volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 1

Autumn 2025

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 September 2025

Date of Publication: 31 October 2025

Citation: Fraser Riddell, 'Lafcadio Hearn: Guest Editor's Introduction', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.1 (2025), ii-xxii.

volupte.gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths
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Lafcadio Hearn:
Guest Editor's Introduction

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In a review of Lafcadio Hearn's *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* in 1894, an anonymous critic in the *New York Daily Tribune* praised the collection's 'wealth of wondrously artistic prose', noting that 'the influence of the French decadents is apparent' in the 'vivid word-coloring' of Gautier and the 'impressionism of Verlaine'.[1] Hearn's writing, he suggested, 'seeks to make words minister to all the senses', so that the 'printed page must convey color, sound, odor, and glimpses of more ethereal things'.[2] When the review reached Hearn – then 7,000 miles away in Kōbe, Japan – he was not impressed. In a letter to his friend Ellwood Hendrick, he complained that he was 'vexed' by the 'curious' suggestion that his style bore the traces of 'the *decadents*'. 'Never read a line of Verlaine in my life', he insisted, 'and only know enough of the decadent school to convince me that the principle is scientifically wrong, and that to study the stuff is mere waste of time'.[3]

Twelve years later – on the posthumous publication of his *Life and Letters* in 1906 – Hearn's complaint elicited an equally frosty response in the review pages of the *New York Daily Tribune*. The newspaper's critic insisted on the 'essential soundness' of his colleague's observations.[4] Any reader who doubts that Hearn's 'literary tastes were very much those of the decadent school', he suggested, need only observe in his correspondence 'the outcropping, in a dozen places, of a strain of feeling which would have immediately placed him in harmony with Verlaine'.[5] The anonymous author supported this contention with a sketch of the personality revealed in Hearn's letters that aligned him with the recognizable tropes of decadent authorship, familiar from the foundational manifestos of Walter Pater and Arthur Symons: 'an imaginative, dreamy individual, intensely sensitive, intensely curious, hungering always to concentrate himself about some work of a purely literary character'.[6] This tension between Hearn's disavowal of 'the decadents' and the prominent place that discourses of decadence have played in his reception is the starting point for this special

issue. The contributors show how productive this disidentification was for Hearn's work and how valuable it continues to be for scholars engaging with Hearn's writing, generating new transnational and intersectional approaches to the study of decadence and fin de siècle writing more broadly.

Hearn's life of intense sensitivity and curiosity began on the Greek island of Lefkada, where he was born Patricio Lafcadio Tessima Carlos Hearn in 1850, the son of Charles Bush Hearn, an Anglo-Irish Army surgeon, and a local Greek woman, Rosa Antonio Cassimati. After an itinerant childhood spent in Dublin, County Durham and London, Hearn emigrated to the United States in 1869, arriving penniless in Cincinnati, Ohio. He began his literary career with sensationalist journalism for the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, specializing in tales of violence and the macabre, often redolent of the gothic grotesque of Edgar Allan Poe.

His early work was closely concerned with the lives of socially ostracized groups, often living on the levees of the Ohio River, such as African American and mixed-race stevedores and roustabouts, sex workers, criminals and the city's itinerant immigrant labourers. This fascination with those at the margins of urban modernity signalled his nascent attraction to a recognizable Baudelairean decadent tradition. In 1874, Hearn married Alethea 'Mattie' Foley, an African American woman who had been born into slavery in Kentucky. Such a union was illegal under Ohio's anti-miscegenation laws. Their relationship was short-lived, though was to have a considerable impact on Hearn's posthumous reputation when it came to light in the years following his death. In October 1877, Hearn moved to New Orleans, initially on assignment to cover the fallout from the contested presidential election of 1876. In the Crescent City – a nexus of French, Spanish, Caribbean, and Southern influences – he found a vibrant milieu that resonated with his preoccupation with cultural creolization and miscegenation.[7] He worked as a journalist, editor, and translator for a number of local papers, including the New Orleans *Item* and the *Times-Democrat*. Here he produced ethnographic sketches and short essays he referred to as 'Fantastics': 'impressions of the strange life of New Orleans […] dreams of a tropical city'.[8] In a letter to the American author William D. O'Connor in 1884, he explicitly articulated his aesthetic mission as a

dedicated search for unconventional beauty, proclaiming: 'I have pledged me to the worship of the Odd, the Queer, the Strange, the Exotic, the Monstrous. It quite suits my temperament.'[9] In doing so, he aligned himself with the transgressive commitment to perverse sensuality and stylistic ornamentation prominent in the decadent works of Théophile Gautier and Gustave Flaubert.

While in New Orleans, Hearn published two idiosyncratic studies of Creole culture, initially timed to coincide with the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, 1884–1885: *Gombo Zhèbes: A Little Dictionary of Creole Proverbs* (1885) and *La Cuisine Créole* (1885), one of the earliest Creole cookery books. This phase culminated in his departure for Martinique in 1887, resulting in the ethnographic travelogue *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890) and the novella *Youma: The Story of a West-Indian Slave* (1890). This was followed by the novel *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* (1889), concerning the environmental destruction wrought by a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico in 1856.

