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‘Peculiar, Exotic, Irresistible’:
Exotic Decay and the Fantasy of Enslaved Beauty in Lafcadio Hearn’s
Two Years in the French West Indies (1890)

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What role do racialized women play in the articulation of decadent aesthetics in the colonial Caribbean? This article takes up that question by turning to Lafcadio Hearn’s *Two Years in the French West Indies* (1890), a text that registers both fascination and ambivalence toward Creole culture in the wake of emancipation. Hearn is best known as a cosmopolitan figure whose work traverses the US South, the Caribbean, and Japan. Yet while much of the critical attention on Hearn has focused on his global mobility, folkloric ethnography, and *Japonisme*, his writing in and about the French West Indies has received less sustained analysis. In particular, scholars have yet to fully reckon with the aesthetic and ideological weight he places on the figure of the *femme de couleur* – a mixed-race woman whose beauty, agency, and racial proximity to whiteness make her a potent figure of both desire and decline.

Lafcadio Hearn uses the figure of the *femme fatale* to explore the cracks in colonial power. In his Caribbean writings, especially *Two Years in the French West Indies*, Hearn draws on the decadent fascination with transgressive women – figures who cross boundaries of sex, race, class, and spiritual order. Like Charles Baudelaire’s seductive corpses, Algernon Charles Swinburne’s tortured saints, or Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sensual Madonnas, Hearn’s *femmes fatales* are never just beautiful: they are unsettling, excessive, and politically charged. But in Hearn’s case, these women carry the weight of a specific colonial history. They emerge from the plantation world and its afterlives, shaped by emancipation, creolization, and the threat of Black freedom. Hearn offers multiple versions of this figure: the *belle affranchie*, who embodies a sensual and racialized vision of Martinique’s past; *La Gniabliesse*, a supernatural seductress who lures enslaved men away from the

cane fields to their deaths; and the towering *zombi* woman – fourteen feet tall – who surfaces as both fantasy and reckoning. These women work against the colonial figures Hearn otherwise references – such as Étienne Ruzé de Lavison and Joseph Romanet du Caillaud – who try to control or explain the Caribbean through Western legal, scientific and theological discourses. By contrast, Hearn's *femmes fatales* resist explanation. They expose the limits of imperial knowledge and haunt the archive with their unruly presence. In Hearn's decadent imagination, the *femme fatale* is not just a symptom of social decline – she is a sign of colonial collapse.

Lafcadio Hearn's portrayal of the creole *femme fatale* in 'La Fille de Couleur', a sketch in *Two Years in the French West Indies*, entwines eroticism with racialized power, enslavement, and emancipation.¹ His depiction of the *fille de couleur*, both as an object of desire and as a figure of historical and cultural transition, reveals deep ambivalence toward freedom and the shifting racial and gendered dynamics of post-emancipation society. In Hearn's rendering, this racially mixed woman emerges as both alluring and doomed – a product of colonial decadence whose very desirability is tied to the structures of racial oppression that the abolition of slavery seeks to dismantle. The *fille de couleur* embodies a paradox: she is a source of erotic power and agency, yet one whose existence, in Hearn's imagination, is inextricably linked to a world vanishing with legal emancipation.

Martinique was a French colony from the seventeenth century, and like many other Caribbean colonies in the decades that followed, it became heavily dependent on enslaved labour for the production of sugar, tobacco, and rum. The transatlantic slave trade facilitated the forced labour of countless enslaved Africans and their descendants, some of whom were transported to Martinique over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the late eighteenth century, the majority of the population in Martinique was of African descent, though the state was legally structured along racial lines that privileged white colonists and free people of colour over the enslaved population. The tropic island that fascinates Hearn has a dynamic past of slave

rebellions, one of which he fictionalizes in *Youma: Story of a West-Indian Slave* (1890). The abolition of slavery in French colonies was legislated in 1848, following the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and the rise of anti-slavery sentiments in Europe and the Americas. This process radically transformed Martinique's social and economic systems, but the legacy of slavery remained deeply embedded in the island's culture, politics, and economy.²

Slavery was a fixture of French imperialism in the Antilles from the earliest years of colonization in the seventeenth century. The French Antilles were formally colonized after the arrival in 1625 of Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc and Urbain de Roissey in Saint Christopher (modern-day Saint Kitts and Nevis). Backed by Cardinal Richelieu, d'Esnambuc established the Compagnie de Saint-Christophe (Company of Saint Christopher) and set sail for the island in February 1627 with French settlers.³ Over the following decades, the French expanded their colonial foothold across the Caribbean, seizing and settling islands including Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue.

