Victorian Anthropology, Racism, and "Heart of Darkness"

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I N *CONRAD IN the Nineteenth Century,* Ian Watt maintains that "the greatest authors are rarely representative of the ideology of their period; they tend rather to expose its internal contradictions or the very partial nature of its capacity for dealing with the facts of experience" (147). This view, which grants considerable authority and autonomy to literary expression (at least in its "greatest" manifestations), is cited approvingly by Brian Shaffer in his more recent "'Rebarbarizing Civilization': Conrad's African Fiction and Spencerian Sociology." Shaffer pursues the important task of contextualizing the work of Joseph Conrad, yet while his stated purpose is "to portray the complex 'dialogic' posture — at once receptive and critical, reinforcing and subversive — that Conrad's Congo fictions assume toward the story of civilization embodied in [Herbert] Spencerian sociology" (46), his focus is overwhelmingly on Conrad's "critical" and "subversive" stance. There is little attention given to the ways in which Conrad uncritically reproduces Spencerian assumptions. As a result, context appears as a static background (much like "ideology" in Watt's formulation) that the master novelist consciously undermines. A very different approach can be found in Benita Parry's *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers,* in which Conrad's texts, with their "decentred and internally inconsistent ideological structure" (2), are viewed as sites where a dialogue occurs between assumptions that are tested and those that are not. What emerges from Parry is a sense of context as a heterogeneous body of assumptions in which the novelist is inextricably bound — a complex and diverse framework that can be interrogated only partially. Shaffer, however,

explicitly rejects Parry's position; for Shaffer, Conrad "invokes, only to destroy" (55). Yet the context that Shaffer himself explores provides evidence to the contrary. The notion that Conrad assumes a "critical" and "subversive" stance toward certain aspects of Spencer's sociology is certainly defensible, but Conrad's use of Africa in "Heart of Darkness" (1899) reinforces the dominant racial paradigm enunciated by Spencer in *Principles of Sociology*—and by Victorian anthropology generally.[1] While important work has been done on the issue of racism in "Heart of Darkness,"[2] the specific affinities between this famous novella and the racial assumptions of Victorian anthropology have not received close analysis. I explore these affinities here, and by revealing Conrad's uncritical reproduction of the attitudes of this extremely imperialistic discourse, I argue that his canonical status as a subversive writer needs to be qualified.

The discipline of anthropology takes as its subject what Clifford Geertz refers to as the "great natural variation of cultural forms" (22). Frequently, however, this subject is obscured by ethnocentric assumptions, for every vantage-point is a cultural vantage-point—one that is defined by a range of cultural norms. V. Y. Mudimbe points out that due to the force of dominant ideologies many schools of anthropology "repress otherness in the name of sameness, reduce the different to the already known, and thus fundamentally escape the task of making sense of other worlds" (72-73). Conrad's version of the anthropological encounter (the contact, or confrontation, between different cultures) participates in precisely the narrow and reflexive gaze isolated by Mudimbe. While "Heart of Darkness" relates the story of a journey hundreds of miles up the Congo river,[3] in intellectual terms this famous novella never really leaves Europe, for an ethnocentric narrative, based on the concept of time, is established that correlates the physical journey away from the European centre with a temporal journey away from the European present. Marlow, the principal narrator, may present Africa as a "strange world" (93) that is wholly "unknown" (94) but instead of being taken out of himself in his novel surroundings he discovers "moments when one's past came back to one" (93). Something vaguely familiar evidently surfaces within the "un-

known," rendering its strangeness intelligible by virtue of its anteriority. "Going up that river" thus appears to be "like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (92-93). Africa becomes a kind of living museum of the primal past—a European projection of a "prehistoric earth" (95) inhabited by "prehistoric man" (96):

> The earth seemed unearthly.... and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.   (96)

While acknowledging a common "humanity" with the inhabitants of the Congo, Marlow makes it clear that this shared estate is mediated by the concept of time. The "kinship" is "remote"; coevality is denied. Marlow organizes Europeans and Africans along an evolutionary continuum with the Congolese engaging in frenzied, mindless activities ("They howled and leaped, and spun"; they create a "wild and passionate uproar") commensurate with their evidently primitive state. Europe's evolved position, "remote from the night of first ages," is signified by intellectual activity, that is, by "thought" and by the attempt to "comprehend" the "meaning" of the "prehistoric" spectacle.

