Joseph Conrad's Racial Idea

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And you also must remember that I don't start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced.
– Conrad to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 8 February 1899, on Heart of Darkness[1]

Race and the Problem of Meaning in *Heart of Darkness*

Following its publication in book form in 1902 as the second tale in *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* made a considerable impact on the literary world. Conrad biographer John Batchelor has claimed that for the last decade of his life, Conrad's reputation was that of "the greatest living English novelist," and that beginning with the criticism of F. R. Leavis and M. C. Bradbrook in the 1940s, *Heart of Darkness* took its place as a milestone of literary modernism[2] (Leavis's famous criticism of the novel for its "adjectival insistence" notwithstanding).[3] And while the cultural and literary value of the novel has been sharply and consistently called into question for the past thirty years, this process of questioning has not affected the text's "hyper-canonized" status.[4] The contentious nature of academic debates

regarding *Heart of Darkness* has meant, in fact, that it has remained at the centre of on-going disputes within the academy regarding questions of race, gender, and colonialism, and the redeemability or lack thereof of literary modernism in terms of contemporary thinking about these matters. Despite the fact that those in the academy often contend that the problems of identity, modernity, and global politics as they existed over one hundred years ago have been surmounted or replaced by different sets of problems and more enlightened discourses of identity, the continuing centrality of *Heart of Darkness* to the process of evaluative and ethical questioning within literary studies suggests that relegating modernity and modernism to the pre-postmodern era is an uneasy and on-going process, at best.

While *Heart of Darkness* remains very much at the centre of debates about race, gender, and modernism, the novel's potential of radical critique has been lost in the way that these debates have been framed. Chinua Achebe's now famous criticism of the novel, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1975), has most frequently served as the focal point of disputes over the meaning of race (and often, by extension, gender[5]) within the novel. In addition to the voluminous and ongoing scholarly response that Achebe's essay has inspired, such events as its canonisation among critical assessments of the novel through inclusion in the Norton critical edition of *Heart of Darkness* (alongside two pieces that seek to directly refute its charge of racism) and the fact that it has, during the past decade, inspired both a collection of essays about the novel (*Conrad in Africa: New Essays on "Heart of Darkness"*) and a book-length response (Peter Firchow's *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"*) unequivocally confirm its continuing centrality to such debates.[6] Also relevant is the fact that some sort of criticism of Achebe has become commonplace among Conrad critics raising questions of race and gender even when his argument is not directly addressed. Achebe's essay has, it would seem, become such an important touchstone in the matter of race and *Heart of Darkness* that it requires some sort of gesture from any critic who wishes to join the discussion.

For this reason, the Achebe controversy provides an interesting case study in contemporary criticism. One might note, on one hand, the nearly universal condemnation of Achebe's essay, even among critics who seek to open new lines of questioning regarding racial and gender identity in *Heart of Darkness*. And one might inquire, on the other hand, why an essay that has been so universally—and repeatedly—condemned should remain so central to the critical debate. Padmini Mongia has stated this problem

succinctly: why, she asks, given the "extremely ill thought-out bases of Achebe's argument," does his essay continue to exercise such an influence on discussions of race and imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*?[7] Mongia concludes that the critical canonisation of the Achebe essay alongside the novel effectively "sets the terms and limits discussions of race and empire" because "Achebe's famous charge can be read as 'extreme.'" As a result, "it becomes possible to dismiss his argument rather than take it seriously," and, by extension, it is possible to dismiss questions of race in Conrad's writing as trivial or inessential.[8]

While Mongia's insight significantly explains the role that "An Image of Africa" has played in limiting discussions of race and empire, I believe that Mongia accedes to the prevailing—and fundamentally flawed— understanding of the essay. To re-phrase the problem posed by the Achebe controversy: why should a charge of racism that has been so repeatedly and elaborately "refuted" remain at the centre of the inquiry into one of the most widely-taught novels in the American academy? If we are to attain a fuller comprehension of this strange phenomenon, we must take note of a couple of significant omissions within the prevalent interpretation of "An Image of Africa." In the essay, Achebe claims, among other things, that *Heart of Darkness* is a novel that "celebrates" the "dehumanization of Africa and Africans" and therefore cannot "be called a great work of art."[9] Based on this statement, his critique has been more or less unanimously taken as a humanist defense of the great literary tradition, from which a work reasonably termed "racist" must be excluded. What has been almost entirely ignored, however, is that Achebe's definition of "racism" within this article is explicitly psychoanalytic, and therefore opposed in many ways to the humanist definition that is assumed to apply here. Achebe makes this abundantly clear throughout the article, in which he not only calls for an analysis of race in the novel in light of the insights of "the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria,"[10] but plainly states that "the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind" lies in the following quote from the novel: "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours.… Ugly."[11] What Achebe labors to make explicit, and what his critics have assiduously ignored, is that he is describing racism in terms of a violent ambivalence based on the troubling recognition of the self in the other. Racism is specifically defined in terms of a disconcerting recognition of similarity at the site of the African body, a site to which whites look for a foundational difference that will affirm their own identities as white, modern, and civilised. Because, within this formulation, racism is irreducible to a matter of intention or personal guilt in a conventional sense, the matter of

Conrad's personal guilt or lack thereof is, in itself, trivialised. Of much more serious import is the suspicion that "the kind of racism displayed by Conrad" is "absolutely normal" within "the English liberal tradition."[12] Achebe fears that because racism against Africans is such a fundamental, and even, he hints, foundational feature of modern liberal humanist thought, white, Western literary critics in particular are incapable of recognising the racism in *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe finds *Heart of Darkness* significant not so much because it tells us something about the author, and not because he is concerned with purifying the literary canon, but because the response it provokes in literary critics tells us something important about an ideological formation that, he suspects, can function only on the condition of the persistent degradation of Africans.