In 1635, d'Esnambuc led a group of approximately one hundred colonists from Saint Christopher to Martinique to establish a permanent settlement. Displaced by Spanish forces from Saint Christopher, some French settlers retreated to Tortuga before moving to northern Hispaniola, where they used wealth accumulated through buccaneering to finance participation in the transatlantic slave trade. This pattern of violent displacement and opportunistic accumulation laid the foundations for the French Antilles' plantation economies. By the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick, France acquired the western third of Hispaniola – later Saint-Domingue – developing it into 'the most prosperous slave colony in the Americas in the eighteenth century'.⁴

The demographic realities of these colonies fuelled the rise of a mixed-race Creole population. In Martinique between 1678 and 1687, the number of white men was roughly double that of white women, creating a stark gender imbalance. Colonial officials made repeated, often desperate attempts to attract white women to the Caribbean. Large and small planters sought

wives, domestic labourers, and reproductive partners who could bear the next generation of settlers. To address the shortage, colonial authorities resorted to moral and social coercion: in November 1680, 128 ‘young women of ill repute’ aged between fifteen and twenty-two were forcibly transported from Paris to Martinique, followed by another shipment of fifty women in September 1682. These measures only partly addressed the imbalance. As historian Bernard Moitt has demonstrated, the small but impactful presence of free and enslaved African women on the islands created both opportunities and intense anxieties for colonial society.⁵ As these women’s sexual exploitation and relationships with white men produced mixed-race children recorded in colonial ledgers, the emerging Creole population became a site of colonial panic. One census from the early 1660s in Martinique, for example, counted 166 Black men, 147 Black women, and 178 mixed-race children – evidence of how deeply interwoven racial mixing was with everyday colonial life.

Moitt highlights a revealing tension in colonial discourse that helps illuminate Hearn’s later writing: while demographic and social pressures encouraged sexual relationships between white men and Black women, colonial elites condemned these same unions as threats to racial purity and social order.⁶ Moreau de Saint-Méry, a Martinique-born lawyer and chronicler of colonial life, gave voice to these anxieties when he claimed that enslaved Black women had an ‘indomitable propensity for Black men’, insisting that neither the privileges of relationships with white men nor the threat of severe punishment could restrain their desires.⁷ His words underscore how colonial narratives often sought to deny Black women’s agency even as they policed and exploited their sexuality.

Recent scholarship has expanded the field of decadence studies by centring its entanglements with race, empire, and ecology. Peter Bailey’s analysis of *Two Years in the French West Indies* situates Hearn’s lush prose within an ecology of imperial decline, arguing that his representations of Martinique’s landscapes and women reflect both aesthetic enchantment and a

deep ambivalence about modernity.⁸ The tensions that Bailey identifies between a desire to preserve the beauty of a vanishing colonial world and an anxious anticipation of its inevitable decline support my reading of the *belle affranchie* as a literary figure whose alluring power emerges from, yet threatens, the very plantation system that cultivated her. My intervention contributes to recent intersectional approaches to decadence, such as Cherrie Kwok's term 'Duvalian decadence'.⁹ This describes literature produced by enslaved and colonized peoples and their descendants – drawing inspiration from Jeanne Duval, the Haitian paramour and muse of Charles Baudelaire – to underscore an underexplored connection between decadence and the Black diaspora. Stefano Evangelista similarly repositions Hearn within transitional and cosmopolitan decadent contexts, particularly in his analyses of translation and aesthetic border-crossing.¹⁰ Mary Gallagher's work also explores Hearn's mediation of Creole folktales in Martinique as ethnographic, innovative, and informed by his close relationships with female interlocutors as repositories of key cultural knowledges.¹¹ Together, these critics offer crucial frameworks for understanding how racialized women in Hearn's Martinique writing emerge not only as exoticized figures of desire but also as products of and participants in the aesthetic and material economies of colonial modernity.

Alongside this, the Afro-Creole cultural elements that Hearn infuses into many of his representations of racialized women afford them disruptive beauty, knowledge, and power, resulting in a *femme fatale* born out of circum-Caribbean-inspired notions of decadence. This figure, at once enchanting and tragic, raises urgent questions: Why does Hearn construct a type of sensual, persuasive woman whose erotic power renders white men vulnerable – allowing her to secure not only her own freedom but also that of her loved ones through enfranchisement – while contrasting the fraught position of the less beautiful, endangered yet emancipated *fille de couleur* of his day?

In *Two Years in the French West Indies*, 'La Fille de Couleur' examines the declining status of mixed-race women in post-emancipation Martinique. Hearn contrasts the *fille de couleur* with the

belle affranchie, who, under slavery, occupied a privileged position due to her beauty and proximity to whiteness through her role in the extra-legal system of *plaçage*.¹² Hearn draws on archival texts to describe powerful, beautiful mistresses of white Creole men, who benefit from economic and social advantages that set her apart from the enslaved and even from free Black women. The *belle affranchie*'s refined hybridity destabilizes racial hierarchies, as her allure blurs distinctions between Black and white, complicating this colonial society's rigid structures. Hearn argues that with the fall of plantation society the *fille de couleur* inherits only a degraded beauty, losing the delicate refinement of her ancestors. He likens her decline to a conservatory plant losing its shelter – once protected and nurtured, she now hardens and grows less beautiful. Post-emancipation, she becomes more aware of racial injustice, less submissive, and increasingly detached from white men, signalling the erosion of the old social order. Hearn's portrayal of the *fille de couleur* as a decadent type reflects his marked, persistent anxieties about racial and cultural decline. He laments the disappearance of the *belle affranchie* as a sign of Martinique's broader degeneration, mourning both the loss of rigid racial hierarchies and the aesthetic ideals they once produced. Within the broader scope of *Two Years in the French West Indies*, 'La Fille de Couleur' serves as a meditation on racial hybridity, colonial decline, and the consequences of emancipation; the chapter encapsulates the broader tensions and contradictions within his works, which simultaneously acknowledge the injustices of slavery while lamenting the 'loss' of what he sees as its cultural and aesthetic byproducts.

