

Undisciplined: Science, Ethnography, And Personhood In The Americas, 1830-1940

Samuel Redman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Redman, Samuel (2017) "Undisciplined: Science, Ethnography, And Personhood In The Americas, 1830-1940," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.1.11

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss1/6>

Review

Redman, Samuel

Winter 2017

Farooq, Nihad *Undisciplined: Science, Ethnography, and Personhood in the Americas, 1830-1940*. NYU Press, \$30.00 ISBN 9781479806997

The Long Darwinian Nineteenth Century

Over the course of the nineteenth century “personhood,” how to exactly to define a person and fitting them into the evolving social fabric, became a hotly contested problem. Constructing personhood served a critically important function in governance, expanding colonialism, and the rise of the modern nation state. Defining personhood worked to identify belonging in societies at the crest of the colonial era in global history. The problem became especially central in the discourse surrounding slavery and emancipation in the Western Hemisphere. A new book, *Undisciplined: Science, Ethnography, and Personhood in the Americas, 1830-1940* by Nihad M. Farooq takes a closer look into a critical century in the evolution of thinking about personhood and citizenship as it developed alongside the rise of the social sciences. Scientific narratives, she argues, shed valuable light on the nebulous understanding of personhood. Tracking the emergence of Darwinian thinking alongside the birth of new approaches to social science like ethnography during the height of global nationalism results in struggles over how individuals fit into larger groups.

Farooq, an Associate Professor of American & Atlantic Studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology, argues in this work that the Darwinian moment maintained a deeper and more complex influence on both the emergent sciences and literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than is commonly recognized in the literature. Darwin’s journey to Tierra del Fuego and his interactions with the Natives there provide the jumping off point for the book. Farooq’s attention then turns to Louis Aggasiz’s efforts in photography in Brazil, Zora Neal Hurston’s work in Jamaica, and finally, Katherine Dunham’s (and others’) efforts to better understand the island nation of Haiti. The book is published as part of NYU’s America in the Long 19th Century series. Reflecting

this emphasis, the work touches on developments on either end of the closing years in the nineteenth century and thereby expands our knowledge on the question of personhood by illustrating the developments on either side of the key moment in the chronology.

While not dismissing the difficult reputations of many of the thinkers described in this book, the author is clearly interested in moving beyond critique lobbied in their direction in recent years. Farooq's weaving in the stories of William James, Agassiz, Melville Herskovits, Franz Boas, Claude McKay, Hurston, and Langston Hughes provide interesting insights into their work in building up (and breaking down) modern academic disciplines.

This provocative book argues the expansion of the human biological and social sciences in the nineteenth century should be read less as an aggressive colonial experience and more of a Darwinian-inspired model of continual adaptation. During this same era, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, geography, and a host of other sciences were coming into their own through the establishment of discursive networks engaging in both publication and correspondence to debate new ideas. Gradually, a host of professional organizations began emerging, based mainly in major cities and universities throughout Europe and the United States. Although debated across the landscape of ideas in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, notions about what it meant to be a person, belong to a society, and construct a family remained central and vibrant in intellectual and legal discourse, often sparked through the cross-cultural interactions experienced by scientific expedition and other exploration.

Combining the result of archival research with Farooq's reading of secondary literature, the book heavily emphasizes a literary criticism perspective while working to contextualize material historically. Though a remarkably fascinating read, this book is ambitious, perhaps overly so. Over the space of an introduction, four chapters, and a brief conclusion the monograph takes on major debates in intellectual history, philosophy, literary studies, and the history of anthropology. The book moves between different regions of the globe – from the seemingly distant and exotic (at least from the perspective of Western science) to the major urban centers where new anthropological societies encouraged the field to grow and move forward. The mixture of narratives is weaved together well throughout most of the book, but at points the story can become somewhat muddled and confusing. This weakness, however, also represents a strength in

the project in its ambition and insights in tying together many seemingly disparate topics around the question of personhood. Expeditions, travel, and cross cultural encounters loomed large in the development of the sciences in Europe and the United States, and much of Farooq's book is devoted to narrating examples of these incidents.

The book benefits from a handful of carefully selected illustrations. This work would serve as a worthwhile addition to courses or reading lists on the history of science, anthropology, literature, and citizenship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Samuel J. Redman is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst where he teaches public history, oral history, and U.S. history. His first book Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums was published in 2016 by Harvard University Press. He is currently working on a book about the history and legacy of salvage anthropology. His email address is sredman@history.umass.edu