Based on his recognition of these arguments, Bart Moore-Gilbert gives what I take to be both a more useful and a more accurate assessment of "An Image of Africa." Moore-Gilbert asserts that in "identifying an 'ambivalence' in Marlow's troubled part recognition, part disavowal of the 'transitional' helmsman, Achebe … anticipates Bhabha's conception of the destabilizing effects of mimicry on the colonizer's psyche."[13] Given the centrality of an essentially psychoanalytic definition of racism to Achebe's critique, I think that it is reasonable to claim that it is the nature of the response to his essay, rather than the essay itself, which has effectively limited the debate regarding the meaning of race in *Heart of Darkness*. That is to say, within the "racism" debate, there is a foreclosure of many critical possibilities, as Mongia has argued. To Mongia's observation, I would add that this foreclosure is based on a particularly restrictive comprehension of race and racism that is clearly foreign to Achebe's essay. Achebe's critics tend to reduce the discussion of race to charges of racism, understood strictly as a matter of conscious intention. Framed in this fashion, the inquiry into the meaning of race is essentially limited to an either / or situation: either the author (or narrator) is irredeemably racist or he is not. Race is not something that can open a new line of questioning (as Achebe suggests it should); it is merely a yes or no question to be settled before moving on to some more productive topic. There is, moreover, an explicit irony in reducing race to a matter of conscious intention in the case of *Heart of Darkness*. Within this novel the belief that simply having good intentions—as Marlow's aunt does, or as Kurtz does when he enters the Congo—sufficiently equips one to address either the realities of imperial domination or difficult truths about the nature of the self is elaborately demonstrated to be pitifully and dangerously naïve, wholly inadequate to either task.

Equally restrictive to any substantive inquiry into the meaning of race

in *Heart of Darkness* is the presupposition that race has the status of an ontological certainty pre-existing the text that may or may not be reflected with mimetic accuracy within the narrative, the assumption being that if a certain standard of accuracy in mimetic representation is met, the charge of racism is effectively demonstrated to be groundless.[14] We must become aware, when perusing the commentary on the question of Conrad and racism, of the seemingly unconscious but nevertheless enormous contradiction between using this standard of mimesis to evaluate charges of racism, and the widespread recognition that the text of *Heart of Darkness* elaborately problematises any standard of truth based on mimetic representation. We are faced, in this case, with the problem that the alleged racism of the novel is measured by a standard of truth that is held to be impossible within the novel itself.

These presuppositions about race, then, posit it as a biological and cultural reality, as a form of human difference pre-existing any linguistic formulation and about which one can have a just or an unjust attitude based on one's hardy honesty and good nature in accepting such differences and the empirical accuracy of one's observations. While it would be simple enough to demonstrate that such beliefs about race are archaic from the standpoint of the very scientific discourses from which they have drawn their conscious rationale (both in Conrad's time and in our own),[15] the problem at hand is quite a different one. Our problem is, rather, that such an understanding of race conceives of it as quite a different sort of thing than a formal feature of language, ideology, or narrative. Moreover, this faulty presupposition significantly explains how a novel that has consistently sustained complex analyses of the problems of narrative meaning simultaneously sustains a discussion that adopts a naïve standard of the mimetic reproduction of nature's truths when discussion turns to the topic of race. Such an assumption forecloses the discussion against the possibility that race, within *Heart of Darkness*, names a formal problem of meaning with which the text wrestles. This presupposition eliminates the possibility that the belief in race is exposed as an effect of a "failure to discover transcendental sanctions for ethical values."[16] Such, however, is its precise meaning in *Heart of Darkness*.

In this essay, I will argue that within *Heart of Darkness* race cannot be reduced to a superficial matter of content that can be antiseptically quarantined from the contemplation of the text's pristine narrative aporias; I will argue that what Bette London terms the "political" and "metaphysical" texts of *Heart of Darkness* cannot be meaningfully separated.[17] Instead of creating such a partition, according to which race would almost certainly be relegated to the "political" end of the spectrum and thus isolated from

"metaphysical" problems regarding the formal aspects of meaning, we should recognise that race effectively centres the "metaphysical" inquiry into the crisis of meaning within the story. Through his formulation of "the idea," Marlow forcefully expresses his inability to discover a metaphysical absolute on which to ground his self-knowledge. "The idea," in turn, is essentially figured in terms of the black bodies and faces that Marlow encounters on his journey along the Congo River. Conrad therefore creates (or pulls from a broader cultural context and critiques) a correspondence between the empty master signifier of "the idea" and signifiers of racial difference. As has often been noted, *Heart of Darkness* provides a powerful critique of the possibility of conveying meaning in storytelling, or of communicating, in Marlow's terms, the "'truth'" or "'meaning'" of "'one's existence'" to another person: "'It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone.…'"[18] Yet the critical recognition of the problem of representation within narrative, or the problem of expressing the "truth" of one's experience through storytelling, has been distorted by the separation of "metaphysical" from "political" analyses. The practice of creating such a separation and relegating questions of race to the "political" side has prevented us from recognising that Conrad's radical critique of beliefs about race and racial identity serves as both the vehicle and the expression for this problem of meaning within *Heart of Darkness*.

"The Idea"

"Metaphysical" discussions of the novel very often take what Mark Wollaeger has referred to as "Conrad's hunger for absolute values" as the central determinant of the problematic of meaning within *Heart of Darkness*.[19] While Wollaeger frames this claim in terms of a larger argument about Conrad's "negative theology,"[20] Peter Brooks focuses on how the absence of any absolute guarantor of meaning results in a "reflection on the formal limits of narrative, but within a frame of discourse that appears to subvert finalities of form."[21] Tony Jackson, utilising a Lacanian framework, argues that the need for an absolute is treated quite self-consciously in the novel as an "imaginary" construct, and therefore becomes a problem for Marlow because of "its immediate impossibility but its ultimate necessity."[22] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan examines "the absence of a transcendental, sovereign Word," which emerges as a troublesome absence in the novel due to "the tension between the strong religious overtones in Marlow's narration and the explicit denial of the metaphysical which his story carries."[23] J. Hillis Miller explains this problem of meaning most lucidly, however, when he argues that the opening of the story

contains a system of interlocking similes that

> invite the reader to see whatever either of the narrators sees and names on the first level of narration as a veil or screen hiding something invisible or not yet visible behind it, though when each veil is lifted it uncovers only another veil behind it, according to a paradox essential to the genre of the apocalypse.[24]