In 1890, seeking refuge from the perceived destruction of traditional Creole culture by modernization, Hearn journeyed to Japan, initially as a correspondent for *Harper's Magazine*. Over the years that followed, he established himself as one of the most pre-eminent Western writers on Japanese art, culture and spirituality, publishing over a dozen volumes based on his experiences in Japan. In 1891, he married Koizumi Setsu, a Japanese woman descended from an aristocratic samurai family, and later took the name 'Koizumi Yakumo' on his naturalization as a Japanese citizen in 1896. His collections such as *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894), *Kokoro* (1896), and *Kwaidan* (1904) brought together essays, short stories, art writing, and philosophical reflections in a hybrid style that infused familiar Western genres with elements of Japanese aesthetics. Such writing was shaped by his pedagogical work as a teacher and lecturer, ultimately as Professor of English Language and Literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo from 1896–1903. His lectures introduced his students to a wide range of nineteenth-century literature, including the Pre-Raphaelites, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater, and W. B. Yeats, often in terms that related their style to elements of Japanese artistic tradition.[10] His works were motivated by an

impetus to preserve Japanese folklore and traditional culture against the pressures of Meiji-era modernization, securing for him a celebrity status in Japan that endures to this day. Indeed, in September 2025, the national Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) began screening a new daytime television drama (*asadora*) which focuses on the relationship between Hearn and his wife Setsu, *BakeBake*.[11]

Decadent Style and the Transnational

Despite Hearn's disidentification with the 'decadent school' of the 1890s, his works were nevertheless shaped by his participation in a transnational network of writers whose works now underpin our scholarly understandings of decadence and aestheticism. From the 1870s onwards, he was deeply immersed – as both a reader and translator – in the work of French decadent writers, including Gautier, Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, and Pierre Loti. Indeed, as Bernadette Lemoine has observed, following his arrival in New Orleans, Hearn became 'one of the first and best-respected translators of nineteenth-century French literature in the United States'.[12] His translations of short stories and extracts by a wide range of contemporary French writers were printed in a succession of New Orleans newspapers from the late 1870s to the mid-1890s. Such work introduced the hyperaesthetic style of these unfamiliar European writers to many readers in the American South for the first time.

Hearn's sustained engagement with literary translation was likewise crucial to his own stylistic development. Translating Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) provided him with what Stefano Evangelista has called 'a schooling in how to become a decadent writer'.[13] His friend and early biographer Elizabeth Bisland characterized this work as 'full of intricate assonances, of a texture close woven and iridescent', which emerged through his 'passionate search for equivalents of the subtle nuances of [Flaubert's] phrases'.[14] Hearn's impressionistic focus on colour, sound and sensory description led his less sympathetic critics, such as the physician George M. Gould, to label him a 'chameleon' marked by a 'a chromatic voice, a multicolored echo'.[15] For such readers,

Hearn's tendency to privilege the immediacy of sensation over sustained rational reflection signal a lack of moral seriousness in his work. At the same time, his chameleon-like ability to take on the 'colour' of his surrounding environment signals the manner in which his decadent style was associated – often in condemnatory terms – with racial hybridity and cultural creolization.

As a journalist in New Orleans, Hearn's close engagement with French literary periodicals meant that he was exceptionally well placed to introduce his readership to the most recent aesthetic developments in European literature. In 'Decadence as a Fine Art' (1886) he offers his own summary of recent articles by Léon Barracand and Georges de Peyrebrune in the *Revue politique et littéraire* on the emergence of 'a new school of writers […] who seem to call themselves decadents'.[16] Hearn figures the work of these authors as a product of what Dennis Denisoff calls a 'decadent ecology'.[17] Their work is compared to material that emerges from biological processes of 'deca[y]', 'decomposition', 'ferment' and 'rott[ing]'.[18] The 'brilliant sparkle' of this new style represents a 'jewel' in the steamy, slimy 'dung-hill' of literary naturalism.[19] Of the literary 'grubs' and 'larvae' who occupy this seething pile of 'rubbish', only a small minority, Hearn suggests, will 'enjoy […] metamorphosis' into 'many colored' decadent butterflies.[20] The dominant impulse of such writing is towards a quasi-mystical synaesthetic condensation, in which 'all impressions of form, of color, of music, of perfume' might be 'compressed into one word'.[21] Hearn's account of such claims – punctuated by exclamation marks, rhetorical repetitions and his characteristic dashes – functions primarily to ironize the self-seriousness of the new movement. It is, he concludes, 'to say the least, sublimely amusing'.[22]

Elsewhere, Hearn's journalism turns to tropes of decadence in similarly caustic terms to characterize the emergent dynamics of nineteenth-century print cultures. In 'Latterday Reviews' – an article in the *Times-Democrat* on 13 November 1883 – he offers 'a few remarks on the decadence of the Art of Criticism'.[23] His representative example of this decline is the French monthly periodical *Le Livre*, *revue du monde littéraire* (1880–1889), edited by the journalist and bibliophile Octave Uzanne. The decadence of the journal's approach is evident, he suggests, not only in its