While much of the discourse regarding Hearn's depictions of racialized women rightfully acknowledges and often critiques the author's exoticism of them, his personal history – specifically, his relationship with Mattie Foley, a Black woman whom he married in 1874 while living in Ohio – echoes in and complicates his literary constructions of race and eroticism. Some of the earliest published criticism of Hearn's relationship with mixed-race and Black women posits a connection

between his sexual attraction and his decadent literature. Nina Kennard, one of Hearn's early biographers, writes in 1912 that:

The school of French writers who have been dubbed 'decadents' and who exercised so great an influence on him were infected with a strange partiality for alien races and coloured women. Exotic oddness and strangeness, primitive impulses, as displayed in the quest of strange tongues and admiration of strange people, were a vital part of the impressionist creed [...]. Baudelaire boldly declared his preference for the women of black races. Most of Pierre Loti's earlier novels were but the histories of love affairs with women of 'dusky races', either Eastern or Polynesian.¹³

Kennard's use of 'infection' signals some outside force creeping in, ushering in contamination: a rhetoric of corruption. Pathogens exist, and so does the fear of them; to say Hearn was 'infected' suggests not just exposure but transformation and the implication that his attraction to Black and mixed-race women compromised him in some way. This frames his desire as something invasive, an independent influence that alters him, rather than something innate to his worldview. The language Kennard uses – 'strange', 'infected', 'influence' – suggests a form of moral or artistic corruption, as if attraction to racialized women relegates him beyond the norms of (implicitly white) bourgeois society. This site of 'infection' marks Hearn's violation of social and legal propriety by marrying Mattie Foley, while at the same time indicating prevalent forms of attraction to and models of representing racialized women within decadent literature. This inflammatory 'infection' is a symptom of friction, of the body responding to something it cannot absorb without consequence. Kennard sees Hearn's attraction as a literary contagion, something acquired, caught, rather than consciously chosen. Yet his marriage was not merely an aesthetic dalliance but a real disruption which destabilized his social positioning, not least in the termination of his employment with the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. Kennard's critical condemnation treats his attraction as something foreign and deleterious rather than something generatively structuring his experiences and shaping his writing.

Her claim that his attraction was part of an 'impressionist creed' reinforces this, positioning it as a mere artistic affectation rather than a sincerely felt and genuinely companionate relationship.

But if we take this ‘infection’ seriously – not as a sign of unnatural deviation but as a force of transmission, transformation, and disruption – it allows us to reframe our understanding of Hearn’s complex relationship with literary decadence. While Kennard’s assertion is fraught with xenophobia and racism, we might nevertheless take at face-value her observation that Hearn’s engagement with non-white women informs the decadent commitments of his work. What might it mean to understand the author’s racialized eroticism as a generative force in his literature, not merely fetish or exoticism? Kennard’s biographical provocation might illuminate the plentiful descriptions in Hearn’s Antillean writing of beautiful mixed-race and Black women, defined by a beauty which is enchanting and unique, but ultimately disposable, transient and in decline.

Hearn constructs an evolutionary narrative of racial beauty by drawing on historical texts by colonial figures: priests, scholars, physicians, and members of the French military such as Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, Joseph Romanet du Caillaud, and Étienne Rufz de Lavison.¹⁴ These sources, written from the perspective of colonial administrators and European observers, provide him with a genealogy of Creole racial mixing that he presents as naturalized historical fact. Through these texts, Hearn asserts that the conditions of slavery produced a uniquely beautiful type – the *belle affranchie* – whose refinement and allure gave her influence over white Creole men, unsettling the very racial hierarchies that structured plantation society. Hearn’s descriptions of histories of racial and sexual relations in Martinique reveals the deeply ambivalent function of the *fille de couleur* within the colonial order: she is simultaneously an agent of disruption and an object of containment. His assertion that ‘Nature, in the guise of the *belle affranchie*, had mocked at slave codes’, underscores the ways erotic desire subverts the rigid racial hierarchies upheld by colonial power.¹⁵ The *fille de couleur* embodies a paradox – her ‘irresistible fascination’ unsettles racial boundaries, yet her position within the economy of desire remains one of precarious subjugation rather than true emancipation. Hearn’s language oscillates between celebration and condescension, positioning these women as powerful figures who ‘mock’ and ‘laugh’ at racial pretensions, yet he

simultaneously underscores their marginalization, marking them as transient and outside the legitimizing structures of marriage and legal recognition.