The scope of the anthropological encounter in "Heart of Darkness" is significantly narrowed by the use of a temporal framework—what remains is the contact of Europe with its own distorted and "ugly" reflection. Marlow does not find anything distinctively African in Africa; instead, he finds a European construction of "truth stripped of its cloak of time" (97). The Congolese, presented as the present-day remnants of an archaic existence, embody this essential "truth" (from which Marlow, as a modern European, has become estranged) and appear to have no "cloak of time" (which is to say that they have no heritage

of cultural development). Of course, it could be argued that Conrad is not interested in presenting an authentic vision of Africa or a substantial anthropological encounter, and rather is concerned with what J. H. Stape refers to as "quintessentially Western crises of identity" (xiii). Accepting that Conrad's main concern is with European identity, however, only serves to map out an area of the text presided over by that elusive construct known as authorial intention. Outside the confines of this delineated space, the problem of Conrad's representation of non-European identity remains. What is more, this form of representation (the non-European as a living example of Europe's "remote" and "ugly" past) can be found not only in "Heart of Darkness" but also in other texts, particularly those written by the Victorian evolutionary anthropologists. Consider, for example, the moment of cultural contact described in the famous penultimate paragraph of Charles Darwin's *The Descent Of Man* (1871):

> The main conclusion arrived at in this work, namely that man is descended from some lowly-organized form, will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many persons. But there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me, for the reflection at once rushed into my mind—such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled, and distrustful. They possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they had no government, and were merciless to every one not of their own small tribe. He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins. (2: 404)

In Darwin's anthropology, the attributes of the non-European are interpreted in an evolutionary context: the Fuegians are not simply different from present-day Europeans, they are "barbarians." The parallel with "Heart of Darkness" is inescapable. Darwin's statement, "such were our ancestors," is as relevant to his construction of the Fuegian as it is to Marlow's construction of the "prehistoric" African. In both cases, a temporal scheme dominates the anthropological encounter; first impressions (Darwin's perception of tangled hair and frothing mouths;

Marlow's perception of the "wild and passionate uproar") are not superseded by more valuable insights.

The anthropology practised in "Heart of Darkness" is also evident in John F. McLennan's interesting work, *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* (1865). Peter Rivière points out that one of McLennan's main concerns in *Primitive Marriage* is to contest the findings of Sir Henry Maine, who, in *Ancient Law* (1861), argued for the archaic nature of the Victorian patriarchal family structure (xxxii-xxxvi). In opposition to Maine, who "seems not to have been able to conceive of any social order more primitive than the patriarchal" (McLennan 91), McLennan presents a series of social structures proceeding from "the rudest that can be imagined" (63), advancing through various matrilineal forms, and only then arriving at the Victorian patriarchy (68-105). In Maine's system, the Victorian form of social organization is sanctioned by tradition — by virtue of being archaic. In McLennan's system, conversely, the Victorian form finds a new sanction: patriarchy emerges as "the product of an earlier and ruder stage in human development" (90), and thus is legitimized by virtue of being the result of evolutionary progress. The crucial point from an anthropological perspective is that McLennan services his narrative with ethnographic materials. He makes extensive use of the writings of European travellers, missionaries, and administrators regarding peoples from Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and South America, and from these "well-authenticated cases" (24) he infers the shape of human prehistory, arguing that "What is now true in varying degrees of all the rudest races may be assumed to have been true of all the earliest groups" (68). Contemporary non-Europeans provide McLennan what they provide Darwin (and Conrad): living examples of the European past.

Non-Europeans traditionally occupied an inferior position in the European view of the world, and this was especially so in the middle of the nineteenth century.[4] Yet the relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans established in Darwin's *The Descent of Man* and McLennan's *Primitive Marriage* reveals a new approach to racial differences — an approach influenced by

what George Stocking refers to as "The Revolution in Human Time" (69). By mid-century, important archaeological discoveries, such as the spectacular finds of 1858 at Brixham Cave in Devon and the Somme Valley in France, where human remains were found alongside the remains of extinct animals, seriously challenged the limited temporal narrative afforded by orthodox religion (Stocking 69-74; Daniel 57-60). Whereas Archbishop Ussher's influential time scheme (promulgated in 1654) had set the date of creation in 4004 BC, the new archaeological advances created an immense and uncharted past dating back at least 100,000 years. Suddenly time became an important variable in the understanding of human existence. History was evidently preceded by pre-history, and filling this empty space became a pressing task. In this context, the theory of evolution, which was given its most influential expression in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), must have seemed tailor-made to provide much needed answers. Empty vistas of time could apparently be filled with the spectacle of an evolving natural world. Of course Darwin deals neither with human races nor with the human species as a whole in his landmark text.[5] Nevertheless, evolution quickly took on a racial character. In 1864, the naturalist A. R. Wallace published an influential essay, "The Origin of Human Races and the Antiquity of Man deduced from the theory of 'Natural Selection'," that firmly laid the racial foundations for the emerging discourse of evolutionary anthropology. Wallace argues that as a result of an incessant struggle for survival (the struggle for survival is the basis of the theory of natural selection),

