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Goldsmiths
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Global Decadence, Race, and Futures of Decadence Studies Conference
Online, 31 March - 1 April 2023

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Comments from the closing roundtable serve as the point of departure for our review of the ‘Global Decadence, Race, and the Future of Decadence Studies’ conference, held virtually from 31 March to 1 April 2023. Sponsored by the Jefferson Scholars Foundation, the University of Virginia Arts and the Office of the Provost & the Vice Provost of the Arts, and the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London, the event was a short but profound glimpse into the current state of the field of decadence studies.

When the roundtable participants were asked about their introduction to the field, Jane Desmarais described how decadence was ‘siloesd’ in Victorian Studies when she began her career. Her characterization recurred amongst the responses from fellow panellists; Peter Bailey, Kristin Mahoney, Dennis Denisoff, and Stefano-Maria Evangelista. Denisoff responded that he had searched for a ‘decadentism that preceded nineteenth-century British and French Decadence’, while Evangelista historicized the field as not even existing when he was completing his doctoral program. Bailey explained that although his journey had begun with Aestheticism, ‘Decadence explained race better’. Citing Regenia Gagnier and Tanya Agathocleous, Mahoney discussed the decentring of British nineteenth-century studies from its likewise ‘siloesd’ discipline. These responses capture how the move to globalize decadence studies was prioritized by the conference chair, Cherrie Kwok, and vice-chairs Joe McLaughlin and Amy Sailer.

As two graduate students who are working on decadence and nineteenth-century studies more broadly, we found the conference highly generative for our own work (Gunja Nandi approaches the century from a postcolonial perspective, while Rachael Nebraska Lynch is a Victorianist with a focus on queer theory and disability studies). To us, the event demonstrated a commitment among current and emerging decadence studies scholars to engage with critical

frameworks that have historically been de-emphasized in nineteenth-century studies, and echoed Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong's call for Victorian studies to 'become undisciplined'. Invoking Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), they elaborated that 'un-disciplinarity invokes a set of strategies for living, thinking, and being within a negative ontology: a "total climate" of anti-Blackness that has produced and continues to produce the conditions that sustain Western modernity'.¹ The conference practised this undisciplining throughout its program, including panel topics such as 'East Asian Decadences', '21st-Century Decadences', 'Gender, Race, and Sexuality: Decadence's Haunting Bodies', 'Indigeneity, Race, and Reception in Late 19th-Century Decadences', and 'Black Decadences from Harlem to the Caribbean'.

The event's panels also highlighted the inherently interdisciplinary nature of decadence studies, cutting across a swathe of critical, historical, and theoretical perspectives to examine multiple contemporary approaches to decadence, and the multifarious implications of it in various post-colonial, spatio-temporal, and cultural crossroads. Over the two-day period, several presenters addressed gaps and ruptures in dominant nineteenth-century archives, thus engaging in the arduous task of rendering visible that which had hitherto remained largely invisible – unarguably one of the fundamental tasks of undisciplining. Cherrie Kwok's 'After Haiti: Jeanne Duval and the Rise of Duvalian Decadence' referred to seeking traces of Duval's resistance towards Baudelaire in the archives, defined the anti-imperial and anti-racist ethos of a new concept called Duvalian Decadence, and explored how decadent aesthetics arose as a result of racial contact and conflict between the traditions of white Euro-Americans and formerly colonized or enslaved people of colour. Sriya Chakraborty's 'Decadence, Trans-gression, and the Politics of the Archive' addressed the archival absence of subjects faced with multiple jeopardies along gendered, racial, sexual lines, and the necessity of compiling alternative 'Black/Queer counter-archives', vis-à-vis her analysis of *Lote* (2020) – an award-winning avant-garde novel by Shola Von Reinhold. Von Reinhold also gave the first plenary talk of the conference. Titled 'Pink Diamond, Black Grotto',

they focused on Doris Payne (the famous Black and Indigenous jewel thief from West Virginia in the twentieth-century) and explored how excess, ornamentality, and thieving are powerful expressions of refusal and joy against the settler colonial politics of Black and queer fugitivity.

