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Research Statement: AHSS Awards, 2020

Although the British Empire began declining after World War II, recent events like Hong Kong's revival of colonial laws to oppress pro-democracy protestors, or the rise of white nationalism in British and U.S. politics, exemplify how imperialist mindsets still shape how we relate to each other. This is why some literary critics are investigating what postcolonialist Robert Young describes as Empire's "lingering legacies," often using prose, poetry, and nonfiction to analyze how these legacies haunt our present. Yet, little work has examined how we might *transform* this condition. As a result, we risk constructing an ineffective response to imperialism—a response that identifies its problems but cannot move against and *beyond* those problems. How, then, can literature help us envision new social structures or mindsets that would help individuals from different national or racial backgrounds connect with each other in a more egalitarian way? And, despite the differences that set us apart, how can literature illuminate the concerns that we share over and against our differences?

My dissertation examines a set of nineteenth and twentieth century writers from Black America (W.E.B. Du Bois), the Caribbean (Maryse Condé), China (Shao Xun Mei), and India (Sarojini Naidu) who explored these questions by constructing anti-imperial utopias in their literature. Most importantly, I argue that their anti-imperial utopias draw on themes from an artistic and political movement in the Victorian period called Decadence. Although the movement is interested in multiple themes, I focus on the tendency for Decadent writers to use tropes like decay to provoke new artistic and social formations. Unlike existing studies, however, I trace the relationship between these formations and anti-imperialism, and examine a global (rather than exclusively European) set of Decadent writers. In the process, my work shows us how our divisive political present can learn from the anti-imperial structures that my writers create. Building on my research, I plan to create a digital map that visualizes the global circulation of Decadent texts for other scholars and the public. I am applying to the Arts,

Humanities, and Social Sciences Summer Research Grant to conduct the archival work and data collection that will shape my research, and the map, for the next three years of my degree.

I have already received a dissertation prospectus fellowship this Spring from the Institute of Humanities and Global Cultures (IHGC) to define the theoretical trajectory of my research and complete my prospectus by the end of this semester. I have also received support from the UVA Dean's Graduate Research Development Fund Award and a tuition fellowship from the UVA Library's Scholars Lab to attend the Digital Humanities Summer Institute this summer and acquire the technical skills for building my digital map. The AHSS grant would allow me to collect publication data about my writers for the map, and conduct archival work on various correspondence files and manuscript drafts for my dissertation.

This information is important because I need to examine how my writers discussed their relationship to Decadence with their European contemporaries, and how they viewed Decadence in relation to their own anti-imperial work. I also need to trace how the Decadent influence developed in earlier drafts of their work, so that I can determine how they interacted with Decadent ideologies throughout their careers. Gathering this information would include trips to the New York Public Library, which houses Du Bois and Naidu's correspondence files, Columbia University's Special Collections Library to access the Condé archives, Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and Indiana University's Lilly Library to access Shao's letters. The research conducted here will form the foundation for the subsequent chapters in my dissertation (each chapter will individually focus on one of the writers I am exploring) and lay the groundwork for constructing the digital map's dataset.

I expect to complete my first chapter and build a prototype for the map by the end of Fall 2020. This will put me in the position to apply for additional support in the form of two fellowships from the Canadian Federation of University Women in December of this year, UVA's Renate Voris Fellowship in Spring 2021, and an NEH Digital Humanities grant in 2022.