Each of these critical assessments identifies a "paradox," according to which some sort of absolute guarantor of meaning is perceived as both vitally necessary for the formulation of the "truth" of "one's existence" and yet ultimately beyond realisation. None of these critics, however, observe that the dominant figure for this failure to discover an absolute is the racial body. The narrative movement of *Heart of Darkness* is driven by Marlow's fascinated scrutiny of black faces and bodies, as though these bodies withheld some compelling secret, some important revelatory truth. And while the bodies of Africans by no means provide the only trope for this crisis of meaning within Marlow's story, they are the dominant figure; to paraphrase Miller, the black body works in conjunction with a series of interlocking figures;[25] but, because it is the only figure consistently (even obsessively) evoked, it eventually takes up the burden of Marlow's often painful awareness of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of discovering any final cause. Moreover, this figure substantially determines not only the problem of meaning, but also the meaning (or lack thereof) of race in the novel. Marlow experiences black bodies and faces as "grotesque masks" that simultaneously promise a revelation of "the truth of things" and attest to the impossibility of the arrival of any such truth (*HD* 11). I will therefore understand Marlow's attitude towards black Africans—frequently characterised by a violent and irresolvable ambivalence—in terms of this perpetually deferred promise of an absolute ground for knowledge. Blacks embody this promise, a promise which Marlow experiences as both necessary for the construction of his tale, and impossible, in that it can never be realised.

To begin to unpack the complexity of the role played by racial bodies in *Heart of Darkness*, we must look at Marlow's explanation of "the idea," with which he frames the story of his journey into the African wilderness (*HD* 4).[26] "The idea" is initially articulated through the description and uncompromising rejection of the two predominant understandings of the British imperial project held by Conrad's contemporaries. As the story begins, the frame narrator provides what we might take to be Conrad's representation of the standard patriotic account of British imperialism. It seems probable that this account, distinguished by the frame narrator's

increasingly lyrical expression of "reverence and affection" for empire's great conquests, deliberately parodies the beliefs likely to be held by *Blackwood's* readers (*HD* 2).[27] Thrown into romantic reverie by the thought of being on the lower reaches of the Thames, the narrator eulogises "all the men of whom the nation is proud," who have "all gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (*HD* 2). The mood of patriotic sentimentality established by this internal monologue, characterised by an uncritical belief in the complementarity of the two great rationales for empire—carrying the "sacred fire" of religious or scientific knowledge and the "sword" of military conquest to the less advanced regions of the earth— is dramatically interrupted by Marlow's first words: "'And this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth'" (*HD* 3). In the course of the next page, Marlow proceeds to thoroughly subvert the patriotic naivety of the frame narrator's view with an alternate account of empire that we might take to be its ideological counterpart, in which imperial conquest is characterised as "robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale" (*HD* 4). Marlow concludes this assessment of empire with his famous observation that the "conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (*HD* 4). With this reference to fetishised physical features denoting "racial" difference (complexion and shape of nose), Marlow shifts the terrain of his monologue from the Roman conquest of England to the European conquest of Africa. This invocation of race signals that the figure of "sacrifice," through which he articulates "the idea" in the next two sentences, has as its most immediate referent his frequent allusions to African religious ritual within the story.

This second assessment of empire, while frequently cited by critics seeking to redeem Conrad from charges of racism, is also qualified, however, when Marlow ends his disquisition on empire with a formulation of "the idea," ostensibly the redemptive factor through which one might rationalise the violence and exploitation of imperial conquest. Although imperialism is "not a pretty thing.… What redeems it is the idea only" (*HD* 4). There is, Marlow claims, "[a]n idea at the back of it," an idea that he distinguishes from the patriotic pablum of the frame narrator by explaining that he refers "not [to] a sentimental pretence but an idea" (*HD* 4). When Marlow has come to the point of naming the thing that might provide a justification for something so serious as ideologically sanctioned robbery and murder on a grand scale, however, he announces simply that the idea "is something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice

to.…" (*HD* 4) This metaphor of sacrifice distinctly suggests selfless nobility and Christian service along the lines of the "white man's burden"—exactly the "sentimental pretence" behind the frame narrator's opening internal monologue—at the same moment that it evokes not just the "primitive" practice of sacrifice to a religious idol that is repeatedly and explicitly attributed to black Africans throughout the story, but the "unspeakable rites," unmistakably alluding to human sacrifice and cannibalism, the evidence of which Marlow has observed in Kurtz's camp (*HD* 45). Within Marlow's figuration of "the idea," ideological binaries, Christian service and cannibalistic orgies collapse into each other. In the very process of being named, the most high-minded imperial sentiments reveal a secret equivalence to their ideological opposite, the practice of ritual sacrifice, and, ultimately, cannibalism.[28]

Marlow, instead of naming the final guarantor of imperialism's particular constellation of meanings, gives us a figure that not only fails to serve such a purpose, but that testifies to the ultimate impossibility of doing so. Meaning folds in upon itself at the moment of revelation, for the signifiers of difference on which imperial ideology is built collapse into one another at the point of being figured: finding a redemptive purpose behind the monstrous exploitation documented in the story requires one to dedicate oneself absolutely to "the idea," yet doing so is equivalent to participating in the primitive religious practice of human sacrifice. The rationale for the eradication of sacrifice can be most truthfully described, it turns out, in terms of the rationale for practicing sacrifice; or, the justification for eradicating the practice of sacrifice is equivalent to the justification for participating in the practice of sacrifice. Punctuation works to emphasise this point, for the ellipses that end Marlow's explanation of "the idea" materialise an absence; they alert us to the inadequacy of this pronouncement to its stated purpose of naming a justification for colonial violence and exploitation. Such ellipses, in fact, serve as hallmarks, throughout the text, of the problem of naming an absolute on which to ground one's beliefs. They mark a reiterative trailing off, indicating Marlow's ultimate inability to perform the speech-act that he feels is required to lend finality to the meaning of his story. They signal a deferral of the fixing or naming of the thing that must be present to convey "truth," but that is finally beyond any determinate enunciation. In this passage, the ellipses draw our attention to the fact that Marlow's statement is incomplete, insufficient to its stated purpose of naming an absolute on which to ground empire's (and his own) system of meanings.