Hearn's Creole *femme fatale* complements his aesthetic evolutionary theory to erase the sexual violence and forced labour of enslavement, apparently allowing him to maintain his erotic gaze without culpability. The text argues that decades of miscegenation created racialized beauty powerful enough to destabilize enslavement. I quote Hearn at length:

'After one or two generations', writes the historian Rufz, 'the *Africaine*, reformed, refined, beautified in her descendants, transformed into the creole negress, commenced to exert a fascination irresistible, capable of winning anything (*capable de tout obtenir*)'. Travellers of the eighteenth century were confounded by the luxury of dress and of jewellery displayed by swarthy beauties in St. Pierre. It was a public scandal to European eyes. But the creole negress or mulattress, beginning to understand her power, sought for higher favors and privileges than silken robes and necklaces of gold beads: she sought to obtain, not merely liberty for herself, but for her parents, brothers, sisters, – even friends. What successes she achieved in this regard may be imagined from the serious statement of creole historians that if human nature had been left untrammelled to follow its better impulses, slavery would have ceased to exist a century before the actual period of emancipation! By 1738, when the white population had reached its maximum (15,000), and colonial luxury had arrived at its greatest height, the question of voluntary enfranchisement was becoming very grave. So omnipotent the charm of half-breed beauty that masters were becoming the slaves of their slaves. It was not only the creole *negress* who had appeared to play a part in this strange drama which was the triumph of nature over interest and judgment: her daughters, far more beautiful, had grown up to aid her, and to form a special class. These women, whose tints of skin rivalled the colors of ripe fruit, and whose gracefulness – peculiar, exotic, and irresistible – made them formidable rivals to the daughters of the dominant race, were no doubt physically superior to the modern *filles-de-couleur*. They were results of a natural selection which could have taken place in no community otherwise constituted; – the offspring of the union between the finer types of both races. But that which only slavery could have rendered possible began to endanger the integrity of slavery itself: the institutions upon which the whole social structure rested were being steadily sapped by the influence of half-breed girls. Some new, severe, extreme policy was evidently necessary to avert the already visible peril.¹⁶

Hearn's depiction of the *belle affranchie* and *fille de couleur* not only aestheticizes their adornments but also obscures the material realities that underpin their refinement. The luxurious jewellery, silken dresses, and golden beads that mark these women as objects of fascination are not evidence of their autonomy but rather a testament to the wealth extracted from the plantation economy. These possessions, gifted or permitted by white Creole men, reinforce the fundamental dependency of these women on the very system that subjugates them. Across Rufz and Romanet's writings, Hearn

identifies and romanticizes the process by which these women ‘make even the fetters of slavery serve them for adornments’, yet in doing so, he erases the violent mechanisms of colonial exploitation that provide these trappings in the first place.¹⁷

This obfuscation is central to Hearn’s *femme fatale*. He presents these women as figures of seductive power, capable of reversing hierarchies by enthralling their former masters, yet this apparent agency is entirely relegated by the economic and racial structures of the plantation system. The wealth that allows them to dress in finery is not their own; their ability to captivate white men relies upon their desirability and sexual availability within a system that still positions them as commodities, as chattel. The trope of the *femme fatale*, as Hearn and those he cites construct it, depends on the illusion of power – an illusion that conceals the fundamental inequity at the heart of their position.

This contradiction is particularly evident in Rufz’s characterisation of the *belle affranchie* as both irresistible and powerless, capable of obtaining ‘anything’ yet entirely reliant on what white Creole men are willing to bestow to their intimate partners. Hearn erases the fact that these women were not simply beneficiaries of white men’s desire but products of a plantation system in which their very bodies were commodified, their beauty shaped by selective sexual violence, and their possessions the remnants of an economy built on racialized labour. Hearn’s nostalgia for the *belle affranchie* thus becomes a nostalgia for a world in which white men retained ultimate control – not just over wealth and power but over the women whose adornments, refinement, and very survival depended on their continued patronage.

Hearn’s *belle affranchie* and *fille de couleur* emerge as complementary figures, speaking simultaneously of disruptive erotic potency and of colonial decline. However, it is also worth asking whether Hearn’s movement to the Creole cultures of Louisiana and Martinique was, at least in part, an attempt to find a more hospitable environment where the process of Black abjection was less violently enforced. As scholars have noted, Hearn sought to redeem himself after the

scandal of his marriage to Mattie Foley, and his migration coincided with a period (1868–1894) when anti-miscegenation laws had been repealed in Louisiana, making such relationships legally permissible. Furthermore, Louisiana’s long history of extra-legal interracial relationships through the *plaçage* system – where white men and women of colour engaged in formalized, though unofficial, unions – provided a cultural precedent that likely shaped Hearn’s imagination. Similarly, his depiction of Martinique suggests a lingering nostalgia for a colonial past in which racial mixing, though officially unspoken, was widely practised. By tallying illegitimacy statistics, Hearn presents historical miscegenation as both an open secret and a symptom of social decay, framing the *fille de couleur* as both empowered and doomed. In this chapter, this contradiction is emblematic of Hearn’s broader anxieties: his fascination with women of colour seems almost inextricable from his impulse to frame their agency as fleeting, their power as an ephemeral by-product of colonial decadence rather than a step toward genuine liberation.

