

Cherrie Kwok Awarded 2020 Jefferson Fellowship

By Richard Milby

As winner of a 2020 Jefferson Fellowship, third year PhD student Cherrie Kwok might give you the impression that the award honors a small army of professors, colleagues, and close friends, rather than one exceptional graduate student in English.

When reached for this article, again and again Cherrie expressed her gratitude to professors who guided her, to scholars who inspired her, and to her friends who lent support throughout her career. Those who have known her have known not only an astute and dedicated scholar, but a stalwart and active member of the community.

But make no mistake about Cherrie's remarkable individual qualities. Her superb scholarship on the late-Victorian Decadent movement, her dedicated and engaging teaching, and her organizational zeal with respect to the English Department's annual graduate student conference, "Grad-Con," (for which she served as Co-chair alongside John Modica this year) all stand out to colleagues, peers, and students alike.

This is one of the hallmarks of the Jefferson Fellowship selection. According to the Jefferson Scholars Foundation, successful applicants will not only exhibit "a capacity for the highest levels of scholastic achievement," but "also demonstrate a commitment to sharing their knowledge discovery with a broader audience through achievements in teaching and academic outreach."

Established in 2001, the Jefferson Fellowship is one of the highest individual honors offered to graduate students at the University of Virginia. The Foundation describes the award thus: "Based solely on merit, Jefferson Fellowships are designed to identify Ph.D. and M.B.A. candidates who demonstrate outstanding achievement and the highest promise as scholars, teachers, public servants, and business leaders in the United States and beyond. The award consists of living and research stipends, space to engage in research and collaborative conversation, and a variety of professional development and enrichment opportunities."

Cherrie Kwok embodies the qualities of both rigorous scholar and energetic community leader. Her background hints at why this might be the case. Growing up, Cherrie split her time between Hong Kong and Vancouver Island, and so was shaped by two very different environments— "one that was efficient, intense, and sophisticated, and another that was quiet, imaginative, and reflective."

Her work in the late-Victorian Decadent movement brought her into close contact with the writing of "wickedly clever" writers like Oscar Wilde who had an eye towards subverting tradition (and the wicked tongue to do it). Courses with English faculty including Stephen Arata (her dissertation advisor), Njelle Hamilton, Jerome McGann, and Rita Felski began to feed an investigation of twentieth century writers in Black America, the Caribbean, China, and India who show shades of a Decadent aesthetic in their poetry and prose. With the time and resources made available by the Jefferson Scholars Foundation, Cherrie plans to concentrate on the dissertation that represents the culmination of her work in this area.

On the teaching front, Cherrie has learned much from her exceptional instructors — and those that may have left something wanting:

"I've met some brilliant teachers here. There were others before, though, who didn't use their power as teachers in the most helpful manner. I learned the hard way that not all your mentors have your best

interests at heart. These experiences became very important when I taught for the first time this year, because I realized what I wanted to become in the classroom: someone that my students could count on to help them grow, and to guide them forward in a firm, fair, and productive way.”

Cherrie’s ambitions for the near future indicate that while much has changed with this award, much has remained the same. In light of the ever-shifting circumstances with respect to the novel Coronavirus, she remains attentive to the fact that “we need to support each other over and against our different titles, rankings, and statuses if we want activities like teaching and scholarship to continue in an ethical manner. The dire material and existential concerns that individuals at almost every level of higher education are facing right now are, in fact, concerns that have always already been there for contingent faculty, non-tenure track faculty, staff, and graduate students.”

The UVa English Department offers its warm congratulations to Cherrie for this well-earned honor.

To learn more about the Jefferson Fellowship, read more on their website, here (<https://www.jeffersonscholars.org/jefferson-fellowship>).