

Axel's *Other* Castles

The Transnational Poetics of Postcolonial Decadence

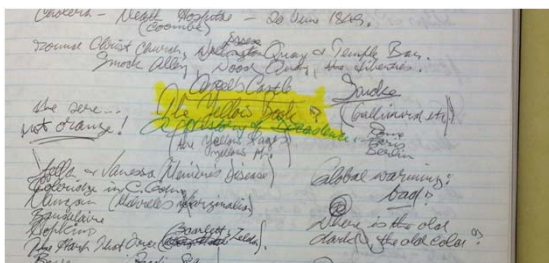
- This project traces the reemergence of the *fin-de-siècle* idea of “decadence” in postcolonial poetry, drama, and art. In doing so, the project asks how contemporary writers and artists have sought to affirm a commitment to form, beauty, and the imagination while responding to the urgent historical realities of the postcolonial era. I argue that these writers and artists transform a style often associated with licentious behavior, conspicuous consumption, elitism, political indifference, and the notion of “art for art’s sake” into a powerful means of critique for postcolonial societies.
- In my research I discover that Anglophone writers and artists from various parts of the postcolonial world—Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia, and Northern Ireland—show a surprising affiliation with “decadent” writers of the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*, such as Oscar Wilde and J.-K. Huysmans, as they reveal the interwoven histories of metropolitan aestheticism and colonial exploitation.

Findings: Derek Walcott



In the play *The Last Carnival* (1984), West Indian poet Derek Walcott satirizes the way European artists created false dreams of colonial splendor. Here, a governess from England, played by a young Frances McDormand, arrives at a cocoa plantation in Trinidad that would later be burned down by Black Power revolutionaries. The set is inspired by Antoine Watteau's 1717 Rococo painting *The Embarkation for Cythera*.

Findings: Derek Mahon



Archival research done at Emory University shows that in the 1997 collection *The Yellow Book*, Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon returns to the idea of decadence to tackle themes such as global warming, globalization, and the excesses of Ireland's “Celtic Tiger” years.

Findings: Yinka Shonibare



In his short film *Un Ballo in Maschera* (2004), the Anglo-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare combines European opera and traditional African Wax Print fabrics to visually juxtapose the excesses of European courts with the sources of their wealth in various colonial enterprises.

Findings: Agha Shahid Ali



In the poem “The Dacca Gauzes,” the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali plucks a line from Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—“For a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite Dacca gauzes”—to trace the links between a highly sought after fabric in Europe and its sites of production in Bengal. As Ali writes: “In History we learned: the hands / of the weavers were amputated, / the looms of Bengal silenced, / and the cotton shipped raw by the British to England.” The fabric can be seen in Whistler’s *Harmony in Grey and Green* (1874).

Findings from this project have appeared in the journal *PMLA* and have been presented at the “Decadence and the Senses” conference at Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2014, and in Paris at the 2013 Irish Seminar at the Centre Culturel Irlandais. Future research will be conducted at the Special Collections archives at Hamilton College (Ali) and the University of Toronto (Walcott).