Hearn’s metaphor of mixed-race women as ‘rivaling the colors of ripe fruit’ evokes a logic of consumption – one that simultaneously aestheticizes and commodifies these women’s bodies. The comparison to fruit evokes taste, sensuality, and desirability, positioning these women as objects to be plucked, tasted, and consumed. It also implies a temporality – fruit is only desirable at a specific moment before it spoils. This reflects the author’s broader framing of the *belle affranchie* as a fleeting product of slavery’s social structures, a beauty that was cultivated under specific conditions and, in his view, has since deteriorated. The language of ‘peculiar, exotic, and irresistible’ reinforces this dynamic by rendering these women as foreign curiosities, beautiful and appealing because of their difference. Hearn’s emphasis on their ‘gracefulness’ situates them within a tradition of European aesthetic ideals, suggesting that their refinement is what makes them so dangerously attractive to white men. This speaks to the *femme fatale* trope that runs throughout Hearn’s work – these women do not merely captivate, they threaten. Their beauty is not just an

object of admiration but a force that disrupts social order, making them ‘formidable rivals’ to white women.

Yet, the passage also underscores a hierarchical temporality – these women, Hearn claims, were ‘no doubt physically superior to the modern *filles-de-couleur*’. This assertion constructs a narrative of decline, where the *belle affranchie* represents an unattainable past ideal that has since eroded. By linking beauty to racial mixing under slavery, Hearn implicitly ties aesthetic value to the very structures of oppression that produced it. The conservatory metaphor lingers here: just as certain plants flourish in controlled environments, Hearn suggests that these women’s beauty was cultivated under the forced conditions of enslavement and white patronage. With the collapse of that structure, he sees their beauty fading – another lament for what he views as the aesthetic and social loss of the pre-emancipation world.

Hearn’s portrayal of the *fille de couleur* in *Two Years in the French West Indies* reflects his deep ambivalence toward the shifting racial and sexual economies of the post-emancipation era. If French Creole societies like Louisiana and Martinique had once provided a structured, albeit highly racialized, space for extra-legal relationships between white men and women of colour through systems like *plaçage*, Hearn recognizes that these arrangements are increasingly threatened in the wake of abolition. The economic and legal conditions ushered in by emancipation – particularly the dissolution of slavery as an economic system and the granting of formal citizenship to formerly enslaved populations – undermined the very foundations that had sustained *plaçage*. For Hearn, this transformation represents not a triumph of freedom, but a form of disorder, a collapse of what he frames as a historically stable and mutually understood mode of interracial intimacy. In this way, Hearn’s investment in French Creole cultures reflects not simply an aesthetic or anthropological interest; it is also bound up with his anxieties over the loss of a social order that allowed for a regulated yet permissive form of interracial desire.

Hearn's reflections on the decline of the *belle affranchie* in *Two Years in the French West Indies* reveal a fundamental paradox in his thinking. While he acknowledges the immorality of slavery and the necessity of emancipation, he simultaneously mourns the loss of the very conditions that, in his view, made possible the most beautiful and refined mixed-race women. His description of these women as the result of a unique process of 'natural selection' under slavery underscores the extent to which he sees their beauty as an artificial product of the plantation system.¹⁸ Without the rigid structures of racial hierarchy and economic dependence imposed by slavery, he suggests, the distinct physical and social refinement of the *belle affranchie* is fated to disappear.

This tension between morality and aesthetics manifests in his discussion of racial mixing under slavery. He suggests that slavery, despite its undeniable cruelty, enabled the emergence of a unique hybrid beauty, one that could not have developed under any other circumstances, 'results of a natural selection which could have taken place in no community otherwise constituted... But that which only slavery could have rendered possible began to endanger the integrity of slavery itself.'¹⁹ Here, Hearn acknowledges that the presence of these women – their beauty, refinement, and especially their influence over white men – was itself a destabilizing force within the plantation system. The same structures that produced them also made their existence precarious, as their status often relied on extra-legal relationships like *plaçage* rather than formalized rights. In this way, he recognizes that the *belle affranchie* was always an unstable figure, her position contingent on the continued existence of a colonial order that was bound to collapse.

Dennis Denisoff's *Decadent Ecology* provides a useful framework for analysing the shifting racial, economic, and sociopolitical dynamics in Hearn's New World writings. Drawing on Ernst Haeckel's model of evolutionary ecology, Denisoff explores the decadent notion that a dominant species, in its relentless pursuit of self-enhancement, may ultimately exhaust the very resources that sustain it, leading to its own degeneration and eventual replacement by another species.²⁰

Slavery, as a hierarchical system designed to sustain white supremacy and economic dominance, saw the creation and recreation of the species ‘Man’, and ultimately created conditions that undermined its own stability. If white Creole power rested on the subjugation of enslaved populations, then the emergence of the *belle affranchie* – a figure whose beauty gave her influence over white men – signals the internal incongruities of that system. The same racial hierarchy that sought to contain and exploit non-white bodies also created the conditions for their ascendance. Hearn dramatizes this by suggesting that ‘the institutions upon which the whole social structure rested were being steadily sapped by the influence of half-breed girls’, whose seductive power eroded the normally fixed barriers between enslaver and enslaved.²¹ His account turns colonial anxieties about racial mixture into an aesthetic and evolutionary crisis, in which the refinement of the *belle affranchie* is at once a venerated product of Creole civilization and a marker of its collapse. By framing racial mixing as both a product and a disruptor of the slave system, Hearn maps the logic of Haeckel’s self-limiting model onto the decline of creole society. The ‘success’ of slavery in producing wealth and a stratified racial order also ensured its downfall, as the rigid structures that upheld it could not withstand the pressures of emancipation, universal suffrage, and Black political empowerment. In this way, Hearn’s work registers the decay of a system that, in striving to perfect and sustain itself, ensured its own extinction – just as Haeckel’s model predicts for dominant species in nature.