> the better and higher specimens of our race would . . . increase and spread, the lower and brutal would give way and successively die out, and that rapid advancement of mental organisation would occur, which has raised the very lowest races of man so far above the brutes, (although differing so little from some of them in physical structure), and, in conjunction with scarcely perceptible modifications of form, has developed the wonderful intellect of the Germanic races.   (clxiv)

The natural process of evolution thus provides a natural racial hierarchy, with the "Germanic races" occupying the highest stratum. At the bottom of the hierarchy, Wallace situates "those low

and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come in contact"—peoples such as the "red Indian in North America, and in Brazil," and "the Tasmanian, Australian and New Zealander in the southern hemisphere," all of whom approximate, in various ways, the "wandering savage" of the European past (clxv). Non-European peoples are called upon to supply the missing links in the story of prehistory. In his introduction to *Primitive Marriage*, McLennan nicely summarizes the new approach to human differences: "The preface of general history must be compiled from the materials presented by barbarism. Happily, if we may say so, these materials are abundant. So unequally has the species been developed, that almost every conceivable phase of progress may be studied, as somewhere observed and recorded" (6). In order to write his "preface of general history," McLennan employs an anthropology dominated by the concept of time; that is, he relies on the belief that the species has been "unequally . . . developed." With ethnographic particulars converted into the raw "materials presented by barbarism," the Victorian evolutionist constructs a self-gratifying narrative of "progress"—a narrative that finds its highest expression in contemporary Europe.

One of the defining features of evolutionary anthropology appears to be its peculiar conflation of the categories of time and space. For McLennan, Darwin, and Wallace, distance from the European present becomes virtually synonymous with distance from the European center. This conflation of time and space is also evident in Spencer's anthropological writings. These voluminous writings are part of a grandiose project, the "Synthetic Philosophy," that attempts to bring all observable phenomena under the yoke of an evolutionary principle of "change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite, coherent heterogeneity" (*First Principles* 380). In the *Principles of Sociology* (1876), a work that deals with "super-organic evolution," or the evolution of society, Spencer makes use of ethnographic materials to service his discussion. He posits a dialectic between "internal factors" and "external factors" to be the engine of cultural progress (8-39), but he finds that difficulties arise because adequate information on "the original internal factors . . .

supposes a far greater knowledge of the past than we can get" (37). His solution is to proceed by "studying those existing races of men which, as judged by their visible characters and their implements, approach most nearly to primitive man" (39). In three lengthy chapters, Spencer outlines the evolution of "internal factors" by relying on "the facts as described by travellers" (75). He argues, for example, that mental and emotional evolution involves a movement away from simple reflex actions toward the ability to objectivize, understand, and control such impulses (53-55). Then he turns to his ethnographic sources to find evidence of the "original" forms in question: "the Andamanese, Tasmanians, Fuegians, [and] Australians betray impulsiveness in a very decided manner; we may safely assert it to be a trait of primitive man" (58). Similarly, in order to find "the earliest character" of the human emotional state, he consults a "vivid description of a Bushman" provided by a European traveller (58). Like his colleagues, Spencer achieves an understanding of the human past by turning away, momentarily, from the European centre. Peoples such as the Bushmen, the Tasmanians, and the Fuegians are denied a legitimate position within their own historical narratives so that the evolutionary master-narrative, with its final focus on contemporary Europe, can be completed.

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to subordinate anthropological concerns to an evolutionary master-narrative can be found in E. B. Tylor's famous work, *Primitive Culture* (1871). In this mammoth study, Tylor seeks to establish a "Science of Culture" based on an investigation of the "stages of development or evolution" embodied by different human groups (1):

> Civilization actually existing among mankind in different grades, we are enabled to estimate and compare it by positive examples. The educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according as they correspond more closely to savage or to cultured life. The principal criteria of classification are the absence or presence, high or low development, of the industrial arts, especially metal-working, manufacture of implements and vessels, agriculture, architecture, &c., the extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles, the condition of religious belief and

ceremony, the degree of social and political organization, and so forth. Thus, on the definite basis of compared facts, ethnographers are able to set up at least a rough scale of civilization. (26-27)

When he speaks of "the definite basis of compared facts," Tylor implies that his "scale of civilization" is the result of empirical research. Yet the notion that "Civilization actually exist[s] among mankind in different grades" is a considerable presumption, as is the belief that the "educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard." Tylor presents an enormous amount of often very interesting information in *Primitive Culture*, but his will to contain cultural differences in a single evolutionary continuum (a continuum with Europe at its apex) overshadows the entire project and leads to many racially-charged conclusions. Consider, for example, his assertion that "the European may find among the Greenlanders or Maoris many a trait for reconstructing the picture of his own primitive ancestors" (21), or his claim that the "series of ancient lake-settlements, which must represent so many centuries of successive population fringing the shores of the Swiss lakes, have their surviving representatives among the rude tribes of the East Indies, Africa, and South America" (61). Consider also Tylor's lengthy discussion of mythology. He maintains that the roots of the mythic practice are in "the human intellect in its early child-like state" (284), for at this stage of development the urge to make associations is unchecked by exposure to the facts of experience. Gradually, as the human organism grows, such associations are recognized by the expanding intellect to be only fictions, or myths, and are relegated to the realm of art. The psychological basis of this theory is both interesting and, more importantly for the present discussion, racially neutral. Yet Tylor's predisposition to differentiate human groups in evolutionary terms leads him to turn to various "rude tribes" from around the world to find contemporary examples of the mythological practice:

