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the Guest Editor

**Robert Stilling**

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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

## Decadence, Decolonization, and the Critique of Modernity: An Introduction by the Guest Editor

Robert Stilling

Florida State University

What would it mean to decolonize decadence? To ask the question is to consider the relationship between disparate but intertwined critiques of modernity. For writers in late nineteenth-century France such as Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, for example, ‘decadence’ captures a particular critique of urban modernity. These were writers who exhibited a ‘profound scepticism about modernity and progress’, and were ‘disgusted by overcrowding, poverty, and rampant commercialism, what Huysmans described as ‘the caliphate of the counter’.<sup>1</sup> Decolonizing critiques, however, developed out of the anti-colonial movements that lead to political decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of newly independent postcolonial national cultures, as well as continuing efforts at cultural decolonization, including the development of postcolonial theory, and theorizations of coloniality and decoloniality. These are all critiques of modernity differentiated by their origins and ends, but which nevertheless cast doubt, each in their own ways, on the project of Western civilization, its myths of progress, imperial expansionism, imposed temporalities, and enthrallment to commodity capital. But to consider what it would mean to decolonize decadence is also to imagine modernity from starkly different viewpoints, from a stance of alienation within the West, from standpoints that experience Western hegemony as alien, and from innumerable perspectives that otherwise navigate colonial rule, imperialism and its aftermath, settler colonial myths, or the development of national cultures outside, but in relation to the West. It is to consider the scope and scale of modernity (or modernities), to provincialize the Eurocentric view of modern experience as primarily urban, to challenge diffusionist models of development and cultural transmission (as in, ‘first in the West, and then elsewhere’), and to question a Western conception of history as chronologically linear and singular, culminating in the heights of European civilization, however

much that civilization seems nearing its endpoint.<sup>2</sup> It is to deploy greater precision when it comes to the representation of non-Western cultures and the translation of non-Western texts. It is also to consider how ‘Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself’, and thus how the discourses of decadence that arose in Europe and its colonies were mutually constitutive and developed differently in specific local contexts and in dynamic relation with other non-Western understandings of civilization, history, temporality, race, and art.<sup>3</sup>

As an evaluative stance toward history, decadence often finds its foil in the Western myth of progress. Those artists and writers who embraced decadence in *fin-de-siècle* Europe as an oppositional stance toward the present state of the world, and who understood progress as decadence, and vice versa, frequently saw the domain of art and imagination as the primary alternative to a sordid reality. By contrast, while the project of decolonization has aesthetic implications, it seeks concrete ends in the liberation or repatriation of colonized territory, the dismantling of persistent racist colonial hierarchies, the rejection of Eurocentrism, and a delinking from colonial epistemologies.<sup>4</sup> Decolonizing critiques often reject both the sense of belatedness that can define a decadent sensibility in the West and the sense of the colonized world as being late-comers to history.<sup>5</sup> They likewise reject the hierarchies and binaries that emerge because of the West’s own understanding of itself as a civilization at the forefront of history. As Aníbal Quijano writes, because Europeans imagined

themselves to be the culmination of a civilizing trajectory from a state of nature [...] relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world were codified in a strong play of new categories: East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern—Europe and not Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Insofar as the project of decolonization seeks material ends incommensurable with a status quo defined by the persistent injustices of settler colonialism, which may persist in postcolonial societies, ‘decolonization is not a metaphor’.<sup>7</sup>

Decadence, as an idea in Western thought, however, is an engine of metaphorization. Its articulation often involves the application of figures of decline, degeneration, sickness, morbidity, and decay borrowed from the organic, medical, and biological domains to the domains of history, politics, culture, society, race, religion, economics, technology, and art.<sup>8</sup> Because anxieties about social decadence drive anti-decadent polemics, within the context of colonialism, the concept is always (at least) double-edged. For the imperialist, colonial expansion was often seen as both a potential antidote to the ‘pressing threat’ of decadence at home, and as a potential accelerant of degeneration through colonial contact.<sup>9</sup> Insofar as a decadent ethos stands in opposition to endless growth and development and jingoistic imperialism and nationalism, or asserts the independence of the individual part over the whole, or partakes of a cosmopolitan pluralism at odds with or the consolidation of mono-lingual, ethnically homogenous national cultures, an embrace of decadence might be seen to undo the sorts of systems that efforts at decolonization also seek to dismantle.<sup>10</sup>