Thus, "the idea," which is supposed to allow one to differentiate between the primitive and the civilised—and, in doing so, provide a

justification for the conversion or eradication of the former by the latter—creates a disruptive equivalence between the two at the very moment that it defines them as different. "The idea" therefore annuls the redemptive rationale of imperialism at the exact moment it is posited. In this way, Marlow's formulation of "the idea" announces the price of knowledge in *Heart of Darkness*: according to the logic of "the idea," which is explicitly positioned as imperialism's master signifier, one must ultimately recognise that the binary opposition between civilisation and its others—or, the differentiation required by the demand for a legitimising purpose—can only be produced at the cost of self-nullification at the moment of its enunciation. In the opening pages of the story, "the idea" therefore subverts both the patriotic view of colonialism and its ideological counterpart, the anti-imperial view, because it announces the ultimate equivalence, at the moment of differentiation, of the identity categories, civilised / primitive, that both views so blithely assume. "The idea" declares that the problem of imperialism, on a more fundamental level than either view acknowledges, is a problem of the production of meaning.[29] This means that imperialism, at its base, is irreducible to the fetishistic universalism of the pro-imperialist view—the "sentimental pretence" that allows a knowledge of this problem of meaning to be evaded. It is equally irreducible to the more sympathetic liberal relativism initially expressed by Marlow, according to which some similarity might be recognised between civilised humankind and its others, but ultimately only to affirm a reassuring difference (colonised Africans, after all, remain comfortingly "primitive" within this latter view, with all that this designation implies.) "The idea," in other words, exposes the choice between these two predominant positions as a false choice between false alternatives, to the extent that this choice disguises the common reliance of both positions on an ideologically determined binary masquerading as one of nature's truths.

It is here, in the disavowed founding moment of imperialist ideology, that we might locate the problem of race in Conrad's text. In this space that exceeds the artificial but ideologically sanctioned binary on which both views of imperialism presented in the opening pages are dependent, in this primal moment of differentiation that is "necessary" for the production of meaning but simultaneously "impossible" in that it can be founded only on the condition of irreducible paradox, we are able to situate the meaning, or lack thereof, of race. "The idea" provides, I would assert, one of the clearest cases in literature of naming the aporetic ground of subjectivity, a space in which one collapses into one's other at the very moment of differentiating oneself from the other; and, significantly, "the idea" is developed throughout the story primarily in reference to what was perhaps

the predominant ideological fetish of Conrad's time as well as our own: race.

Fetishism and the Black Body

Given the formal characteristics of belief that are highlighted in Marlow's expostulation of "the idea," I believe it is appropriate to treat "the idea" as a critique of imperialism as an ideology, not just in a general sense of the term, but in a more specifically Althusserian sense. Althusser writes, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," that "[i]deology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."[30] Over the next several pages, as Althusser progressively unpacks the meaning of the term "real conditions of existence," it becomes clear that this term does not refer to any simple empirical reality that the subject might mimetically represent to herself more or less accurately, for "the representation given to individuals of their … relations" to society is "necessarily an imaginary relation."[31] "Real conditions of existence" instead refer to the paradox that one necessarily encounters when attempting to theorise the origins of the subject according to the scenario of interpellation. If the formation of the subject precedes the address of state authority, in what sense can she be said to be created as a subject through recognising herself in this address? And if the subject's existence does not precede this address, how can she recognise herself in the address at all? Judith Butler has explained this problem succinctly:

> [I]nterpellation of the subject through the inaugurative address of state authority presupposes not only that the inculcation of conscience already has taken place, but that conscience, understood as the psychic operation of a regulatory norm, constitutes a specifically psychic and social working of power on which interpellation depends but for which it can give no account.[32]

Althusser's assertion that the subject's relation to the "real conditions of its existence" is "necessarily an imaginary relation" is therefore not simply an expression of political cynicism, but an analytic observation that the aporia marking the emergence of the subject (designated as "conscience" within Butler's account) is ultimately inaccessible to any narrative mimesis, for it cannot be located within a linear temporal continuum except as an enabling disruption of linear time. As a result, there is no image that can be fixed to this site of symbolic birth, measurable in terms of its empirical accuracy, which can determine the truth of the subject. Instead, Althusser's metaphor of "hailing" self-deconstructs, revealing only an irreducible paradox at the

site of the founding of the subject. "Ideology," within this formulation, ultimately names the process through which the subject relates to this irreducible mimetic failure at the site of her own symbolic emergence; it indicates, alternately, the relationship of the subject to her own aporetic subjective origins.

While it is neither possible nor desirable to reduce "the idea" to a post-World War II conceptualisation of ideology—one need only note the emphasis on temporality and the very different metaphorical configuration within Althusser's formulation to recognise significant differences from "the idea"—it is nonetheless important to take note of the ways that Conrad anticipates Althusser's conceptualisation of ideology. For Conrad, "the idea," much like Althusser's "ideology," names the relationship of the subject to the aporia marking his symbolic emergence. Moreover, this relationship is ultimately shown to be "imaginary," in Althusser's sense of the word. That is to say, if the subject is to maintain a belief in her own symbolic consistency, some image or idea must conceal from her a knowledge of her own aporetic origins. But because Conrad, like Althusser, allows only a self-deconstructing image to be attached to "the idea," we, like Marlow, become acutely aware that there is nothing other than a sort of self-nullification to be discovered at this point of symbolic origin. To believe anything else is to be captured in an imaginary relationship to oneself; a problem that is, moreover, ultimately inescapable from the standpoint of either author.

This similarity of "the idea" to Althusser's concept of ideology is relevant not only in itself, but because it allows a much more lucid recognition of the role that race plays in *Heart of Darkness*: a belief in race allows one to sustain this imaginary relation. If "the idea" names the site of Marlow's paradoxical constitution as a subject of imperial ideology, the black body invariably mediates Marlow's relationship to this subjective origin. For Marlow, the black body persistently forces an awareness of the metaphysical emptiness of "the idea," and to the extent that Marlow dwells on this troubling absence of an absolute whenever he is confronted with black bodies, race is exposed as a fetish of imperial subjectivity.