reviewers' 'absolute lack of scholarship' and their tendency to afford undue attention to 'worthless novel[s]', but also in the disjunction between its 'magnificent' material form and the quality of its contents.[24] While 'no cost has been spared' on its 'quaintly beautiful […] typography' and its 'very attractive […] engravings', Hearn nevertheless concludes that '[i]t is certainly to be hoped that so beautiful a publication […] will reform its critical departments'.[25] In 'The Omnivorous Newspaper' – in the *Times-Democrat* 29 August 1886 – Hearn similarly laments that the 'book-era is in its decadence' on account of the effect of newsprint on the attention spans of European and American readers.[26] The dominance of the newspaper, he suggests, is 'destined to ultimately strangle not merely all public interest in serious reading but likewise all capacity for it'.[27] Journalism's short, episodic sketches – and its insistent focus on 'excit[ing] violent interest' – has eroded readers' cognitive abilities to 'maintain the mind in one line of thought for any great length of time'.[28] In such a 'condition of mental savagery', a long philosophical novel, such as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), 'could scarcely hope for many readers were it to appear today'.[29] The literary marketplace, he suggests, is one in which there is simply nothing new to catch readers' hyperactive attention: 'the capacities of plot' have been 'exhausted' and in poetry 'all the artifices of construction' have already been 'essayed'.[30] This state of distraction, sustained by the rhythms of newsprint, reflects a broader fragmentation and specialization of human knowledge, in which the accumulation of 'many millions of classes of facts […] has outgrown all individual capacity'.[31] In place of an Enlightenment vision of the progressive pursuit of truth, Hearn substitutes an epistemology of decadent modernity. Here, 'we will only be able to judge by occasional encounter with facts, and then, perhaps only vaguely'.[32] This mode of knowing he compares to 'an ant […] judg[ing] the nature of what it touches for the first time with its antennae'.[33] The image anticipates Hearn's subsequent writings on insects in Japan, where entomology provides a framework for exploring both the aesthetics of scale and the sensory worlds of non-human animals.[34]

As the 1890s progressed, Hearn became more closely acquainted with recent developments in French decadent literature, particularly through his engagement with the English Japanologist

Osman Edwards, who introduced him to the works of Verlaine and to those of the Belgian symbolist Émile Verhaeren. He nevertheless remained 'hopelessly insensible to […] the decadent movement': 'The new poetry', he noted, 'is simply rotten! – morally and otherwise'.[35] At a formal level, he suggested, such writing demonstrated none of the 'lucidity, sharpness, firm, hard outline' which Hearn valued most highly. At a thematic level, Hearn found that there was 'a splendid something entirely absent from the new poetry – the joy of life'. Poetry, he conceded, need not confine itself solely to the 'joyous' – 'there is beauty in pain and sorrow'. Yet this writing, he complained, is fixated solely on 'ugliness or pain, without beauty'.[36] Hearn nevertheless represents a perceptive – if unsympathetic – critic of the formal effects of fragmentation and distortion that such works were striving to achieve. He compares the 'startl[ing] incongruities' of Verhaeren's 'La Dame en Noir', for instance, to 'a structure in which Gothic, Byzantine, Arabian, Indian, Greek, and Chinese architectures are mingled into one composition'.[37] Elsewhere, he registers the 'shock' of the poem's disorientating succession of similes in which 'one fine image [is] suddenly shattered by another and another, in kaleidoscopic succession'.[38] Hearn's response to such writing resonates with critics' responses to the visual dimension of his own work, a fact that suggests a knowing play with decadent forms and a self-conscious eye to his own reception.

Hearn only rarely used the epithet 'decadent' when discussing literature in English, whether in his many journalistic book reviews or in his lectures in Japan. His voluminous book collection – now held at the University of Toyama in Japan – includes a small number of important English works on Aestheticism and decadence, such as Walter Pater's *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* (1890) and Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). In other respects, though, his collection demonstrates little engagement with the English literature of the 'Yellow '90s', favouring instead more stolidly respectable writers such as Austin Dobson, Edmund Gosse, and W. E. Henley. Of English literature published in the closing decade of the century, his greatest enthusiasm was undoubtedly for the works of Rudyard Kipling, who he praised for his 'astonishing use […] of the language of the people'.[39] For Hearn, Kipling's writing represents 'the only prose

of the nineteenth century which offers […] all the qualities of concentration and strength that characterize the best French writers'.[40] That Hearn had earlier posited the 'art of condensation, of concentration' as the defining stylistic tenet of literary decadence – strikingly at odds with Kipling's demotic prose – is a reminder of the flexibility and capaciousness of late nineteenth-century aesthetic categories.[41]

Hearn's idiosyncratic sense of decadent style in English is most strikingly reflected in the comparison that he draws between 'some French writers of the decadence' and the poetry of John Addington Symonds.[42] Specifically, Hearn refers to the 'Stella Maris' sonnet cycle in *Vagabunduli Libellus* (1884), which Symonds addressed to his lover, the gondolier Angelo Fusato. In a lecture on 'Pessimists and their Kindred' – delivered to students of English literature at Tokyo Imperial University – Hearn identifies as characteristically decadent Symonds's preoccupation with the 'pain which he felt at his inability to obtain' the 'inner as well as [the] outer self' of the cycle's addressee.[43] It remains unclear whether Hearn was alert to the queer subtext of what he called Symonds's 'morbid fancies'.[44] If he was, he nevertheless diplomatically refers to the poem's addressee using female pronouns. However, it is striking that he presents the cycle's concern with the uncomprehensible 'mystery of another human life' in terms that mirror what Eve Sedgwick influentially called the 'epistemology of the closet': queer sexuality framed as a concealed or hidden essence.[45]