However, in nineteenth-century European thought, the ‘diagnosis of social and cultural decadence arises within the context of a view of civilizations as having lifecycles. This underlying metaphor links cultures to the different developmental stages in an individual human life’.<sup>11</sup> Non-European cultures are thus often portrayed as ‘embodiments of Decadent ancient civilizations that Europe is destined to follow; present-day examples of Decadence (usually Asian); or primitive states in the stagnant side-waters of history (often African)’. Just as Europe is portrayed as embodying ‘technological progress and moral degeneration’ simultaneously, decadence, as a comparative concept for evaluating civilizations, often entails contradictory representations of non-Europeans, colonized peoples, and Indigenous peoples as both primitive and decadent, as both closer to the nature and thus more authentic, but also on the verge of extinction or assimilation, or nearly refined out of existence.<sup>12</sup> To the degree that a decadent sensibility is sustained by the consumption of plundered artifacts, the exoticization of the Other, and fantasies of vanishing natives, or plays into fears of racial contamination and degeneration, or weds itself to a developmentalist model of civilizational comparison, the idea of decadence, no less than the idea

of progress, can serve to naturalize the hierarchies, binaries, and racial classifications that the West imposed worldwide through colonization, however unstable these classifications turn out to be in practice.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, decadent literature often relies on, even as it destabilizes, many of the categories that decolonizing initiatives seek to decentre, reframe, and dismantle. Nevertheless, those upon whom colonial hierarchies were imposed can turn the metaphorical possibilities of decadence, and anti-decadence, back against the West, playing against their audience's cultural assumptions. They can do so even as they seek to decentre and provincialize a Western conception of modernity that yields such narratives of progress, decadence, and civilizational difference in the first place. Decadence can also offer points of engagement and dialogue across Western and non-Western cultures as artists and intellectuals position themselves within a shared or polycentric understanding of modernity in which the West is just one player.

Yet, as Tuck and Yang insist: 'Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks.'<sup>14</sup> The contributors to this special issue therefore take nuanced approaches to decadence, anti-decadence, colonialism, settler-colonial myths, Indigenous performance, imperial decline, cultural nationalism, Orientalism, and translation across an array of geographic contexts, including the West Indies, the Pacific, North America, South Asia, the late Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Britain. Indeed, to address some of the many issues raised by anti-colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial critiques of modernity, scholars of decadence will need to recast the field within a wider geographic and historical frame of reference. The essays in this issue reflect the more global approaches that scholarship on decadence has taken in recent years in ways that give precise attention to local contexts and differences without imposing a single model or metaphor for how decadence operates globally.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Bailey, for example, in his examination of Lafcadio Hearn's revisions to his travel writing on Martinique, demonstrates how Hearn's depictions of Martinique's once carefully cultivated gardens as sites of decay and ruin reflects the resentments of white creoles, who felt

dispossessed and politically marginalized after emancipation by newly enfranchised Black and mixed-race majorities. Bailey shows how Hearn employs decadent rhetorical strategies to pin the blame for the loss of Martinique's prelapsarian beauty on the alleged barbarousness of 'negro-radical rule'.

In her article on late nineteenth-century writing about Hawai'i, Lindsay Wilhelm observes that 'decadence emerged from globe-spanning conversations about the shape of things to come – conversations in which colonial writers had a major stake' (p. 35). Wilhelm demonstrates how Tylorian thinking about stages of civilizational development, and the presumed collapse or assimilation of 'primitive' societies, created a vexed sense of time in in depictions of Hawai'i as, on one hand, a place of stasis, indolence, and changelessness, a veritable 'Island of the Lotus Eaters', and on the other hand, as a site of a rapid development and advancement toward decadence and decline. Wilhelm notes, however, that 'ranged against this body of *haole* [foreign] literature was a wealth of 'ōlelo Hawai'i historiography [...] in which Kanaka Maoli historians articulated alternative national narratives in their own native language' (pp. 21, 33). Nevertheless, Wilhelm offers a note of caution: 'in the midst of our discipline's turn to the global, we should be conscientious about enlisting non-Western writers into Western canons, lest we erase the claims to distinctiveness that were key to those anti-colonial nation-building efforts' (p. 35).

In his essay on the poetry and performance of Mohawk and Canadian writer E. Pauline Johnson (or Tekahionwake), Tim Clarke illustrates how Indigenous writers can resist the discursive violence of native extinction narratives by turning decadent literary and performance strategies toward ends that subvert Western myths about the vanishing Indian. Clarke demonstrates how Johnson navigates the 'settler conceptions of Indigenous peoples' by employing a 'decadent aesthetic of artifice' to 'undermine her audience's essentializations of cultural and racial otherness' (p. 40). By playing to her audience's anti-decadent desire to relieve the ennui of modernity through the vicarious enjoyment of Indigenous peoples' supposed vitality, simplicity, and authenticity, Johnson 'bait[s] and makes a spectacle of settlers' desires to find correctives for the alleged

decadence of modernity in their own fantasies of alterity'. Likewise, Johnson's poetry 'pierces the myth of the vanishing Indian' with a 'proclamation of Indigenous survival and persistence' (p. 49). In Johnson's hands, a decadent aesthetic offers something of a survival strategy. As Clarke writes, decadent artifice offers 'a tactic for living amid discourses that alternately presume or anticipate her demise' (p. 55).