While Conrad does not, it should be noted, utilise the specific term "fetish" in *Heart of Darkness* as he does elsewhere, this novel nevertheless contains a deliberate and sustained exposition of the logic of race as a fetishistic logic.[33] I would argue that, to the degree that Conrad exposes race as the site of the persistent collapse of meaning paradigmatic of "the idea," employing the term "fetish" to describe the role of race is consistent with Conrad's own application of the term in other works of fiction. In "An Outpost of Progress" (1896), for instance, the narrator comments satirically

that the trading company's "storehouse," filled with ivory, "was in every station called the fetish, perhaps because of the spirit of civilization it contained."[34] In this passage Conrad utilises the term "fetish" in much the same way as Marx did in coining the term "commodity fetishism"; it indicates "a kind of catachresis, a violent yoking of the most primitive, exotic, irrational, degraded objects of human value [fetishes] with the most modern, ordinary, rational, and civilized [commodities]."[35] Conrad employs the term, in other words, to indicate the collapse of the assumed distinction between objects valued according to "civilised" commercial practices and objects valued according to "primitive" practices of fetish-worship. The narrator compounds the irony of this failure of meaning at its most elemental level through such phrasing as "the spirit of civilization." We must therefore interpret this passage as signaling, at the site of the commodity, the same type of failure of the binary civilised / primitive that defines "the idea." We encounter a similar use of the term "fetish" in *The Secret Agent* (1907), in which "science" is named "the sacrosanct fetish of today," and "the fetish of the hour that all the bourgeoisie recognize."[36] In Conrad's use of "fetish" in these phrases, we can once again identify the same sort of catachresis, the same ironic collapse of the most advanced form of knowledge—science—into the most "exotic, irrational, and degraded," fetishism. "Fetish" names, in these instances, the object or idea that is supposed to distinguish civilisation from its others, but which actually marks the point at which such distinctions fail.

Despite the fact that Conrad does not deploy this particular term in *Heart of Darkness*, it is in that work that Conrad gives the concept of fetishism, and the centrality of specific fetishes to the maintenance of imperial identity, its most explicit and extended exegesis. Conrad provides a detailed narrative exposition of *race as fetishism* in chronicling Marlow's fear that the lack of some ontological assurance from the black body will result in the total collapse of one's access to truth; in elaborately and repeatedly portraying how this fear results in Marlow's attitude of terrified fascination towards blacks, even as they are engaged in seemingly banal activities; in creating, in short, a narrative driven forward by Marlow's persistent view of Africans as "the embodiment of an impossible irresolution" to "a crisis in … meaning."[37]

If "the idea," then, announces Conrad's awareness—and Marlow's at least partial awareness—of a problem of knowledge that imperialist ideology must evade in order to sustain itself, the black body is the site where Marlow persistently feels himself confronted with this problem of knowledge. We might clarify this point by observing that for someone holding the pro-imperialist view that Marlow scornfully rejects at the

opening of his narration, African bodies serve as a form of material evidence upholding the conviction of racial and cultural degradation that grounds a belief in the righteousness of imperial conquest. A stereotypical imperialist (such as the frame narrator) might easily slip through life without being troubled by any awareness of the aporetic grounds of his belief system (revealed in Marlow's figuration of "the idea") if only he looks often enough upon the body of a black African, which he will experience as providing a self-evident sensual truth that sustains his belief in the difference between civilisation and its others, between the racially advanced and the racially degenerate. Marlow, on the other hand, experiences these same objects—the fetishes of the imperialist—as confronting him with the vertiginous retreat of any final cause that might provide a metaphysical guarantee for his system of meanings. Such an absolute, if it were discovered, might supply him with a firm ground for a belief in his identity as a "civilized" man, comfortably and absolutely distinct from the "prehistoric" men that he observes (*HD* 32). Marlow, however, instead repeatedly discovers the same equivalence at this site of absolute difference—the black body—that characterises "the idea." The black body, the site of an imperial fetish masquerading as an absolute, presents itself to Marlow in terms of the promise of a metaphysical guarantee of knowledge that can never be realised.

Observing such "prehistoric" men on the banks of the river as he steams past, Marlow finds the realisation of similarity at the site for which he seeks confirmation of absolute difference so disturbing that he can articulate it only indirectly: "the men were—no, *they were not inhuman*. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—*this suspicion of their not being inhuman*" [italics added] (*HD* 32). This statement begins as an attempt to confirm their inhumanity from the evidence of the sights and sounds they produce. As Marlow watches and listens to "a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling" on the shore of the river, he begins "the men were—" but has to alter his pronouncement mid-statement to "no, they were not inhuman." The dash, much like the ellipses discussed earlier, materialises Marlow's ultimate inability to definitively name the thing to which he refers—in this case the black body—as the site of an absolute difference, an inhumanity that might affirm his own humanity. Literally "looking" to African bodies to confirm the racial and cultural binaries that he requires to sustain his identity, he instead experiences the same collapse of the self into the other that defines "the idea." Marlow's abortive attempt to confirm his identity status through the observation of African bodies results in Africans appearing as monstrous things, creatures that cannot be definitively

recognised as either "human" or "inhuman"; they are, instead, "not inhuman," which is not even a conviction, merely a "suspicion." In this scene, blacks alternately command Marlow's fascination and terrify him, as he vacillates between being "thrilled" by "the thought of their humanity" and horrified by this same "ugly" recognition (*HD* 32). Here, Marlow's experience of Africans is essentially defined through a confrontation with the impossible moment of (racial) difference, which ends with his violently ambivalent fascination with this locus of the inconsistency of his own being, the black body. Like the typical imperialist, Marlow seeks some deeply sensual self-grounding truth in African bodies. Unlike the typical imperialist, however, Marlow repeatedly discovers in these bodies only a vertiginous emptiness rather than an affirmation of his own self-consistent identity.

Blacks, by their very physical and auditory presence, promise to provide the ontological guarantee that Marlow seeks. The possibility of discovering the thing that would guarantee the solidity and consistency of his own being, however, vanishes at the moment of its appearance. That is to say, the very objects that provide fetishes for the imperialist—material manifestations of self-evident truth –confront Marlow instead with their own ontological emptiness, for they fail to provide the absolute grounds for self-knowledge that he seeks. Black bodies therefore generate in Marlow an anxiety, which hardens into a conviction by the end of the story, that no metaphysical guarantee of one's being exists, and that any such "great and saving illusion" can be maintained only through deception (for instance, his famous "lie" to Kurtz's "Intended" that closes the story) (*HD* 70). Marlow's sense, articulated in this passage and developed throughout the story, that if the black body fails to provide a sensual affirmation of the truth of his being, no metaphysical certainty is possible—his sense that the failure to discover such an absolute at the site of the black body will result in the radical failure of the entire system of imperial meaning—testifies to the role of the black body in enabling an entire constellation of meanings to exist. Without its assurance, it seems, the whole system comes crashing down, and one is faced with a world bereft of any certain knowledge.

