

Marginalised Voices in Modernism, Aestheticism, and Decadence

Around a century after the heyday of modernism, critical perspectives on the period and related phenomena like decadence and aestheticism have begun to shift. Recent years have seen the emergence of New Modernist Studies (Mao and Walkowitz; Mao) that seek to expand notions of modernism. Building on scholarship that has emphasized inclusivity and transnational perspectives, this MADS conference on “Marginalised Voices in Modernism, Aestheticism, and Decadence” aims to contribute to this project by prompting new reflections on perspectives from the margins by authors of colour, working-class, disabled, female, or queer writers and voices from outside traditional centres of cultural power, as well as their intersections.

Whereas modernity and modernism are terms that are fraught with notions of colonization, oppression, and violent ‘discovery’ if seen from a post-colonial perspective, numerous textual examples attest not only to complex interrelations between literatures from the Global North and the Global South but also suggest the emergence of a plurality of concomitant modernisms. Thus, “in the first decades of the twentieth century [...] Black and Asian writers were engaged in publishing, editing, reviewing, and broadcasting in a wide range of cultural and political organisations” (Snaith 116). Against the backdrop of the pan-African movement, for example, gaining traction after the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900, texts by authors such as C.L.R. James, Duse Mohamed Ali, or Una Marson both directly and indirectly engaged with questions of racial emancipation and produced modernisms of their own. Similar social and political arguments, as well as the promotion of “cultural self-discovery” (Winkiel 401) can be found in South Asian writing from the early twentieth century.

Likewise, there was a marked rise in the publication of working-class fiction during the interwar years, with novels such as Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933), Walter Brierley’s *Means Test Man* (1935), and Lewis Jones’s *We Live* (1939) attracting considerable attention (Hubble). This literary surge was fostered by publishers and intellectuals sympathetic to left-wing causes, who sought to give voice to manual workers’ experiences and social concerns (Hilliard 5). Notably, many of these novels extended their focus beyond male experience, revealing a “complex intersectional web of gender and class, of action and reaction” (Paul 124).

As such, they echo the ‘woman question’ and the emergence of the New Woman in the fin de siècle and at the beginning of modernism. While female writers still “had to battle overt discouragement as well as structural hindrances” (Marshik and Pease 3), a new wave of female authors started to write literature and formed their own *feminist aesthetics* (Płonowska Ziarek). This coincides with an increasing interest in questions relating to gender, sexuality, and reproduction. Their depiction is not only part of canonical modernist texts, like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), but also represented in relatively unknown works of literature by women writers, like Charlotte Haldane’s *Man’s World* (1926).

Simultaneously, depictions of queer desire and pleasure increase during modernism, fuelled by the public interest in the trials of Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall, and can be found not only in connection with aestheticism (Glavey 7) but also in decadent writing (Kahan 351). Authors that depict queer desire range from Gertrude Stein, Radclyffe Hall, and Djuna Barnes to E.M. Forster or Richard Bruce Nugent. Likewise, depictions of trans* individuals are not uncommon anymore and can famously be found in the writing of Virginia Woolf or Djuna Barnes.

It is also during modernism that the unique focus of literary writing on able-bodied individuals is questioned and juxtaposed with bodies that are formed or functioning in a non-normative way and whose disability can unsettle “modernist aesthetics itself” (Davidson 2). While New Woman novelists, like Sarah Grand, sought to eradicate disability and were outspoken in their views on eugenics (Andree), examples of disability as “a constitutive feature of modernist art and literature” (Davidson 2) can be found in novels by authors such as Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, and Claude McKay, and mental health issues are explored in texts by Virginia Woolf or Jean Rhys.

The mode of literary and cultural production and engagement is key to the emergence of marginalised voices. Little magazines and periodicals, such as *The Little Review* (*Ulysses*), *Others* (Mina Loy’s poems “Love Songs”) or Richard Bruce Nugent’s Harlem Renaissance magazine *Fire!!*, are frequently where these voices can first be heard. However, marginalised voices are not restricted to literary writing but also resound in transatlantic archives of “women’s arson campaigns, suffrage riots, birth strikes, illegal birth control clinics, industrial sabotage, antilynching activism, queer revolutionary cells, and the more daily work of committee meetings, sewing circles, and letter- writing campaigns” (Richards 1) as well as in BBC radio programmes (Procter).

In order to arrive at a fuller picture of how modernism, aestheticism, and decadence, as well as the academic fields of study exploring them, interact with, express or silence voices from the margins, we invite papers tracing novel intersections across questions of, amongst others, race, reproduction, sex, gender and sexuality, class, disability, age, religious and political minorities, etc. in the long fin de siècle and early twentieth century. Proposals are invited on the following (non-exclusive) fields of enquiry and their intersections with marginalisation:

- Aestheticism
- Decadence
- Literary genre
- Literary/cultural infrastructures, including magazines and periodicals
- Old and emerging media and/or intermediality
- Colonialism and empire
- Transatlantic/transnational networks
- (Cultural) appropriation
- Bodies and biopolitics
- Eugenics
- Socioeconomic developments
- Censorship
- Affect and/or (the politics of) emotion
- Care
- ...

We are inviting proposals for individual 20-minute papers, joint panels, or roundtable discussions by **09 January 2026**. Please include a title, abstract (ca. 300 words) and a bio-note (ca. 150 words) and email your proposals to Eva Ries (eva.ries@uni-a.de) and Leila Michelle Vaziri (leila.vaziri@uni-konstanz.de).

Confirmed Keynote Speakers: Professor James Procter (Newcastle), Dr. Juno Richards (Yale)

The conference will be free to attend.

Bibliography

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