While Hearn was thus generally dismissive of the decadent literature of the 1890s, he nevertheless maintained a greater degree of sympathy for symbolist writing. He understood such work as sharing distinctive formal affinities with Japanese literature, specifically a generative imprecision that 'leave[s] […] something not said, but suggested'.[46] In a lecture on 'Some Symbolic Poetry' – likely delivered in Tokyo around 1900 – he provided for his students an exposition of English poems that 'gain by being left in a kind of nebulous condition – so that the thoughts expressed appear only very faintly, as an object looming through some beautiful colored mist'.[47] His eclectic range of examples place W. B. Yeats ('Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven', 1899)

alongside Alice Meynell ('The Modern Poet', 1885), while also including works by Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Richard Garnett and Roden Noel. The 'best examples' of such poetry, he suggests, demonstrate 'a real inner relation to the best Japanese poetry'.[48] Indeed, Hearn draws upon his students' familiarity with East Asian languages to suggest how the imagery of these poems generate meaning. The poems succeed, he argues, by

> combining together images so incongruous in themselves, that you stare in surprise at the juxtaposition; and while you are staring, there comes to you in a sudden flash the sense of a meaning which the images are intended to represent, only as the Chinese ideograph represents a sound.[49]

Here Hearn suggests that the poet's images are to the meaning of the poem what the strokes of a Chinese ideograph (or, in Japan, a *kanji*) are to the sound it represents – not a literal transcription, but a suggestive visual pattern that indirectly evokes an underlying mystical reality. The tension that runs throughout Hearn's works between an empirical commitment to the material world of the senses and a fascination with evanescent spiritual experiences is one that preoccupies many late-Victorian writers as they grapple with the competing claims of aestheticism, decadence and symbolism.[50] Hearn's ultimate insistence that the ethos of decadence is 'scientifically wrong' reflects his own deep commitment to the synthetic philosophy of Herbert Spencer, which held that the universe is propelled forward by cosmic laws of progressive evolution.[51] In this respect, he was deeply suspicious of aesthetic innovations that claimed to be the byproducts of cultural decline. At a thematic and formal level, though, Hearn's commitment to Spencerian thought often manifested itself in a manner that is hard to distinguish from the dominant currents of literary decadence. A reviewer in 1896 notes, for instance, that Hearn follows 'his master's teaching' in evoking the 'utter incomprehensibleness' of a universe in which 'all […] man's investigations eventually bring him face to face with an insoluble enigma'.[52] The 'vivid word-coloring' and 'impressionism' that struck the *New York Daily Tribune* as so obviously decadent might equally be seen as articulating Hearn's idiosyncratic Spencerian mysticism.

Lafcadio Hearn and Decadence Studies

It is precisely this refusal of clear affiliation that allows Hearn's works to speak so powerfully to the recent turn in decadence studies towards transnational dynamics of cosmopolitanism, colonization and race. In particular, Hearn has emerged as an important figure in the reassessment of 'critical cosmopolitanism'.[53] As Evangelista has shown, his writing inhabits geographical spaces of cross-cultural exchange that extend beyond those international metropolitan networks that are most familiar in accounts of late nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism.[54] His work's fascination with the productive nature of cultural and linguistic hybridity often exists in tension with a recognizably Herderian urge to preserve distinct national traditions. Indeed, his late writings in Japan endorse modes of resistance to the encroachment of Western modernity that are often strikingly nationalistic, even xenophobic.[55] For his earliest Japanese critics, such as his fellow cosmopolitan writer Yone Noguchi, Hearn's principal achievement lay precisely in his antiquarian 'attemp[t] to revive the old Japan'.[56] For Noguchi, Hearn's retellings of 'strange tales' in *Kwaidan* (1904), for instance, represent 'nothing but a sure protest against our destruction of the peculiarity of thought and dream of the seventeenth century'.[57] In this respect, Hearn's cosmopolitan imaginary aligns him with what Alex Murray has recently identified as a prominent tradition of 'Decadent conservatism'.[58]

Hearn's writings have also proved a valuable resource for resituating discourses of decadence within the historical and geographical pressures of nineteenth-century colonization. For Robert Stilling and Jacqueline Couti, Hearn's writings on the West Indies reflect an aesthetic of decadence which emerged in the Caribbean in response to a crisis in white identity following emancipation, focusing in particular on themes of racial decline and biological degeneration.[59] Peter Bailey has similarly observed how Hearn's travel writings on Martinique specifically attribute colonial environmental degradation to mismanagement by Black and Indigenous Martinicans.[60] Such writings are often underpinned by implicitly social Darwinist fears of evolutionary race replacement, in which (as Hearn puts it) the 'future tendency must be to universal blackness […]

— perhaps to universal savagery'.[61] By emphasizing Hearn's racializing and eugenic thinking alongside his interest in hybridity, scholars have shown how these concepts were not just compatible with, but foundational to decadent writing when viewed through a transnational lens.

The impressionistic aestheticization that characterizes Hearn's depictions of Black and mixed-race people in his Martinique writings is inextricable from processes of racist objectification and fetishization, which often reinscribe the biological categories of nineteenth-century race science. This aspect of Hearn's writing was clearly evident to his earliest readers, some of whom satirized his obsessive preoccupation with describing what he called, in 'West Indian Society of Many Colorings' (1890), 'infinitesimal differences of tint'.[62] Charles Battell Loomis' 1891 parody of Hearn, 'Nueva York: A Study in Color', for instance, ridicules his racializing gaze by reorienting its focus onto the bodies of white European immigrants, freshly arrived at Manhattan's Battery Park. Loomis' Hearn-narrator rhapsodizes:

> Here can we revel in tints. The hash-brown of the Tuscan, the radish-heart pink of the Saxon, the Excelsior stuffing yellow of the Dane, the catsup-hued Muscovite, the beetpink Swede, the tomato-colored English […] [T]hese and many more colors so blend with the rich foliage and grasses of the Park that we forget them all in a dreamy reverie…[63]

Loomis' parody exposes the instability of Hearn's racial taxonomies by applying his colourist rhetoric to white European bodies, revealing the arbitrary nature of his aesthetic distinctions. By mirroring Hearn's descriptive style, Loomis not only lampoons his fetishization of difference but also underscores how the racializing aspects of Hearn's works are sustained by his descriptive styles of impressionistic visual excess and wilful exoticism.