In a talk titled ‘Biblical Beefcake, Greeting Cards, and Gilgamesh’, the second plenary speaker, Robert Stilling, focused on how the Black, queer counter-archive of Richard Bruce Nugent’s illustrations systematically pushes the boundaries of racial and homoerotic expression. Stilling’s attention to how Nugent’s campy and queered Biblical canon acquired kitschy dimensions was echoed in papers such as William Rees’s ‘Feeling “Mighty Real”: Disco, Self, and Sylvester’, which recalled how the gaudy excesses of the 1970s disco scene allowed queer people to embrace the liberatory campy artifice of performing multiple identities. Von Reinhold’s opening plenary talk, which included their melodious playing of the harp, captured the affect of this instinctive retreat into the artifice of slippery identities and cosmetic ornamentation, as a mode of survival and resistance.

These threads were especially helpful for our research – particularly Nandi’s, which foregrounds the openly eroticized but abjected bodies of queer Oriental dancers, fetishistically rendered as decadent exotic spectacles by the Orientalist discourse permeating most of nineteenth-century Western literature. Her research focuses on symbolist and decadent poetry from India that use the language of decadence to delineate postcolonial resistance to the violence historically inflicted upon the textual/sexual bodies of the communities of these dancers by the discursive continuum of Western Orientalism, British colonialism, and Indian anti-colonial nationalism. However, Sheng-Mei Ma’s ‘Pacific Envy of *Crazy Rich Asians*’ served as a timely reminder for us that some post-colonial responses also continue to cater to anglophone audiences by deploying decadent aesthetics to perpetuate self-orientalising portrayals of racialized stereotypes.

Significant concerns regarding the challenges facing the field today also surfaced during the discussions, primarily in relation to the unprecedented proliferation of decadence studies from its localized, apolitical origins associated with Aestheticism. Indeed, if every field and every subject

intersects with, and is construed as decadent, then nothing remains distinctively so, in which case, the ubiquity and universalization of decadence paradoxically results in its disappearance. However, as primarily a postcolonial studies scholar, Nandi appreciated the presenters' unanimous treatment of decadence as a discourse of the marginalized, wielded as a tool for resistance to neo-imperialist ideologies. As long as decadence invests in this oppositional stance, it does not seem likely to be subsumed within the mainstream, in opposition to which it is defined.

Somewhat atypical for academic conferences, the event also featured two creative writing roundtables where poets and novelists shared their contributions to decadent literature and poetry. These roundtables offered Muñozian performances where, as poet Dustin Pearson mentioned, glimpses of a utopia on the horizon emerged, with decadent poetry 'resolving the violence' committed against the body.² Others such as Santiago Vizcaíno read his poetry in Spanish, facilitated by translator Kimrey Anna Batts, in which the translation functioned as both an access tool but also part of the reading's performative intimacy. Also highlighted were other forms of worldmaking within the decadent style: poet Paul Cunningham noted how, within decadent poetry, especially that of Ario Herondo, 'language accumulates' and the 'neologism-heavy language' of the style appealed to him. Joyelle McSweeney's poetry was full of these neologisms and worldmaking, which was punctuated with her disclosure during the Q&A of how her hearing impairment informs her poetics. These themes were especially helpful to Lynch's work on cripqueer and racialized excess and the body in nineteenth-century British literature; the creative writing panels performed into existence practices of repair and resistance, further emphasizing decadence studies' relationship to the study of the body.

The conference produced critical interventions in decadence studies and opened up numerous generative possibilities. Rachel Teukolsky has referred to Victorian decadence as an '[un]democratic enterprise' that 'thrived on a power dynamics of inequality'.³ Despite transgressing lines of gender normativity, decadence can remain complicit in its reinforcement of elitist, misogynist, Orientalist, and imperialist ideologies. The concluding roundtable panellists, each of

them a colossus in their own right, have regularly contended with decadence's uneasy relationship with racial and cultural power hierarchies. They have now created a foundation for emerging scholars to take this work forward with the goal of undisciplining the field, questioning when decadence functions normatively as well as unearthing where resistance and alternative decadent modes have gone under-examined.

¹ Chatterjee, Ronjaunee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, 'Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies', *Victorian Studies* 62 (2020), 369-91 (pp. 369-71).

² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

³ Rachel Teukolsky, 'On the Politics of Decadent Rebellion: Beardsley, Japonisme, Rococo', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 49 (2021), 643-66 (pp. 644-45).