In this passage, Conrad bluntly exposes the role that the black body is expected to play as a physical manifestation of an impossible absolute. Marlow expects such bodies to affirm the existence of an absolute, and therefore place the fundamental binary oppositions—the difference between whites and blacks—that such an absolute enables on the comforting grounds of metaphysical certainty. Instead, we are presented with the failure of Marlow's senses to produce any such affirmation of his humanity when confronted with African bodies; or, the failure of the signifiers of difference that define these bodies (such as ritual scarification,

which Marlow reads as a signifier of cannibalism [*HD* 33]) to generate the absolute that Marlow requires of them.

Marlow's awareness of this ontology of the self torments him from his first encounter with black Africans, which marks the immediate beginning of the portion of the story set in Africa. This episode, moreover, stages what we quickly come to recognise as Marlow's definitive scene of desire, that of his captive gaze scrutinising black bodies for a clue to the metaphysical riddle that haunts him. Thus, before Marlow even touches ground in Africa, a group of "black fellows" paddling a canoe captures his attention. His fascinated gaze pores over their bodies, which he characterises in terms of "bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement" (*HD* 11). His fascination with the material and sensual qualities of African bodies is inspired, significantly, at a moment of lamentation regarding his "isolation" among Europeans on the ship, which, he complains, "seemed to keep me away from the truth of things" (*HD* 11). Because the "wild vitality" and fluid, natural movement of the African bodies is situated in opposition to Marlow's sense of remoteness from "the truth of things," African bodies immediately come to represent a mysterious "truth" from which Marlow feels himself separated. Yet, in this encounter, the promise of truth held forth by black bodies is simultaneously experienced as a withholding of the truth, for although "they were a great comfort to look at," making Marlow feel that he "belonged still to a world of straightforward facts," the "feeling would not last long," because, every time this feeling arose, "[s]omething would turn up to scare it away" (*HD* 11).

In short, from the point of their introduction in the text, Marlow experiences black bodies as passively issuing a promise. They promise to reveal "the truth of things" and ensconce Marlow firmly within a solid, material "world of straightforward facts." The sensual properties of African bodies somehow hold forth the possibility of banishing the self-alienation of the civilised that seems invariably to separate him from "the truth of things," or "truth" writ large. The possibility of a world free from the constitutive alienation of the self named by "the idea," however, inevitably vanishes soon after it appears, and is therefore experienced as a withholding, for one can only get a sense of it at the point of its vanishing. Moreover, this chronological sequence—experiencing the comforting possibility of existing in a world where truth is sensual and self-apparent, immediately followed by an acute awareness of the absence of any such truth—is condensed into simultaneity with Marlow's perception, as he observes the bodies, that they had faces "like grotesque masks" (*HD* 11). African faces become, within this formulation, a synecdoche for the troublesome sensual properties of Africans. Like masks, they promise the possibility of revelation

(what is the mask hiding?), yet they are experienced as horrifying, at times mocking and "grotesque." It seems that for Marlow the problem of meaning will be settled at the site of the African body—can it provide an incontrovertible sensual ground for a system of colonial meanings, or can't it?—and the fact that mask-like African faces and bodies somehow suggest the possibility of knowing "the truth of things" and therefore allowing one to exist in a "world of straightforward facts," yet never deliver on this promise, means that they also confront Marlow with the consideration that no such transparent truth of the senses exists. Marlow therefore experiences the African body as a promise that is also a betrayal. African bodies present not only the possibility of imagining an absolute, but the awful prospect that no such absolute exists; while they inspire an awareness of the possibility of existing in a world of stable signification, composed exclusively of determinate and intelligible facts, they also inspire the anguish of the thought that the attainment of such an ideal existence is ultimately impossible.

Episodes in which Marlow contemplates the difficulties posed by this absence of an absolute on occasions of witnessing seemingly banal incidents, such as men paddling a canoe, tending his boat's engine, or a woman walking along the shore of the river, occur frequently throughout the story, and, by the end of the novel, the figure of the African body has come to explicitly manifest the problem of knowledge. In fact, if Marlow marks the narrative introduction of Africa with an observation of black bodies, the sensual properties of which somehow induce thoughts of an absolute and purely determinate knowledge, by the end of his story comprehending this problem of meaning has become the equivalent of deciphering the riddle of an African face.

Conrad takes the final step in creating this equivalence during Marlow's rumination on Kurtz's famous last words, "The horror! The horror!" (*HD* 64). Significantly, Marlow makes no attempt to decipher any particular message in his reflections on this abstruse pronouncement, for the revelation it offers is, for Marlow, unrelated to any determinate content. Instead, the important "truth" it allows one to "glimpse" is "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" that determines what a "[d]roll thing life is" (*HD* 65). The "truth" that Marlow discovers in Kurtz's final words, it seems, is a final re-discovery of the same problem of knowledge revealed by "the idea": that of the impossibility of ascertaining a definitive "purpose" in the absence of an absolute. The futility of any attempt to determine such a "purpose" has, by this point, come to be accepted as both an inevitability—as the terrifying and inescapable necessity of being subject to a "logic" that is both "merciless" and empty of

"purpose"—and an impenetrable mystery. It is because Kurtz's words so unmistakably reveal this "mysterious" absence of a final cause—the void from which human "purpose" miraculously emerges—while simultaneously acting as "the expression of some sort of belief," that they strike Marlow as "remarkable" (*HD* 65). And it is here, at the point of expressing astonishment that belief is possible at all under the existential circumstances of humankind, that Marlow attaches a final and definitive image to the metaphysical conundrum that torments him:

> "He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had *the appalling face* of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate." [italics added] (*HD* 65)

At this point, we cannot help but recognise that Marlow's figure for "truth" is merely a final repetition of his encounter with "grotesque" African faces and bodies that has largely defined his tale of Africa, and that has persistently presented him with the same question regarding meaning from the first moment of his journey (*HD* 65). Marlow's only attempt to directly assess the significance of Kurtz's pronouncement is therefore presented as a final confrontation with the recurring figure of the compelling but terrifying mask-like face. Marlow's employment of violently ambivalent language throughout the passage, including his immediate explanation of what one experiences when encountering such a thing—"the strange commingling of desire and hate"—both emphatically declares the impossibility of interpreting this image in terms of any self-consistent meaning, and exactly describes his attitude toward Africans throughout the novel. The fact that Marlow has once again discovered the site of the grounds of truth—the African body—to be empty of the validation and certainty he seeks is vigorously stressed as he follows this description with a metaphor of truth as a vast empty space, an abyss, "the edge" of which Kurtz "had stepped over" (*HD* 65). Conrad allows Marlow to discover nothing other than the empty form of belief, the void from which belief impossibly emerges, an impossibility that must, finally, be figured in terms of black bodies. For Marlow, black bodies and voices consistently pose the question of meaning: not of particular meanings, but the problem of how meaning is possible at all.