There lies within our reach . . . the evidence of races both ancient and modern, who so faithfully represent the state of thought to which myth-development belongs, as still to keep up both the consciousness of meaning in their old myths, and the unstrained unaffected

habit of creating new ones. Savages have been for untold ages, and
still are, living in the myth-making stage of the human mind.
(282-83)

Tylor appears to be unable to conceive of the human past with-
out also thinking of non-European peoples. As such, "the savage"
becomes "a representative of the childhood of the human race"
(284). To find the human race in its adult state, one must
evidently turn to Europe, and particularly to those evolutionists
who turn the practices of "lower tribes" (284) and "less educated
races" (292) into the objects of scientific investigation.

The ascendancy of evolutionary ideas in the field of anthropol-
ogy was very pronounced in the 1860s and 1870s but was rela-
tively short-lived. By the end of the century, as James Clifford
points out, "evolutionist confidence began to falter, and a new
ethnographic conception of culture became possible. The word
began to be used in the plural, suggesting a world of separate,
distinctive, and equally meaningful ways of life" (92-3).[6] An
important practitioner of this "new ethnographic conception"
was Franz Boas, who, in "The Limitations of the Comparative
Method of Anthropology" (1896), rejects using a system of
"grand uniform evolution" in the study of human groups (904).
Instead of relying on a comparative methodology, in which non-
Europeans are used to substantiate the hypothesis of European
development, Boas proposes an "historical method," in which a
prime concern would be the "histories of the cultures of diverse
tribes which have been the subject of study" (907). Of course one
could hardly say that the problems of ethnocentrism and race
were removed from anthropology with the advent of Boas and
twentieth-century practices; indeed, whether such problems can
ever be removed is uncertain. Nevertheless, the relativizing of
the concept of culture (the use of the word in the plural, as
Clifford puts it) that is implied in Boas's essay does suggest the
beginning of an important shift in the European perception of
non-Europeans—an approach toward viewing human differ-
ences simply as differences, and not as manifestations of a com-
mon identity refracted along an evolutionary continuum.

While "Heart of Darkness" was published only three years after
the essay by Boas and almost thirty years after Tylor's *Primitive*

Culture and Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, Conrad's representation
of the anthropological encounter does not reveal any indication
of a shift toward a more sensitive approach to otherness. Like the
evolutionists, Conrad appropriates the non-European present
and inserts it into the European past. Indeed, Tylor's suggestion
that "the European may find among the Greenlanders or Maoris
many a trait for reconstructing the picture of his own primitive
ancestors" requires little modification to be applicable to
Conrad's version of the "prehistoric man" of the Congo, from
whose "wild and passionate uproar" Marlow is able to deduce
his own estate, "remote from the night of first ages." One of
Marlow's descriptions of his "cannibal" crew provides further
evidence of the evolutionist practice of arranging different hu-
man groups along a temporal continuum: "I don't think a single
one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of
countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of
time—had no inherited experience to teach them as it were"
(103). Conrad's Africans exist at the very "beginnings of time,"
while his Europeans exist at the opposite end of the evolutionary
sequence, "at the end of countless ages." Separating these ex-
tremes is not only time but also the consciousness (or "clear
idea") of time, a faculty that Marlow continues to deny to
the members of his crew when he points out that they are
"big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the conse-
quences" (104). The "capacity to weigh the consequences" in-
volves the recognition of cause and effect—the recognition that
time is the dimension in which events unfold. One could also
argue that the conscious experience of living in time and the
transmission of this conscious experience to subsequent genera-
tions are defining aspects of human culture. The Congolese in
"Heart of Darkness" lack these components of a cultured iden-
tity. As Marlow points out, their lack of a "clear idea of time" is
complemented by a lack of "inherited experience."[7]