While Hearn's fascination with the aesthetics of skin colour is ripe for parody, such nineteenth-century categories of race were nevertheless central to his own sense of self. He attributed his sense of displacement to his 'meridional' Greek heritage, writing playfully that he 'cannot be happy in an English moral community' as 'a fraud – a vile Latin – a vicious, French-hearted scalawag'.[64] He believed that '[w]hatever is good in [him]' arose from the 'dark race-soul' of his mother, including his 'language power' and his 'sensitiveness to artistic things'.[65] Against the

backdrop of the racial segregation of the Jim Crow era, Hearn's early reception in the United States was radically transformed by the posthumous scandal surrounding his first marriage to Mattie Foley. His relationship with Foley was often framed as symptomatic of a broader pathologized 'sexual craving' for women of colour, manifest in his nocturnal 'carnal expeditions' to the brothels of New Orleans.[66] The intensity of this opprobrium is reflected in a remarkable review of Edward Laroque Tinker's *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days* – published in *The New York Times* in 1924 – which concludes that 'his life was strangely parallel morally to [Oscar] Wilde's'.[67] Here, the controversy about the interracial intimacy of 'queer Lafcadio Hearn' is aligned with the scandal of male same-sex desire that arose in the aftermath of Wilde's notorious 1895 trials for 'gross indecency'.[68] Other early critics similarly framed Hearn's behaviour as sexually deviant. Richard Le Gallienne, a noted chronicler of British decadent literature, castigated Hearn's 'perverted taste for miscegenation'.[69]

George Gould – the author of one of the most scurrilous early biographies, *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn* (1908) – went so far as to write to the sexologist Havelock Ellis in an attempt to elicit a diagnosis of Hearn's notional sexual abnormality. To his credit, Ellis offered a sympathetic defence of 'men of Hearn's type' who 'reach the spiritual world through their absorption in beauty and nature and art': '[T]here are not many people of this type, and there is little danger of the rest of the world following in their steps, while their work seems to affect a wholesome "catharsis" in the emotional life of more ordinary and mild people'.[70]

Ellis's interest in Hearn's distinctive style of 'absorption' links to another prominent trend in recent scholarship, which has turned to his work to think about the relationship between decadence, embodiment, and the senses. Hearn's awareness of processes of perception was sharpened by his own visual impairment; he was blinded in one eye during a schoolyard accident as a teenager and was severely myopic in his other eye. As Catherine Maxwell has noted, his impaired sight apparently invigorated his alertness to other sensory channels, particularly the pleasures of smell. Hearn's works carefully craft his persona as a 'cosmopolitan *flaireur*', alert to the exotic scents of distant lands and beautiful women.[71] Kathryn Webb-Destefano has likewise drawn

attention to the ways in which blindness is thematized in Hearn's works as facilitating a heightened alertness to mystical and spiritual experiences.[72] My own work places Hearn's reflections on literary impressionism and the vibrant materiality of language in dialogue with recent scholarship on neurodiversity and sensory processing. In doing so, it asks us to reevaluate the significance of 'sensory difference' as an identity category around which decadent sub-communities were formed.[73]

An Overview

The work collected in this special issue responds to these recent trends in decadence studies, while also broadening our understanding of Hearn's work. Aman Erfan demonstrates Hearn's mastery of the short-form ghost story, whose sophistication is evident in the carefully handled 'play of authorial voice' in collections such as *In Ghostly Japan* (1899), *Shadowings* (1900), and *Kwaidan* (1904). Hearn's work participates in a late nineteenth-century literary marketplace characterized by significant public appetite for supernatural and fantastic literature. As Erfan demonstrates, Hearn intuitively grasped that the effectiveness of the genre resided in the narrative craft of its 'telling'. In doing so, he participated in the well-established nineteenth-century tradition of employing techniques such as heightened narration, digressions, and frame narratives. Hearn utilizes these conventions as a point of departure in his idiosyncratic cultural project: the evocation and mediation of a 'strange, ghostly, and eternally elusive Japan' (p. 2) for an English-speaking readership. His authorial intrusions, footnotes, parentheses, and metanarrative commentary interrupt the narrative flow to foreground his narrator's mediating presence. As Erfan demonstrates, this self-conscious act of rewriting transforms the stories into complex co-constructions between author and audience.