At the heart of Hearn’s dilemma is the question of preservation. How, he wonders, can the refined beauty of the mixed-race woman endure in the post-emancipation world? His writing suggests that he sees no clear solution. The *fille de couleur* of the present, he notes, is already losing the physical delicacy and submissive charm that characterized her predecessors:

The almost extreme physical refinement and delicacy, bequeathed to her by the freedwomen of the old regime, are passing away: like a conservatory plant deprived of its shelter, she is returning to a more primitive condition, – hardening and growing perhaps less comely as well as less helpless.²²

Hearn's metaphor of the conservatory flower underscores his investment in artifice, suggesting that the mixed-race woman's beauty is not inherent but cultivated under highly specific, unnatural conditions. Just as a delicate plant, removed from the wild and placed in a controlled environment, flourishes under careful regulation, the *fille de couleur's* refinement and physical allure, he implies, were the product of a colonial order that has since begun to decay. With emancipation, she is exposed to the unchecked forces of nature – blackness, hardship, and social upheaval – which Hearn frames as corrosive to the beauty and grace inherited from the *belle affranchie*. No longer sheltered by a system that once preserved her aesthetic and social appeal, she is, in his eyes, hardening, losing the delicate features that once defined her allure. For Hearn, this shift is not merely a transformation but a regression: a return to an unrefined, 'primitive' state that marks the decline of both the mixed-race woman and the creole world she embodied. Once a symbol of exotic enchantment, she now represents the inevitability of racial and cultural dissolution in the post-emancipation era.

Hearn invokes this same metaphor in 'The Creole Patios', lamenting the female octoroon of the pre-emancipation era:

Daughters of luxury, artificial human growths, never organized to enter the iron struggle for life unassisted and unprotected, they vanished forever with the social system which made them a place apart as for splendid plants reared within a conservatory. With the fall of American feudalism the dainty glass house was dashed to pieces; the species it contained have perished utterly; and whatever morality may have gained, one can not help thinking that art has lost something by their extinction.²³

Again, Hearn's conservatory metaphor suggests that the beauty of mixed-race women in the colonial era was an artificial product of slavery and the rigid social structures that upheld it. In 'The Creole Patios', however, this same metaphor takes on a more explicitly nostalgic and even an elegiac tone, framing the decline of the 'female octoroon' as a tragic aesthetic loss. By likening these women to 'splendid plants reared within a conservatory', Hearn suggests that their beauty and power were dependent on highly specific environmental conditions – conditions rooted in the brutal realities of slavery and racialized sexual economies. The conservatory, an artificial space

designed to cultivate exotic specimens, mirrors the plantation economy itself, which selected, commodified, and controlled the reproduction of enslaved women. These women did not exist outside of this system; rather, their allure was shaped and maintained by it. Hearn's assertion that they were 'never organized to enter the iron struggle for life unassisted and unprotected' reveals his view that emancipation left these delicate women exposed to a harsher reality, where their thoroughly cultivated beauty could no longer ensure their survival. The language of fragility – 'daughters of luxury', 'artificial human growths' – reinforces his belief that these women were not just dependent on the system but fundamentally unsuited to life beyond it.

Hearn's invocation of American feudalism here is particularly telling, as it frames the *antebellum* racial order as a noble, if doomed, social structure. His phrasing – 'the dainty glass house was dashed to pieces' – suggests a sudden and violent rupture, an irreversible destruction of a carefully maintained aesthetic order. He mourns not the system of racial and sexual exploitation itself, but the artistic and cultural loss that, in his view, accompanied its collapse. The passage highlights the depth of Hearn's ambivalence: while he acknowledges that morality may have gained from the end of slavery, his concern lies with what he perceives as art's loss. This aestheticized nostalgia erases the material realities of the women he describes, reducing them to objects of beauty whose worth is measured by their aesthetic and sexual functions rather than their autonomy or agency.

Ultimately, Hearn's writing on the *belle affranchie* reveals the contradictions of his racial and aesthetic politics. While he lightly condemns slavery, he also romanticizes the forms of beauty and social arrangement it produced. He mourns the loss of a type that could only have existed under oppressive conditions, even as he acknowledges that those conditions were unjust. In doing so, he articulates a distinctly decadent ambivalence – an attraction to the fading, the artificial, and the doomed, coupled with an anxiety about the inexorable forces of social change. In the end, Hearn's

vision of post-emancipation Martinique is one of irreversible decline, where not only economic stability and social order have eroded, but beauty itself is in peril of extinction.