   Culture, for the evolutionary anthropologist, stands in opposi-
tion to nature. Nature is the source of humanity, and is embodied
by various non-European peoples such as Darwin's Fuegians,
who are "absolutely naked" and possess "hardly any arts." Cul-
ture, conversely, is the goal of human development, and is em-

bodied by what Tylor refers to as the "educated world of Europe
and America," with its "industrial arts," "scientific knowledge,"
"moral principles," "religious belief," and "social and political
organization." Within the evolutionist's narrative, mental endow-
ments enable certain human groups to evolve from the state of
nature to the state of culture. The Africans in "Heart of Dark-
ness," however, evidently lack the necessary faculties, and thus
they remain examples of what Wallace calls "those low and men-
tally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come in
contact." Nature, as opposed to culture and consciousness, pre-
dominates in Marlow's representation of the Congolese. Notice
how his description of the "big powerful men, with not much
capacity to weigh the consequences" directly counterpoints the
absence of consciousness with the presence of nature (the physi-
cal body).[8] Many of Marlow's other descriptions foreground not
just the body, but the naked body—the body unencumbered by
the attributes of culture. He perceives, for example, "deep in the
tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes,—the
bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening,
of bronze colour" (110). Consider also the following passages:

> streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in
> their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage
> movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and
> pensive forest.   (133)

> When next day we left at noon, the crowd, of whose presence behind
> the curtain of trees I had been acutely conscious all the time, flowed
> out of the woods again, filled the clearing, covered the slope with a
> mass of naked, breathing, quivering, bronze bodies.   (145)

The European observer (possessing what Wallace refers to as
"the wonderful intellect of the Germanic races") may be "acutely
conscious" here, but the same cannot be said of the "swarming"
objects of his gaze: the "naked . . . bodies" whose very actions
(they are "poured" by the forest; they "flowed out of the woods")
appear to be manifestations not of intellect or will but rather
of the natural world. Curiously, the faculties of mind that are
denied to the Africans as individuals are transferred to the
imposing totality (the "pensive forest") of which they are an
unconscious part.

The representation of Africans in "Heart of Darkness"—their proximity to nature, their lack of culture and consciousness, and, most importantly, their position as part of the European past—reveals a racist (sub)text that is consistent with the discourse of evolutionary anthropology. An important consideration that needs to be addressed, however, is the relationship between Marlow, who presents the image of Africa, and Conrad, who creates Marlow. Such critics as Eloise Knapp Hay (173-75), P. J. M. Robertson (106), Jeremy Hawthorn (171-202), and Shaffer ("Progress" 221) have attempted to diffuse the issue of racism in the novella precisely by maintaining a fundamental distinction between the author and his narrator. As Hay puts it, "Marlow, not Conrad, is the offender" (175). While this argument is appealing (in one stroke an evidently racist text is transformed into a text that is concerned with racism; Marlow, to the extent that he expresses ethnocentric views, becomes an object of Conrad's attack), it is beset with problems. First, it has not been substantiated: Hay, Robertson, Hawthorn, and Shaffer either take for granted a fundamental distinction between Marlow and Conrad, or leave the boundaries between the author and his narrator vague. Certainly it seems legitimate to assume that Conrad and Marlow are not identical, but it does not follow that Marlow's unreliability necessarily extends to include his racially-charged utterances. The concept of the unreliable narrator provides an interesting point of departure, but what is needed, and what has not been provided, is specific evidence that Marlow's anthropology is suspect within the context in which Conrad has situated him. A second problem with the attempt to drive a wedge between Conrad and Marlow is the presence of racial attitudes in many of Conrad's other works. "Heart of Darkness" does not exist in a vacuum; tendencies that are generally evident in the oeuvre can shed light on uncertainties encountered in any one text.[9] But by far the most significant obstacle to using Marlow's unreliability to manage the issue of racism is the importance of his construction of Africa within Conrad's interrogative project.

Whatever else it does, most critics would agree that "Heart of Darkness" advances a powerful, and in many ways brilliant, as-

sault on European culture and imperialism. While this assault is multifaceted, on at least two levels it is dependent on the evolutionary racial structure advanced by Marlow. First, there is the presentation of primitive Africa as a desirable alternative to the hypocrisy of Europe. Marlow depicts Brussels, one of the metropolitan centres of Europe, as a "whited sepulchre" (55) that is full of people "whose knowledge of life" is "an irritating pretence" (152).[10] He also reduces European activity in the Congo to a "sordid farce" (61) and a "philanthropic pretence" (78) that mask the real purpose of the imperialist venture: to "tear treasure out of the bowels of the land . . . with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (87). The initial perception of Africa provides a marked contrast:

> The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.   (61)