Hearn's engagement with the spectral and the liminal – a distinctive presence in his 'weird tales' – is likewise the focus of John Antony Goedhals's article on cosmological interconnectedness in Hearn's earlier Caribbean writings. Goedhals draws out attention to Hearn's 'proto-Buddhist'

and 'oceanic' vision in works such as *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890), arguing that these writings anticipate the spiritual meditations that would define his Japanese period. Hearn's writings are distinctive in their sustained imaginative engagement with Buddhism, synthesizing Eastern spirituality with contemporary Western evolutionary science (particularly the work of Herbert Spencer). Hearn's own idiosyncratic understanding of Spencer's 'persistence of force' underpins his fascination with reincarnation and karma, allowing for a reconceptualization of the relationship between the animate and the inanimate. Goedhals also reframes Hearn's early American 'rag-picker journalism' – which often focused on the derelict and decayed – not as mere morbid sensationalism but rather as productively decadent meditations on impermanence and metempsychosis. The article also allows us to rethink the stakes of Hearn's distinctive impressionistic style. For Goedhals, Hearn's synaesthetic 'word pictures', (p. 22) vividly alert to the effects of light and colour, embody his sense of existential realities grounded in the continual flux of consciousness.

Damian Walsh extends this focus on processes of perception by demonstrating how Hearn integrated such spiritual and evolutionary thinking with Western aesthetic debates – particularly as related to the Arts and Crafts movement – through his focus on Japanese craft. In readings of essays from *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* (1897), Walsh demonstrates how Hearn turns to Japanese handicraft to complicate prominent nineteenth-century distinctions between 'fine art' and 'decorative art'. In doing so, the article draws upon recent theorizations of the philosophy of mind which emphasize the distributed dynamics of cognition. Hearn's detailed descriptions of virtuosic craft, such as a fast-working doll-maker, suggest that the artistic activity of thinking might be 'outsourced from the brain to the hands themselves', (p. 39) implicating both the body and its external tools in the act of thought. Like Goedhals, Walsh is also alert to the central place of 'inherited memory' in Hearn's aestheticism. Hearn's craftspeople channel the skill of previous generations, transforming craft objects, such as the handprint of a young calligrapher, into a materialization of spectral influence. For Walsh, Hearn frames aesthetic experience itself as grounded in embodied gestures that are simultaneously individual and collective, combining the

labour of 'tens of thousands of hands and brains' in the production of communal acts of celebration and decoration.

Walsh's discussion of the significance of the sensory and the embodied in Hearn's aestheticism finds parallels in Cheyenne Symonette's analysis of the racialized and gendered notions of beauty in his works. In *Two Years in the French West Indies*, Hearn employs the figure of the 'femme de couleur' to articulate a distinctly decadent aesthetic, framing her as a type that embodies 'exotic decay' and 'colonial collapse' (p. 63) in post-emancipation Martinique. As Symonette notes, Hearn's portrayal adheres to a recognizable decadent fixation on transgressive women, while carrying the specifically localized historical weight of slavery and emancipation. This comes into sharpest focus in Hearn's nostalgic portrayal of the figure of the 'belle affranchie', a mixed-race woman whose beauty and strategic social positioning gave her agency and influence over white men during the slavery era. For Hearn, this figure is an 'artificial product' cultivated solely under the rigid and unnatural conditions of the plantation system. The post-emancipation 'fille de couleur' are marked, he suggests, by a 'degraded beauty', becoming 'less comely as well as less helpless' (p. 75). For Symonette, this aesthetic mourning allows Hearn to condemn slavery while simultaneously romanticizing the aesthetic ideals it produced, positioning the beauty of these women as an ephemeral product of colonial decadence.

Symonette's analysis of Hearn's preoccupation with the decaying beauty of the mixed-race *femme fatale* is complemented by Daichi Ishikawa's exploration of Hearn's broader 'medical imagination', arguing that his cosmopolitan 'curiosity' often worked to synthesize aesthetic and scientific discourses. Many of Hearn's works draw upon his fascination with anatomy, illness, and the empirical observation of the body, as well as his close friendships with physicians such as Rudolph Matas and George M. Gould. Hearn's collaborative relationship with Matas led to ethnographical studies, such as 'The Creole Doctor' (1886), in which Hearn sought to preserve vanishing collective knowledge of Creole medicine by tracing its transnational origins. As Ishikawa

suggests, such works demonstrate Hearn's commitment to a cosmopolitanism concerned not only with cultural hybridity, but also with the traditional underpinnings of modern scientific knowledge.

Paul Murray's discussion of Hearn's American biographers traces a long-running struggle to reconcile Hearn's transnational identity with a desire to situate him in relation to distinctive national literary or intellectual traditions. It also alerts us to the central significance of the scandal around his marriage to Mattie Foley in early reception of Hearn's writing. As Murray demonstrates, many biographers chose to minimize or dismiss Hearn's sustained engagement with African American and Creole cultures. Mary Gallagher's review of the exhibition *Kwaidan: Encounters with Lafcadio Hearn* (2025) endorses Murray's sense of Hearn as a writer who resists rigid national classification. As Gallagher shows us, Hearn's 'protean' oeuvre is fundamentally 'translational' and 'creolized' (p. 130). It is driven by a pervasive 'hauntological' impetus central to decadent aesthetics, which combines a concern with 'otherworldliness' and a fascination with the culturally exogenous (p. 132). Gallagher also draws attention to Hearn's experimentation with genres and styles that articulate his creolizing impulse, such as his commitment to what he called 'poetical prose'.