Hearn's writing in *Two Years in the French West Indies* constructs decline as a racialized and gendered phenomenon, positioning the *fille de couleur* as a liminal figure whose existence is threatened by the transformations wrought by emancipation and universal suffrage. His anxieties about colonial decay are deeply tied to what he perceives as the impending erasure of mixed-race subjects, particularly women, who had once occupied a socially ambiguous but powerful position within the plantation economy. The mixed-race woman, for Hearn, is both a symbol of aesthetic refinement and a casualty of racial and political shifts that he believes will result in a homogenized, 'savage' Blackness.²⁴ His perspective thus reveals a troubling logic: while he fetishizes the *fille de couleur* for the beauty and cultural hybridity produced under slavery and colonialism, he also frames her as a tragic figure doomed to fade with the dissolution of these oppressive structures.

This sense of doom is not merely abstract – it is tied to the very real social and economic shifts following emancipation. White flight allows for a new threat: 'All these mixed races, all these beautiful fruit-colored populations, seem doomed to extinction', Hearn warns, alerting readers to the dangers of 'the true black element, more numerically powerful, more fertile, more cunning'.²⁵ His language betrays his fear that the structures that once sustained racial hierarchies are crumbling, leaving a power vacuum that will be filled by the formerly enslaved. Yet Hearn is not only preoccupied with the general fate of mixed-race people; he is particularly concerned with the *fille de couleur*, whose historical reliance on white patronage is increasingly unstable. In the past, she wielded a certain form of power – through beauty, charm, and strategic social positioning – but Hearn suggests that these advantages are slipping away. As he observes, "To-day it cannot be truly said of the *fille-de-couleur* that her existence is made up of "love, laughter, and forgettings".²⁶ Instead, she must navigate new economic and social realities, striving for self-sufficiency and the education of her children, while still navigating relationships with white men as potential avenues for upward

mobility. However, Hearn insists that these aspirations are ultimately futile, as racial divisions are deepening beyond repair.

Hearn emphasizes the *fille de couleur*'s growing autonomy as another marker of her decline. He contrasts her with her predecessors, who, in his view, embodied an almost ethereal refinement, precisely because they accepted their subordinate position within the racial and sexual economy of slavery and *plaçage*. In contrast, the modern *fille de couleur* is 'less humble and submissive, – somewhat more exacting', and crucially, she 'comprehends better the moral injustice of her position'.²⁷ Her increasing awareness of systemic racial and gendered injustices transforms her into a less desirable figure in Hearn's aesthetic hierarchy. Her shift from passive beauty to assertive agency disrupts the fantasy of the mixed-race woman as a product of aesthetic cultivation, further reinforcing the sense that her beauty is in decline.

Additionally, Hearn frames the *fille de couleur* as an endangered figure caught between racial poles, her existence threatened by the waning presence of white creoles and the growing dominance of the Black population. In doing so, he mourns not only her individual decline but the broader dissolution of a racial and social order that he associates with aesthetic sophistication. The *belle affranchie* – a product of a bygone era – represents, for Hearn, something idealized and ephemeral: beauty that could only exist under slavery's unnatural conditions. In contrast, the *fille de couleur*, struggling for survival in post-emancipation Martinique, embodies a form of cultural and racial decadence, a beauty that is fading and transforming under the pressures of modernity.

Ann Laura Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* draws our attention to how colonial discourses construct non-white women as objects of both desire and danger. Her study examines why 'the micromanagement of sexual arrangements and affective attachments were so critical to the making of colonial categories and deemed so important to distinctions of ruler and ruled'.²⁸ Such work brings into sharper focus the ways in which Hearn's *belle affranchie* becomes a transgressive embodiment of racialized desire – his sources present her as an object of white male

fascination, but also as a figure whose power stems from her ability to seduce and manipulate her oppressors. Yet, as Stoler reminds us, colonial accounts were typically less concerned with accurately portraying the lives racialized or Othered people than with shaping, alleviating, or stoking European anxieties about racial boundaries and hierarchies. The *belle affranchie*'s beauty, then, is not just a product of evolution under slavery, as Hearn suggests, but a colonial fantasy designed to contain the unsettling realities of miscegenation and the violent hierarchies of the plantation economy.

Moreover, Stoler's concept of the epistemic anxieties of colonial rule – how colonial powers were deeply preoccupied with controlling knowledge about race, sex, and social order – can likewise explain Hearn's lament for the *belle affranchie*'s disappearance. His portrayal of the *fille de couleur* as a degraded, less beautiful version of her mother, suggests a fear that racial mixing, when no longer controlled by white supremacy, would lead to disorder. This recalls Stoler's argument that colonial authorities sought to relegate racialized women, fearing that their bodies and desires could undo the social hierarchy, leading to degeneracy: "This Lamarckian feature of eugenic thinking in its colonial expression linked racial degeneracy to the sexual transmission of cultural contagions and to the instability of imperial rule."²⁹

Stoler's gestures to these frameworks of 'sexual transmission' and 'cultural contagions' invite a return to Kennard's invocation of 'infection' in her description of Hearn's attraction to racialized women. If we understand infection not as something unnatural but as a mode of corruption – one that threatens the integrity of social and racial hierarchies – then Hearn's depiction of the *belle affranchie* aligns with broader colonial fears about degeneracy and destabilization. His framing of these women as both dangerously seductive and aesthetically ideal reflects the same logic that Stoler identifies: a belief that racial mixing, especially through sexual relationships, could transmit cultural 'contagions' that would weaken imperial rule. Hearn's nostalgia for the *belle affranchie* – a woman whose beauty flourished under slavery but supposedly

diminishes in emancipation – suggests that her desirability was contingent on her subjugation. In his framing, once she becomes aware of racial injustice and no longer serves white Creole men, she loses not just social status but also the very beauty that once made her exceptional.