Being "as natural and true as the surf along the coast," and being invested with "a wild vitality" and "an intense energy of movement," the Africans presented in this passage provide a positive alternative to the "whited sepulchre" of Brussels and the "sordid farce" of European activity. Some Conrad scholars interested in defending Conrad against charges of racism cite the above passage as evidence of a positive estimation of Africa and Africans (Robertson 107; Hawkins, "Racism" 168; Watts 198). Marlow's elevation of the non-European is problematic, however, for it is predicated on an association with nature (note the focus on "bodies"), an association that, as the text proceeds, takes its place as part of the racist constellation of evolutionary tropes. Marlow does not turn to African culture to find an alternative to European culture; instead, in keeping with the discourse of evolutionary anthropology, which prefers to acknowledge culture as a

single state of existence at the apex of the evolutionary contin-
uum, Marlow turns to Africa-as-nature. When the European
version of culture is compromised, the only alternative appears
to be the non-European version of nature. Curiously, Marlow
maintains the evolutionist categories of (European) culture and
(non-European) nature, but reverses the valuation of these cate-
gories. At any rate, the crucial point is that Marlow's version of
the (seemingly positive and desirable but ultimately primitive)
African alternative directly supports the critique of Europe.
There is no reason to believe that Conrad does not share this
image of Africa; indeed, if one were to argue, as Hay does, that
"Marlow, not Conrad, is the offender," then surely the critique of
Europe would be left in an uncertain position.
    The second level on which the critique of Europe draws on
evolutionary discourse, and thus the second level on which
Conrad's interrogative project is dependent on Marlow's racist
anthropology, involves the shadowy character of Kurtz. Kurtz is a
paragon of culture—a "prodigy" (79); an "emissary of pity, and
science, and progress" (79); a "universal genius" (83)—who
ends up leading a riot of violence and death in the wilderness of
Africa. By introducing a narrative of regression into Marlow's
evolutionary framework—a narrative that defines a movement
away from culture and back to nature—the story of Kurtz un-
leashes a dark and demoralizing vision of the frailty of European
culture that becomes a centre-piece of Conrad's interrogative
project.[11] It must be recognized, however, that the narrative
of regression is no less racially-inscribed than the evolutionary
structure that it supplements. Kurtz's fall from culture is imaged
as a fall to Africa, or to Africa-as-nature. Thus, in order for the
story of Kurtz to function as a meaningful symbol of the darkness
at the heart of European civilization, an authorial sanction of
Marlow's racially-charged construction is essential. The Africa
where Kurtz's "unlawful soul" ranges "beyond the bounds of
permitted aspirations" and where he indulges his "brutal
instincts" and "monstrous passions" (144) is the Africa
Marlow presents as the sign of "prehistoric" savagery. Kurtz even
"crawl[s] as much as the veriest savage of them all" (132), and he
takes "a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean

literally" (116). African life, in other words, registers the depths of depravity to which the European "prodigy" regresses. For Conrad, as much as for Marlow, Africa is the ur-text (the "truth stripped of its cloak of time") upon which the story of Europe's precarious evolutionary eminence is written.

The nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented level of contact between Europe and other parts of the world as various powers, Britain foremost among them, consolidated vast empires. Such contact generated not only economic activity, but information as well, and thus a steady flow of what could be referred to as ethnographic raw materials flooded into Europe. One could argue that Victorian culture *en masse* was confronted with the reality of human differences and that anthropologists were at the front line of this confrontation. By invoking the newly expanded concept of time, evolutionary anthropology provided mid-to-late nineteenth-century Europe with an intelligible and appealing way of giving diverse perceptions of otherness a semblance of order. Conrad gained from the discourse of evolutionary anthropology an image of Africa as the site of the "prehistoric," and paradoxically, this racist image became part of his sophisticated interrogative project.[12] The real point here, however, is not to criticize Conrad for being unable to transcend the entire array of his culture's beliefs (after all, no interrogative stance can be all-encompassing), but rather to recognize and to investigate the ideological complexity of "Heart of Darkness." It seems that some ideological configurations are visible only to future generations, and if this is the case, then future generations need to be constantly interrogating and re-interrogating the cultural artifacts that constitute their "inherited experience."

NOTES

1 Shaffer argues that Conrad's African fiction "appropriates and tests Spencer's influential 'typology of civilization',"—a typology that posits a distinction between a primitive, "militant" society and an evolved, "industrial" society (46-47). In "Heart of Darkness," Shaffer maintains, Conrad both employs the militant-industrial distinction to characterize the differences between Europe and Africa, and collapses this distinction: "the novella represents not the mutual exclusivity of the militant and industrial tendencies but their mutual reinforcement in what might be called a 'military-industrial complex'" (52). Evidently Europe's progress toward an industrial mode is compromised by militant actions. What Shaffer

does not consider in any detail, however, is the demeaning position that Africa is assigned in Conrad's drama. Africa is presented as the sign of the primitive and is given no alternate identity. While Conrad arguably tests Spencer's version of Europe, Conrad does not significantly depart from Spencer's version of the world outside of Europe.

2 Chinua Achebe provides the first statement here, arguing that the demeaning "image of Africa" that emerges in the novella reveals Conrad as a "purveyor of comforting myths" and "a bloody racist" (784, 788). While these charges have been vehemently rejected by Sanford Pinsker, P. J. M. Robertson, C. P. Sarvan, Hunt Hawkins ("Racism"), Ian Watt ("Critics"), and Cedric Watts, it is important to note that these critics largely sidestep the whole question of the role of Africa within the novella by satisfying themselves that Conrad's concern is with Europe. Sarvan argues, for instance, that "The reference in 'Heart of Darkness' is not to a place (Africa), but to the condition of European man; not to a black people, but to colonialism" (8).