Conclusion

To return to the point of departure for this discussion of *Heart of Darkness*,

I believe that a competent reading of Achebe's "An Image of Africa" would suggest as a response the type of textual analysis that I have performed in this essay. Achebe defines the matter of race and racism in *Heart of Darkness* psychoanalytically as a problem of "desire," or, more specifically, in terms of "that Western desire and need" to "set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar."[38] It is this dynamic of desire within the novel, according to which the "image of Africa" commands an obsessive and ambivalent fascination in its role as "the antithesis of Europe," which I have attempted to address.[39] I would argue, moreover, that when we read *Heart of Darkness* within this frame, it does not just repeat or reaffirm but instead deliberately and forcefully exposes Western "anxieties about the precariousness of civilization" that create "a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa."[40] While Achebe correctly identifies the hostility with which the novel frequently treats African characters as a central feature of the text—its portrayal of the two African characters actually allowed to speak as comical or "insolent," for instance[41]—this hostility exists within a framework that shows such enmity to result from an ultimately fetishistic demand for absolute certainty about the world (and the word). I have argued that the attitude of fascinated horror with which Marlow regards Africans is self-consciously placed in the context of a trenchant criticism of an ideological formation that I have defined as turn-of-the-century British imperialism, and that Achebe defines more broadly as "the English liberal tradition" (in order, I believe, to focus on how the Western academy continues to perpetuate this ideology).[42] In short, I think that *Heart of Darkness* does, in fact, deliberately and systematically criticise the desire of white Westerners to assuage their anxieties through "comparison with Africa" as an ideologically predominant form of fetishism. Furthermore, the characteristically modernist problematic of meaning defined in "the idea" suggests a potentially radical alternative to the anxiety and fetishism that defines the logic of race within the text.[43]

Through the novel's narrator and protagonist, Conrad provides a thorough narrative exegesis of the role of racial bodies in sustaining a specific type of subjective economy at a particular historical juncture. Moreover, because Marlow attempts to discover an absolute through a relentless scansion of the surfaces of African bodies, his attempt to locate and fix—to reify—the impossible moment of difference that would confirm this absolute corresponds unmistakably with the practices of racial scientists. Within emergent discourses such as anthropology and eugenics, such scansion of bodies was believed to reveal incontrovertible natural truths about human difference,[44] a belief that is uncompromisingly and

elaborately rejected within *Heart of Darkness*. This belief is most directly addressed, and rather savagely satirised, when, prior to Marlow's departure for Africa, the company doctor measures Marlow's head "in the interests of science" (*HD* 9).[45] This scene serves to emphasise the broader correspondence between this science of head measurement, through which the doctor seeks to delineate Marlow's psychological characteristics, and Marlow's efforts to discover an essential truth of the self through the minute scrutiny of the surfaces of black bodies. The doctor, through the precise measurement of heads, attempts to "prove" a "little theory" regarding "you messieurs who go out there [to Africa]" (*HD* 9). He attempts to discern some important truth about the character of those who travel to Africa through careful observation and measurement of certain surfaces of the body with "a thing like calipers," and we might note that Marlow, as in his disquisition on the "truth" of Kurtz's final words, expresses no concern at all for any concrete particulars of the doctor's "theory": indeed, he gives us no clue to what his actual theory is (*HD* 9). Again, it seems that Marlow is interested exclusively in the formal properties of this theory—in this case, the fact that the doctor seeks the truth of the subject through bodily measurement—and that, on the basis of these formal properties, he judges the doctor "a harmless fool" (*HD* 9). Marlow's judgment of the doctor turns out to be one of many layered ironies leading to his tale of Africa, for he immediately begins searching for "the truth of things" through the intense scrutiny of bodily surfaces upon his arrival in Africa—as I have argued, this activity both introduces his experience of Africa, and comes to define it through his closing metaphor of truth as a "face" to be deciphered (*HD* 11). Marlow, of course, reaches a conclusion quite different from that of any practitioner of phrenology, for the primary "truth" that he uncovers is that there is no magical object that can banish the problem of one's primordial difference from oneself—the difference from the self initially formulated by Marlow as "the idea" and repeatedly re-discovered through his scansion of black bodies—no matter how closely one might scrutinise one's chosen object. No degree of precision in taking measurements of the physical world can make this "problem" go away. In this brief scene, we witness "science," the "sacrosanct fetish of today" according to Mr. Vladimir, Conrad's character of seven years later, coalescing with the imperial fetish of the self, the racial body, to create a heightened sense of farce.[46]

Conrad provides a significant and prescient commentary on race in *Heart of Darkness*, for he exposes the fact that the perception of "difference" in black bodies is a symptom of the expectation that they play a very specific role within an imperial subjective economy: black bodies are expected to fill the space of the real, to plug the gap in reality, with a

metaphysical absolute. The "horror" with which Marlow regards them is shown to be a result of the fact that they—like any other object that might occupy the space of the real, the foundational aporia of subjectivity—must inevitably fail, a conclusion that Marlow embraces with increasing conviction as the story progresses. There is no mysterious truth contained in the bodies of Africans that might restore one's sense of existing "in a world of straightforward facts" (*HD* 11). Moreover, to the extent that Marlow experiences this specific failure of meaning at the site of the black body as revealing the ultimate impossibility of discovering any metaphysical guarantee of meaning, Conrad diagnoses the ideological centrality of the racial body: its role is that of a foundational fetish of imperial ideology, which Marlow believes must perform the role of *objet a*—must banish his sense of the inconsistency of his being—if the system of imperial meanings sustaining (and sustained by) his sense of self is to be maintained.