Decadence, Genre and Hearn's 'No Man's Land'

As Gallagher shows us, Hearn is a vital figure for re-examining how decadent writers experimented with genre, positioning their works within an expanding global literary marketplace that stimulated new modes of writing. A number of articles in the issue draw attention to the savviness with which Hearn worked across different genres. Erfan's piece, for instance, demonstrates how Hearn's supernatural short stories playfully combine the conventions of the Victorian ghost story with those of nineteenth-century ethnographical and anthropological writings. Ishikawa likewise reminds us that Hearn's confidence with moving between genres has its origins in his early work as a journalist in Cincinnati, where his writing draws its energies from the remarkable range of styles that coexist within what Mark Turner has called the 'miscellaneity' of nineteenth-century print cultures.[74]

As a writer whose career was formed by the pressures of newspaper publication, Hearn was adept at articulating to his editors and publishers what he considered to be most distinctive about his works. Shortly before his departure for Japan, Hearn wrote to William Patten – then art editor of *Harper's Magazine* – that he 'would attempt nothing really in the shape of essays', 'carefully exclud[ing] […] anything bordering upon commonplace narrative'. In contrast to the well-known ethnographic travel writing of Isabella Bird, for instance, Hearn will instead frame his recollections impressionistically, recounting 'solely […] the personal experiences bearing upon it'. His aim, he suggests, is to 'create in the mind of the reader a vivid impression of living in Japan […] as one taking part in the daily existence of the common people, and thinking with their thoughts'.[75] In doing so, he argues for the novelty of a prose genre that reorients the expectations of travel writing by combining it with elements of the short story, the impressionistic sketch and the aesthetic essay.

Many of Hearn's most perceptive early critics recognized the ingenuity with which his volumes on Japan, such as *Kokoro* and *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields*, drew together a surprising array of disparate genres. The Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1904 obituary notice for Hearn – included in this issue in a new translation from the German by Tom Smith – reflects on the challenge of 'adequately describ[ing] the artistic form' of these books. Their constituent chapters, he observes, range from 'anecdote' to 'novella' to 'philosophy' in a manner that often proves impossible to pin down. Hearn's unique output, he suggests, represents 'journalism beyond any newspaper', philosophy that avoids the 'barren wastes of terminology', and science that remains 'full of life'. Elsewhere, Hofmannsthal presents Hearn as a representative example of what he calls the 'New Journalism', alongside the surprisingly eclectic company of H. G. Wells, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson and Maurice Barrès.[76] Such writing, he suggests, 'takes hold of you easily and lets you go easily' and is 'cooked so well with such pure ingredients' that it avoids any risk of readerly indigestion.[77]

For some critics, though, the generic expansiveness of Hearn's books, whilst marking his decadent literary sophistication, ultimately undermined the wider popularity of his works. The

French journalist, critic and translator Thérèse Bentzon (Marie-Thérèse Blanc) – a prominent figure in the reception of English and American literature in Europe – observed in a 1904 article in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* that Hearn's popularity was undermined by the challenging generic hybridity of his works.[78] In comparison with the 'universal' recognition of other contemporary writers 'nourished […] by exoticism', such as Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson, Hearn is admired, she suggests, only by a coterie readership of sensitive literary connoisseurs ('un groupe de délicats').[79] His 'disdain for popularity' is reflected in the manner in which he gathers 'as if by chance' in the same volume 'short stories, essays, personal anecdotes, travel impressions, psychology, and fantastic tales'.[80] The general reading public, she observes, has little patience with such 'mixtures' ('mélanges'), which they typically find 'puzzling'. Hearn's writings, she notes in passing, also lack the qualities that French readers have come to expect from notionally 'English' writers, notably 'lots of humour' and a 'disdain for those races that are not Anglo-Saxon'.[81]

Like many of Hearn's early critics, Bentzon also draws a comparison between the generic and formal hybridity of the 'admirable scattered fragments which compose his works' and his indeterminate geographical, national and racial identity: she presents Hearn as a 'frail little hybrid plant', which 'flower[ed] on the rock of Lefkada', before being 'uprooted, transplanted, tortured by a system of northern repression uncongenial to its nature'.[82] An anonymous critic in the *New Statesman* in 1925 similarly cites his writing as inhabiting 'a kind of No Man's Land', in which his 'poetical prose […] blends indistinguishably with the poets who write *vers libres*'.[83] Such literature, he suggests, 'may be called amphibian or mongrel or half-caste or *fin de siècle* but […] it cannot be ignored'.[84] In this spirit, the critic arranges a number of sentences from 'Torn Letters' (1884) on the page as lines of free verse, anticipating W. B. Yeats's famous treatment of Walter Pater's 'Mona Lisa' in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936. Hearn's 'No Man's Land' accounts, perhaps, for his difficulty in finding a secure home in literary studies in the twenty-first century – his 'worship of the Odd, the Queer, the Strange', combined with his astounding itinerancy, means that his works have often fallen between the rigid disciplinary divisions of nation, language, genre, and

period that characterize much contemporary scholarship. Certainly, his persistently abrasive relationship with the concept of 'decadence' requires us to remain alert to the polyvalent resonances of the term across and between historical moments. Perhaps, as Hearn insisted, '[t]o study the stuff is mere waste of time'.[85]