Similarly, Robertson maintains that Conrad "has deep truths to deliver about civilization" (109), and Watts states that "Conrad's tale asks whether civilization may be merely a hypocritical sophistication of savagery" (203). All of these responses keep the focus on Conrad's critique of Europe, imperialism, and "civilization." Meanwhile, issues regarding Conrad's treatment of non-Europeans fade into the margins, which is exactly where Achebe finds them, in a state of total neglect. Other critics have proved more willing to work constructively with Achebe's insights. Patrick Brantlinger perceives "Heart of Darkness" as a problem text—an ideologically divided work where competing discourses uneasily coexist (255-74). He states that "'Heart of Darkness' offers a powerful critique of at least some manifestations of imperialism and racism as it simultaneously presents that critique in ways that can be characterized only as imperialist and racist" (257). Edward Said (23-30; 165-66) and Sandya Shetty also find discontinuities in Conrad's text, as do Bette London and Marianna Torgovnick (141-58), who extend the discussion to include the problematics of race and gender. Said's commentary is of particular interest, for in addition to arguing that Conrad's critical stance is limited by Eurocentric assumptions, Said provides a useful means of understanding the enormous value of Achebe's contribution to Conrad studies. In a discussion of the process of "resistance," Said speaks of how "writers and scholars from the formerly colonized world have imposed their diverse histories on, have mapped their local geographies in, the great canonical texts of the European center. And from these overlapping yet discrepant interactions the new readings and knowledge are beginning to appear " (53). Said's emphasis is on expanding and thereby enriching the study of literature, and this is to be achieved not by closing ranks around canonical texts but by exploring the insights generated by "new readings and knowledge"—insights such as those provided by Achebe.

Among Conrad scholars, however, there appears to be resistance to broadened avenues of inquiry. A 1992 special issue of *Conradiana*, formed around the rubric of "Teach the Conflicts" in "Heart of Darkness," is particularly striking in this regard. Somewhat amazingly, given its organizing principle, this issue does not contain an article by a critic interested in the question of race, and this omission seems even more glaring given that two of the papers (by Eloise Knapp Hay and Brian Shaffer) explicitly attack Achebe's position. Furthermore, Hunt Hawkins, in the concluding remarks of his contribution, goes so far as to state that "unhappily the matter [of Conrad's racism] is still open to debate" (213). What emerges from this special issue, then, is not only a rejection of the problems posed by racial content in Conrad's novella, but also a desire for a termination of dialogue. Such a desire is surely the exact opposite of both Said's call for "new readings and knowledge" and the whole ethos of teaching the conflicts.

3 Conrad does not clearly identify the Congo in the text, but this reticence is not evident in his "Author's Note," where he states that "Heart of Darkness" is part of

"the spoil I brought out from the centre of Africa" (xxviii). At any rate, his readers, brought up on decades of writing about what was popularly referred to as the "dark continent," would have had little difficulty in recognizing the main setting of the story. See Brantlinger for an extensive discussion of the "myth of the dark continent" in nineteenth-century England (173-97).

4 Two dominant approaches to racial differences circulated in Victorian scientific circles at mid-century: monogenism and polygenism. These positions affirmed the superiority of Europeans over all other human groups but differed regarding the mechanisms that governed this hierarchy. The monogenists, with strong ties to orthodox religion, argued for the unity of the human species. They maintained that racial differences resulted from unequal access to divine revelation and also from the influences of environmental change as different groups migrated from the site of the original creation. The polygenists, whose ties were largely to physical anatomy, argued for the essential diversity of the human species. Polygenists maintained a rigid form of biological determinism and they held that present racial differences had remained constant since the time of the separate creation of the various human groups. For further discussions of these two schools of thought see Stepan (1-46), Stocking (47-69, 240-57), and Burrow (118-36).