In *Two Years in the French West Indies*, Hearn's portrayal of the *belle affranchie* as a decadent, desirable *femme fatale* embodies enchantment and anxiety. He celebrates her as the paramount product of hybridization, a culmination of colonial histories that produced a woman of almost unimaginable beauty and social power. Yet, this same beauty is perilous – threatening to destabilize the very racial stratification that produced her and provided the conditions for her to flourish. The *belle affranchie* becomes a symbol of both cultural refinement and social decay: a force of attraction and anxiety that embodies the fragility of colonial structures. In aligning the mixed-race woman with the concept of decadence, Hearn positions her as a figure of both allure and ultimate demise, illustrating the paradox at the heart of his fascination with Creole women.

However, the *belle affranchie*'s power is much diminished in post-emancipation Martinique. As Hearn shifts focus to the figure of the *fille de couleur*, the vibrant and seductive qualities passed on by the *belle affranchie* of old begin to degrade. The *fille de couleur*, no longer elevated by the institution of slavery and the supposed privileges it granted, is a shadow of her foremother. No longer a *femme fatale*, she is increasingly seen as less beautiful, less delicate, and less powerful in Hearn's text. He describes her return to a 'more primitive condition', drawing on a racialized and evolutionary discourse that frames her as a lingering anachronism that will succumb to the changing social order. Her awareness of the racial injustice surrounding her heightens her dissatisfaction, leading her to reject the traditional relationships of dependency with white Creole men. Where the *belle affranchie* had once been a symbol of exquisitely cultivated beauty and subversive social influence, the *fille de couleur* represents a loss – a sign of cultural and racial decay that marks the collapse of the old plantation system.

Hearn's personal relationships with racialized women, especially his marriage to Mattie Foley, inform and intensify his investment in the *femme fatale*. His attraction to and anxiety about these women is not just observed but lived, giving his writing urgency and intimacy beyond the observed detachment typically associated with a decadent posture. Decadence offers him a way to turn personal transgressions into art, reframing his relationship to racialized women as part of larger aesthetic and philosophical projects. The racialized *femme fatale*, then, is not just a worn relic of a past era but a vital, generative force that animates his literary work.

¹ Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (Harper, 1890).

² See Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Dale W. Tomich, *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar: Martinique and the World Economy, 1830–1848* (SUNY Press, 2016).

³ Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 3.

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 2–18.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Moreau de Saint-Méry, *A Topographical and Political Description of the Spanish Part of Saint-Domingo* (1796), qtd. in Moitt, p. 13.

⁸ Peter Bailey, 'Deforestation and Decolonization: Lafcadio Hearn's French Antillean Writing', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 6.1 (2023), 1–19.

⁹ Cherrie Kwok, 'After Haiti: Race, Empire, and Global Decadent Literary Resistance, 1804–1948' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Virginia, 2024) <https://libraetd.lib.virginia.edu/public_view/k930bz354>.

¹⁰ Stefano Evangelista, 'Lafcadio Hearn and Global Aestheticism', in *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 72–116.

¹¹ Mary Gallagher, 'Lafcadio Hearn's American Writings and the Creole Continuum', in *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South*, ed. by Martin Munro and Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 19–39.

¹² Hearn, 'La Fille de Couleur', in *Two Years in the French West Indies*, pp. 311–37 (p. 314).

¹³ Nina Kennard, *Lafcadio Hearn* (Appleton, 1912), pp. 82–83.

¹⁴ Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, *Histoire générale des îles Saint-Christophe, de la Guadeloupe, de la Martinique et autres de l'Amérique* (Jolly, 1667); Joseph Romanet du Caillaud, *Voyage à la Martinique* [n. pub], 1804; Étienne Rufz de Lavison, *Études historiques et statistiques sur la population de la Martinique* (Carles, 1850).

¹⁵ Hearn, 'La Fille de Couleur', p. 327.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 323–24.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 332–33.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 324.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dennis Denisoff, "'Up & down & horribly natural': Walter Pater and the Decadent Anthropocene", in *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 31–60 (p. 38).

²¹ Hearn, 'La Fille de Couleur', p. 324.

²² Ibid., p. 331.

²³ Bronner, Simon J., ed., 'The Creole Patois', in *Lafcadio Hearn's America: Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials* (University Press of Kentucky, 2002), pp. 126–32 (p. 128).

²⁴ Hearn, 'La Fille de Couleur', p. 331.

²⁵ Hearn, 'A Midsummer Trip to the Tropics', in *Two Years in the French West Indies* (Harper, 1890), pp. 13–100 (p. 97).

²⁶ Hearn, 'La Fille de Couleur', p. 335.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 334.

²⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press, 2022), p. 8.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 62.