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Christy Wampole, *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 296 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780231185172; \$140.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780231185165; \$34.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780231546034.

Response by Christy Wampole, Princeton University.

First, I'd like to thank Professor Williams for his thoughtful and informed review of my book *Degenerative Realism*. The opening example he offers from Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* is ideal for illustrating the abject and clinical nature of degenerative realist fiction. The description of the decomposing grandfather frankly gives you the chills, perhaps because it does not let you look away from the fate of your own body and the absolute indifference of nature toward a piece of flesh that had such importance to you. This is a good way to describe degenerative realism: it makes us look death and decay straight in the face, even if it is civilization and not the body that it sees as rotting. And it does so with indifference.

I appreciate the working bibliography Professor Williams offers of other scholars' work whose interest in the *extrême contemporain* overlaps with the concerns in my book. These are helpful resources and I am certain that such a bibliography will grow as the meaning of this strange moment in French fiction becomes more clear to us all with hindsight. The problem with working on the extreme contemporary is that all of us are blindly touching some part of the elephant—as the old Indian parable goes—each able to perceive a part of it but not the whole. This is why exchanges like the one we're engaged in now are so helpful.

I also appreciated the mentions of Céline, Baudelaire, and other authors whose aesthetic interests seem hauntingly similar to those of the writers of degenerative realist fictions. I can think of many others—HP Lovecraft, for example, who has been perhaps the most important influence for Houellebecq—but instead of listing every possible overlap, I wanted to write something more suggestive than exhaustive, spurring the reader to make their own historical and contemporary connections between authors who might be motivated by the same aesthetic and sociopolitical problems that have incited the practitioners of degenerative realist novels to write.

Regarding the question of literary value, it is true that some of the books in my corpus are real masterpieces and others are destined for the dustbin of history. These differences certainly matter. But my main goal was not to play the literary critic but to show that a pervasive pattern—across various levels of literary quality and authorial reputation—exists in contemporary French fiction and that these authors, regardless of their writing capabilities, are all trying to describe

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the same thing. This is what I find fascinating: a situation in which suddenly, a large group of people gets the same feeling and tries to write it down. This sociological aspect is what motivated me to write the book.

And finally, regarding Professor Williams' idea of imagining what degenerative realism might be like when crafted by black, female, or queer subjects, I'm afraid the exercise would have to remain a speculative one, as I found no solid examples written by such authors. While there are gay authors in my corpus, they are all white males. The closest example by a female author might be Virginie Despentes' *Vernon Subutex* trilogy, although in my view, her inner core is too activist and too punk to participate in the kind of dead-end despondency that degenerative realism represents for us.

I hope that readers of *Degenerative Realism* will continue where I left off, pursuing my untaken paths and tracking where this strange aesthetic might go next.

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