5 Darwin concludes *On the Origin of Species* with an image of "an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about" (489), an image that captures the enormous diversity of the natural world that is at the core of the theory of evolution by natural selection. George Levine, in his insightful discussion of Darwin and nineteenth-century narrative, argues that in the Darwinian flux of life there is a "resistance to closure" such that "species . . . have no real existence" and are "mere conventions of thought" (97-98). Logically, such a rescinding of categories would mean rescinding all racial divisions, for if natural selection can blur the boundaries between species it should certainly blur the boundaries within species. As Levine points out, "intrinsic racial superiority [is] a concept contrary to the essential thrust of Darwin's theory" (101). Nevertheless, the radical epistemological implications of *On the Origin of Species* do not make their way into the racial paradigm enunciated in Darwin's major anthropological work, *The Descent Of Man*. Darwin's concluding description of the Fuegians ("such were our ancestors") is just one example from the later text that reveals a tendency to differentiate Europe and its others along evolutionary lines. Indeed, while "The western nations of Europe, who now so immeasurably surpass their former savage progenitors . . . stand at the summit of civilisation," many groups of non-Europeans can be found "standing almost at the bottom of the scale" (*Descent* 1: 178; 2: 363). The discrepancy between the radical implications of Darwin's theory of natural selection and his anthropological practice reveals an example of what Levine maintains are "deep contradictions within the Darwinian project" (7). This discrepancy also suggests why Nancy Stepan, in her study of racism in British scientific thought, argues that the Darwinian revolution was "incomplete" (47-82).

6 Stocking provides a detailed discussion of the fate of evolutionary anthropology in the twentieth century (284-329).

7 Marlow's famous assertion that the "cannibals" have "restraint" (104-05) arguably reveals the presence of a code of conduct and thus the presence of culture. Yet this attribution, which Watts (201), Pinsker (199-204), and Hawkins ("Racism" 168) cite as evidence that "Heart of Darkness" is not a racist text, is isolated and does not obviously offset the inability to "weigh the consequences," the lack of a "clear idea of time," or the lack of other indicators of culture. Furthermore, Marlow's definition of "restraint" is very vague. He speaks only of one's "true stuff" and "inborn strength" (97)—statements implying that the capacity in question

operates on an instinctive rather than on a rational level. The very presentation of Africans as "cannibals," particularly as "cannibals" who need to restrain themselves from eating Europeans, creates more problems than any vague suggestion of "restraint" can solve.

8 In his discussion of the major tropes of European colonialist writing, Spurr points out that "the body is that which is most proper to the primitive, the sign by which the primitive is represented" (22).

9 In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), the following description of James Wait rivals anything that Marlow has to say in "Heart of Darkness":

> He held his head up in the glare of the lamp—a head vigorously modelled into deep shadows and shining lights—a head powerful and misshapen with a tormented and flattened face—a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger's soul. (18)

Also of note are *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and *The Rescue* (1920). In the former work, the Arab woman, Aïssa, is depicted as being "a primitive woman" (75), a "savage, violent, and ignorant creature" (250), and an "animal that knows only suffering" (334). As for the latter text, which is surely one of Conrad's most conventional and reliable narratives, Mrs. Travers, the European heroine, is presented as "the only being of her kind" (236) among the Malays of the novel. The exclusive status granted here even takes on an explicit evolutionary dimension when Mrs. Travers is described beside the Malay princess, Immada:

> Fair-haired and white she asserted herself before the girl of olive face and raven locks with the maturity of perfection, with the superiority of the flower over the leaf, of the phrase that contains a thought over the cry that can only express an emotion. Immense spaces and countless centuries stretched between them.
>
> (121)

In addition to the racially-charged assertion of the "superiority" of European "thought" over non-European "emotion," the suggestion that "countless centuries" separate Mrs. Travers from Immada correlates ethnic differences with the passage of time, a correlation that is, of course, the fundamental racial strategy of evolutionary anthropology.

10 Brussels, like the Congo, is unnamed in the text, but readers recognizing the latter would have little difficulty recognizing the former: the Congo was a Belgian colony. Furthermore, Belgian excesses in the Congo were gaining notoriety in the 1890s and in the first decade of the twentieth century (Hawkins, "Congo"; Brantlinger 257-64).

11 The idea of regression does not refute the idea of evolution. Culture has to evolve before it can regress. Furthermore, "Heart of Darkness" does not present a wholesale rejection of European culture. Marlow escapes from Kurtz's darkness and returns to Europe, and while the darkness follows Marlow and haunts him in Europe, he is also able to convert this darkness into an intelligible narrative. Even if this narrative is riddled with qualifications, ambiguities, and uncertainties, Marlow's artistic action is perhaps the greatest affirmation of culture in the text. As Clifford points out, "Undoubtedly in both form and content the tale grapples with nihilism. Nonetheless, it does dramatize the successful construction of a fiction, a contingent, undermined, but finally potent story, a meaningful economy of truths and lies" (100). What the narrative of regression defines is not the negation of culture, or of evolution, but rather a dark and powerful statement about the fragility of culture.

12 Conrad is not very forthcoming about his intellectual sources in either his fictional or his non-fictional writings, and thus it is very difficult to assess whether his evolutionary approach to non-Europeans was a product only of intellectual currents circulating in his culture, or whether he was also directly familiar with

the works of the evolutionary anthropologists. It is interesting to note, however, that Conrad's friend Richard Curle identifies Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* (1869) as Conrad's "favourite bedside book" (431).

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