In examining the divergent reception of poet Sarojini Naidu in India and the West, Sriya Chakraborty registers her initial surprise at encountering Naidu's poetry in the US classroom for a course on decadence after two decades of education in India where Naidu was taught primarily as a national poet. While Naidu is perhaps best known to readers of decadent literature in the West as a protégé of Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse, Chakraborty examines how Naidu's reception in India was shaped by 'the demand for a national literature that would capture the heart of India and celebrate a distinctively Indian sensibility' (p. 64). While Indian scholars have noted 'Naidu's indebtedness to Arthur Symons and Gosse [...] these records only serve to reinforce the story of her transformation from an imitator of British orientalism to a true poet of the Deccan' (pp. 61-62). Chakraborty finds that among Naidu's critics, the evidence of Naidu's European decadent influences was often dismissed, disavowed, or misattributed 'in ways that have enhanced her eligibility as a nationalist poet' (p. 76), and which Naidu, who went on to become Governor of the United Provinces, played into herself. Nevertheless, as Chakraborty argues in her reading of Naidu's poetry, Naidu's decadence and departure from realism were integral to her idealizing mode of poetic nationalism.

Kaitlin Staudt likewise notes how decadent aesthetics figured in debates over modernization and national culture across the divide between the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Turkish Republic. In examining the work of Poet Ahmet Haşım, Staudt notes how 'the aesthetic practices of Ottoman poetry' had been linked to narratives of Ottoman imperial decline (p. 79). The embrace of Ottoman aesthetics therefore stood at odds with the 'trends of realism, vernacularization, and utility' that came to define Turkish nationalist literature.

Nevertheless, Staudt argues, Ottoman authors deployed decadent aesthetics ‘to preserve a distinctly Ottoman literary power at home’ even as they disseminated their work through decadent networks in Europe (p. 85). Staudt shows how Haşim took debates over decadence as an opportunity to place Ottoman poetics in dialogue with the West. Haşim, Staudt argues, turns to European literary criticism to highlight ‘the temporal coequality of the Ottoman and European literary debates’ and to position ‘Ottoman poetry as both contemporary to and equal with, its literary counterparts’. In doing so, Staudt argues, Haşim ‘critiques the idea of European poetic primacy, dispelling the idea that symbolism originated in France and dispersed elsewhere across the globe’ (p. 87).

Finally, Alexander Bubb brings our attention again to decadence as a dialogue between Eastern and Western poetics by calling for greater scholarly precision in matters of translation. Bubb re-examines the story behind illustrator Patten Wilson’s drawings of episodes from the Persian epic the *Shahnameh* of Firdausi, several of which appeared in the 1890s journal *The Yellow Book*. While scholars and art dealers have most often assumed that the drawings were inspired by Matthew Arnold’s ‘Sohrab and Rustum’, which casts Firdausi’s poem along the lines of Greek epic tradition, Bubb demonstrates that the drawings were in fact inspired by *The Epic of Kings*, a popular 1882 abridgement of the *Shahnameh* by Helen Zimmern. The question of which translation inspired Wilson matters, Bubb writes, ‘because it allows us to undo the biases that have shaped the field’ (p. 101). Indeed, Bubb argues that Western translations of literary texts from Asia rarely receive the same level of scholarly scrutiny as texts, for example, from ancient Greece. As Bubb argues, scholars must afford ‘the same philological respect to Chinese, Persian, or Sanskrit as, to give a recent example, Yopie Prins does to Greek in her study of Victorian women’s engagement with tragic drama’ (p. 100). As Bubb further details, the bias among nineteenth-century Orientalists in favour of epic over the later Persian lyric traditions enabled a narrative of Persian decline partly inspired by the *Shahnameh* itself. Bubb details how Zimmern’s having been a woman and an

‘unapologetic amateur’ led scholars to overlook her as the likely source for Wilson’s drawings, leading to a distorted understanding of ‘Persian literary influence in Britain’ (p. 108).