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Lafcadio Hearn, Letter to Ellwood Hendrick (December 1894), in *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by Elizabeth Bisland, 2 vols (Houghton, Mifflin, 1906), II, pp. 187–88.
[4] 'The Late Lafcadio Hearn as Revealed in His Letters', *New York Daily Tribune,* 5 December 1906, p. 7.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] See S. Frederick Starr, 'Illusion and Disillusion: The Making of Lafcadio Hearn', in *New Orleans: A Literary History* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 96–112.
[8] Hearn, Letter to H. E. Krehbiel ([n.d.], 1880), in *Life and Letters*, I, pp. 219–22 (p. 220)
[9] Hearn, Letter to William D. O'Connor (29 June 1884), in *Life and Letters*, I, pp. 328–29.
[10] See Hearn, *A History of English Literature in a Series of Lectures*, 2 vols (Hokuseido Press, 1927); Hearn, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets: Lectures by Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. by John Erskine (Dodd, Mead, 1922); Hearn, *On Poetry*, ed. by Ryuji Tanabé, Tesaburo Ochiai and Ichiro Nishizaki (Hokuseido Press, 1934).
[11] See also Rie Kido Askew, 'Why Hearn?: The Critical Reception of Lafcadio Hearn in Japan', *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 18.1 (2016), pp. 57–73.
[12] Bernadette Lemoine, 'Lafcadio Hearn as an Ambassador of French Literature in the United States and in Japan', *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 319 (2006), pp. 299–317 (p. 305–06). See also Stefano Evangelista, '"Clothed with Poetry": Lafcadio Hearn's Decadent Aesthetics of Translation', *Modern Philology*, 121.1 (2023), pp. 104–23, https://doi.org/10.1086/725415.
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[14] Elizabeth Bidland, 'Introduction', in Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, trans. by Lafcadio Hearn (Harriman, 1910), [n.p.].
[15] George M. Gould, *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn* (Jacobs, 1908), p. xiii. For Hearn's relationship with Gould, see Antony Goedhals, 'Lafcadio Hearn and George Gould's Philosophy of Spectacles: The Story of a Buddhist–Christian Encounter', in *Diasporic Identities and Empire: Cultural Contentions and Literary Landscapes*, ed. by Anastasia Louridas and David Brooks (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 199–212.
[16] Hearn, 'Decadence as a Fine Art', in *Essays in European and Oriental Literature*, ed. by Albert Mordell (Heinemann, 1923), pp. 28–33 (p. 28).
[17] Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[18] 'Decadence as a Fine Art', p. 28.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 29.
[22] Ibid., p. 33.
[23] Hearn, 'Latterday Reviews', in *Essays on American Literature*, ed. by Sanki Ichikawa (Hokuseidu Press, 1929), pp. 138–42 (p. 138).
[24] Ibid., pp. 138–39.
[25] Ibid., pp. 139–40.
[26] Hearn, 'The Omnivorous Newspaper', in *Essays on American Literature*, ed. by Sanki Ichikawa (Hokuseidu Press, 1929), pp. 198–202 (p. 200).
[27] Ibid, p. 201.
[28] Ibid., p. 199.
[29] Ibid., pp. 199–200.
[30] Ibid., p. 201.
[31] Ibid., p. 202.

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] See Paul Manning 'Goblin Spiders, Ghosts of Flowers and Butterfly Fantasies: Lafcadio Hearn's Transnational, Transmedia and Trans-Species Aesthetics of the Weird', *Japan Forum*, 32.2, (2020), pp. 259–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2019.1676291.
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[36] Ibid., p. 16.
[37] Ibid., p. 20.
[38] Ibid., p. 21.
[39] Hearn, 'On Composition', in *Complete Lectures on Art, Literature and Philosophy*, ed. by Ryuji Tanabé, Tesaburo Ochiai and Ichiro Nishizaki (Hokuseido Press, 1932), pp. 70–94 (p. 93).
[40] Hearn, 'English Fiction in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century', in *Complete Lectures on Art, Literature and Philosophy*, pp. 348–85 (p. 383).
[41] 'Decadence as a Fine Art', p. 30.
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[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990).
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[47] Hearn, 'Some Symbolic Poetry', in *On Poetry*, pp. 141–70 (p. 141).
[48] Ibid., p. 170.
[49] Ibid.
[50] For an insightful discussion, see Stephen Cheeke, *Walter Pater and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 183–88.
[51] For the relationship between Spencer's thought and Eastern mysticism in Hearn's writings, see Antony Goedhals, *The Neo-Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn: Light from the East* (Brill, 2020).
[52] 'Crystallised Criticism', *The North-China Herald*, 3 January 1896, p. 7.
[53] See Stefano Evangelista, 'The 1890s and East Asia: Toward a Critical Cosmopolitanism', in *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s*, ed. by Dustin Friedman and Kristin Mahoney (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 61–77; Evangelista, 'Lafcadio Hearn and Global Aestheticism', in *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 72–116; Daichi Ishikawa, 'For Curiosity's Sake: British Aestheticism and Cosmopolitan Notions of Curiosity in Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, and Lafcadio Hearn, 1864–1904' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2018).
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[55] Ibid., p. 110; Roy Starr, 'Lafcadio Hearn as Japanese Nationalist', *Japan Review*, 18 (2006), pp. 181–213.
[56] Yone Noguchi, 'Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan*', *The Bookman*, October 1904, pp. 159–60 (p. 160).
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[64] Hearn, Letter to Ellwood Hendrick (April 1892), in *Life and Letters*, II, p. 85.
[65] Hearn, Letter to James Daniel Hearn [n.d.], in *Life and Letters*, I, p. 10.
[66] John Carter, 'Queer Lafcadio Hearn: A Biography of One of the Strangest and Most Interesting Figures in American Letters', *New York Times*, 7 December 1924, p. X.16.
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[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., pp. 556–57.
[82] Ibid., p. 558.
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