant that Victorians were generating the tools to detect climate change and make sense of its long-term effects, even as they were producing the environmental changes that would require such detection.

This conflicted historical situation is discernible in the era’s public discourse around climate science, as in an essay titled “Weather” that ran in the November 1860 issue of *Cornhill Magazine*, just after the fourth installment of John Ruskin’s *Unto this Last*.⁵ This was twenty-four years before Ruskin’s *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* lecture—a lecture that, as Heidi C. M. Scott describes in her essay, both developed and transcended nineteenth-century climate science in its nascent forms—but well after Ruskin began making the regular weather observations that would form the basis for *Storm-Cloud*. Like Ruskin, the author of “Weather” remarks on the strange weather of the day as an occasion for his observations, but his purpose is to introduce the lay reader to the new science of meteorology and its crucial distinction between “weather” and “climate”: “the word *climate* is generally used to express the general average of the weather for a country or a district” (566). Rate of change is key here: “it is quite conceivable that the climate of a place may in the course of time undergo a change, but it would take a large number of observations to prove it.” In other words, “though climate *may* change or be changed, we may almost assert it as an axiom that weather *must* change” (566). Despite having raised the possibility of a climate changing or being changed over time, and of this being proven by an accretion of weather

measurements, the author backs down from this prospect in his final paragraph: “the climate remains, but the weather changes. Throughout all nature we find the same thing—perfect order and system, arising from infinite variety of detail” (579). The will to see nature as ordered and stable prevails: “the whole system is retained in that marvellous harmony and balance which is its peculiar characteristic” (579).

That the author of “Weather” acknowledges and denies climate change, all in the service of introducing readers to climate science, suggests how the very prospect of climate change, years before theories of the greenhouse gas effect took hold, struck at the heart of human susceptibilities regarding our place in the universe.⁶ “Soft denialism” is the term Allen MacDuffie employs to describe such ways of thinking about the environment, and he reads such denialism as a protective gesture against human insignificance, one that can be traced back to nineteenth-century controversies over evolution.⁷ This is but one of the persistent mental habits and discursive modes around climate that the following essays track to the Victorian period. In their article, Tina Young Choi and Barbara Leckie demonstrate that various fields of Victorian writing developed the narrative and epistemological tools for conceiving “slow causality”: seemingly insensible processes that can only be perceived through an aggregation of individual data points. Heidi C. M. Scott’s essay turns from epistemology to ethics, exploring the ways in which a moral discourse came to be read into the climate and the weather, especially through the work of John Ruskin. Finally, Devin Griffiths focuses on the aesthetic realm—specifically, melodrama—to identify its material basis in modern energy culture and its expression of a “geologically powered distribution of the sensible” (613).

All of these critics are engaged in the project of reinterpreting the Victorian period from the standpoint of our climate moment, when a new reckoning with environmental science, history, and discourse has been thrust upon us. This project is already underway, as in recent, excellent work by Benjamin Morgan and Jesse Oak Taylor, and in a new volume of essays edited by Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer. Such a project is not one of mere presentism, nor even strategic presentism, but rather of acknowledging the dialectical relationship between past and present: the past makes the present, but the present continually prompts us to reinterpret significant events, words, and ideas of the past, thus changing our sense of how, exactly, the past has created the present. Climate change criticism, in the words of Ian Baucom and Matthew Omelsky, “has reshaped the order of knowledge” (16), and the following four essays suggest that Victorian studies’

interdisciplinary approach has much to contribute. In different ways, these essays help us discern in the storm-clouds of the nineteenth century, the climate of today.

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NOTES

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1. For a summary of extreme weather events and the media response to them in Summer 2018, see “Media Reaction.”

2. See Fagan for more on the fire tornado of unprecedented scale that contributed to the Carr Fire’s destruction.

3. See Malm for more on this connection.

4. On time-travel narratives and their relation to Victorian theories of time, see Wilson-Bates.

5. This was the last installment, since the series was cut off early due to readers’ outraged reactions.

6. Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius calculated the greenhouse gas effect in the late nineteenth century, coming to the conclusion that “if the quantity of carbonic acid increases in geometric progression, the augmentation of the temperature will increase nearly in arithmetic progression” (267). While he discusses coal combustion in modern industry as a factor in the constitution of the atmosphere, he did not predict major atmospheric disruptions from this cause.

7. See also Klein, from whom MacDuffie adapts this term.

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