While these essays cover a broad geographical range, from travel writing about Hawai‘i to translations of Persian epic, several common themes emerge. Bailey’s and Wilhelm’s essays both illustrate how decadent temporalities shaped Western travellers’ representations of supposedly timeless tropical islands as colonial spaces no less subject to the upheavals of modernity than the European metropolis. Indeed, both show how decadent narratives of development and ruination can be deployed to cast doubt on the ability of colonized peoples to successfully manage the transition to modernity (as the colonizers understood it) without suffering the ills of a decadent modernity, or to proleptically mourn the loss of some allegedly Edenic past. Both Wilhelm’s and Clarke’s essays illustrate how Indigenous writers navigate the pervasive narrative of native extinction, either by holding on to their own sense of historical disruption ‘not calibrated against the timeline of European exploration’ (p. 35), as Wilhelm puts it, or by artfully playing with and against white settler colonial fantasies. Both Chakraborty and Staudt call our attention to how decadent aesthetics were routinely put under pressure in debates over the formation of national culture and the proper place of Western aesthetic ideals during periods of transition to modern statehood. They illustrate how poetry, in particular, could become associated with old imperial formations (Ottoman, Mughal) considered ineligible for the representation of the modern nation. While Haşim and Naidu were critical figures who saw decadent literary modes as means of forging closer connections between European literary debates and Ottoman or Indian literary traditions respectively, Bubb asks scholars of translation to pay more careful attention to the means of transmission by which Asian literature entered into fin-de-siècle European contexts. Taken together, these essays illustrate just a few of the ways that thinking of decadence and decolonization together can shift the frame of decadence studies, decentre decadence as a primarily Eurocentric critique of modernity, and broaden our understanding of the range of responses to modernity with which the idea of decadence is intertwined.

I would like to thank Jane Desmarais for the invitation to guest edit this special issue, which emerged out of the conversations that followed the 2021 ‘Decolonizing Decadence’ roundtable sponsored by the NAVSA Aestheticism and Decadence caucus and moderated by Kristin Mahoney, which featured papers by Peter Bailey, Lindsay Wilhelm, Alexander Bubb, and Katharina Herold-Zanker. My thanks to Bob Volpicelli, who was the driving force behind the 2022 MSA Seminar ‘New Directions in Decadence: Contexts, Geographies, Histories’, in which I first encountered Kaitlin Staudt’s work on late Ottoman decadence. Thanks also to Cherrie Kwok for organizing the ‘Global Decadence, Race, and the Futures of Decadence Studies’, co-sponsored by BADS, which featured Tim Clarke’s paper on E. Pauline Johnson in an important panel on ‘Indigeneity, Race, and Reception in the late nineteenth century Decadences’. Events like these continue to be crucial to the field. Thanks especially to all the anonymous peer reviewers who so quickly and collegially turned around reader’s reports for this issue, and whose suggestions did so much to shape the final product. This work cannot be done without such dedicated colleagues.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Desmarais, ‘Decadence and the Critique of Modernity’, in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 98-114 (p. 98). Desmarais quotes Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the ‘first in the West, and then elsewhere’ model in relation to European historicism and anti-colonial resistance movements, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 6-11. For an overview of how ideas of modernity have been put to scrutiny by an expanding array of voices, not least by those marginalized by or within the West, or cast as peripheral to it see Rita Felski, ‘New Cultural Theories of Modernity’, in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 55-76; and Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 83-180.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 7; and Aníbal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (2007), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Chakrabarty, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> Aníbal Quijano, trans. by Michael Ennis, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), p. 542.

<sup>7</sup> Tuck and Yang, ‘Decolonization is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 1-40.

<sup>8</sup> See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 155-56.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Yee, ‘Introduction’, in *French Decadence in a Global Context: Colonialism and Exoticism*, ed. by Julia Hartley, Wanrug Suwanwattana, and Jennifer Yee (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), pp. 10-12.

<sup>10</sup> See David Weir and Jane Desmarais, ‘Introduction: Decadence, Culture, and Society’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 1; Calinescu, pp. 157-71; Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (New

York: Palgrave, 2010); Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 5-10.

<sup>11</sup> Yee, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Yee, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Curtis Marez, 'The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde's Opium Smoke Screen', *ELH*, 64.1 (1997), 257-87; Hema Chari, 'Imperial Dependency, Addiction, and the Decadent Body', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 213-32; and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Race and the Emergence of Metropolitan Modernism', in *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010) pp. 16-53.

<sup>14</sup> Tuck and Yang, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of just some of the more globally oriented scholarship on decadence, see: Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Regenia Gagnier, 'Global Literatures of Decadence', in *Literatures of Liberalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 131-66; and Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).