Much as, three years earlier, James Wait's bodily presence had posed an impenetrable mystery to the narrator of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* ("no one could tell what was the meaning of that black man"),[47] Marlow repeatedly encounters black faces as an ontological enigma, and finally appeals to the figure of an impenetrable, mask-like face in his attempt to communicate the "truth" that he has "glimpsed" in Kurtz's last words. If the African face somehow opens questions regarding "the truth of things" in the passage marking Marlow's entry into Africa (is an existence in a world of "straightforward facts" possible?), it also provides the final image through which Marlow's missed encounter with an absolute is defined (*HD* 11). His search for the "truth" has come, by this point, to be characterised as a perpetually failing attempt to reify the impossible moment of difference by experiencing it as an incontrovertible truth of the senses. He looks to the deep materiality of black bodies to provide this truth of the senses, but even his most intense scrutiny cannot force them to produce this truth—cannot force them, in other words, to sustain his belief in the solidity and self-consistency of his own being. Black bodies, in the end, carry the burden, noted by Conrad one year later in a letter to the *New York Times*, of the recognition that

> [t]he only indisputable truth of life is our ignorance. Besides this there is nothing evident, nothing absolute, nothing uncontradicted; there is no principle, no instinct, no impulse that can stand alone at the beginning of things and look confidently to the end.… The only legitimate basis of creative works lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous—so full of hope.[48]

A belief in race, it seems, amounts to nothing other than a refusal to recognise this truth, an attempt to surmount it through an appeal to the self-evidence of the senses at the site—prescribed by the dominant ideology of the era—of the racial body.

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NOTES

[1] Norman Sherry, ed., *Conrad: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 130.

[2] John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), 278.

[3] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), 180.

[4] Padmini Mongia, "Why I Teach Conrad and Achebe," *Approaches to Teaching Conrad's Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer*, eds. Hunt Hawkins and Brian W. Shaffer (New York: MLA, 2002, 104–10), 104.

[5] Achebe frequently serves as a synecdoche for all race and gender criticism regarding *Heart of Darkness*, both among practitioners of such criticism and their opponents. J. Hillis Miller performs such a condensation when he uses Achebe as a reference point for considerations of gender, race, and empire within *Heart of Darkness* ("Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?" *Conrad in Africa: New Essays on "Heart of Darkness,"* ed. Attie de Lange, et al [New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 21–40], 23). The more polemical diatribes against Achebe tend to place a very explicit and deliberate importance on this rhetorical move, as when Hugh Mercer Curtler states that "Achebe's essay is a token of a type that is becoming increasingly popular in poststructuralist criticism," which "seeks to reduce the stature of works out of a consideration of charges leveled against their creators" ("Achebe on Conrad: Racism and Greatness in *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana* 29.1 [1997]: 30–40, 30). Bette London, in an essay I discuss below, similarly finds Achebe's argument to be representative of a larger category of arguments that she seeks to refute ("Reading Race and Gender in Conrad's Dark Continent," *Reading with a Difference: Gender, Race, and Cultural Identity*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti et al [Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1993], 269–86).

[6] For Achebe's argument, see "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1989, 2–16). While some sort of response to this essay has become a customary gesture within any commentary on questions of race, gender, or colonialism in Conrad's writing, essays that respond directly to and seek to defend Conrad against Achebe's charges of racism include C. P. Sarvan's "Racism in *Heart of Darkness*" (*International Fiction Review* 7.1[1980]: 6–10), P. J. M. Robertson's "*Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*: A Creative Dialogue" (*International Fiction Review* 7 [1980]: 106–11), Hunt Hawkins's "The Issue of Racism in *Heart*

of Darkness" (*Conradiana* 14.3 [1982]: 163–71), Cedric Watts's "'A Bloody Racist': About Achebe's View of Conrad" (*Yearbook of English Studies* 13 [1983]: 196–209), Robert Hampson's "*Heart of Darkness* and 'The Speech that Cannot Be Silenced'" (*English: The Journal of the English Association* 39.163 [1990]: 15–32), Hugh Mercer Curtler's "Achebe on Conrad: Racism and Greatness in *Heart of Darkness*" (1997), J. Hillis Miller's "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?" (2002), Marcus Ramogale's "Achebe and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: A Reassessment of African Postcolonialism in the Era of the African Renaissance" (*Conrad in Africa: New Essays on "Heart of Darkness,"* ed. Attie de Lange, et al [New York: Columbia University Press, 2002], 313–30), and Peter Edgerly Firchow's book, *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

[7] Padmini Mongia, "The Rescue: Conrad, Achebe, and the Critics" (*Conradiana* 33.2 [2001]: 153–63), 153.

[8] Mongia, "The Rescue," 161.

[9] Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 12.

[10] Ibid., 14.

[11] Ibid., 6.

[12] Ibid., 14; 10.

[13] Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (New York: Verso, 1998), 174.

[14] We might note, for instance, Cedric Watts's citation of fellow Conrad scholar Norman Sherry, through which Watts seeks to defend Conrad's portrayal of cannibalism by establishing that cannibals did indeed exist in the Congo in the 1890's: "the Bangalas … were joyfully cannibalistic" (Watts, "'A Bloody Racist,'" 201). The presupposition, however, that establishing the actual existence of cannibals effectively dispenses with the problem of the *meaning* of cannibalism within the text is so rudimentary that it is difficult to imagine a critic of Watts's status adopting it in regard to any topic other than race.

[15] "The American Anthropological Association Statement on 'Race'" (17 May 1998, American Anthropological Association, 16 Aug. 2006 <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>) for instance, refers to "race" (the scare quotes are theirs) as a set of "myths" that became homogenised into a body of "scientific" dogma as a result of the histories of colonial conquest and chattel slavery. "Racial beliefs," the statement explains, "constitute myths about the diversity in the human species and about the abilities and behavior of people homogenized into "racial" categories. The myths fused behavior and physical features together in the public mind, impeding our comprehension of both biological variations and cultural behavior, implying that both are genetically determined. *Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior.*" [Italics added]

[16] Mark A. Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 75.

[17] London, "Reading Race and Gender," 269. I found it interesting to discover that this division between political and metaphysical readings is sharply realised in the

summary of the state of criticism of *Heart of Darkness* in the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, which enacts this division as the focus on either "text" or "context" (Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore, "*Heart of Darkness,*" *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* [New York: Oxford UP, 2000, 152–6], 154). Criticism focusing on the text includes the "rich field for speculation about the return to the womb, the fall from grace, or the aporias of language"—or psychological, religious, and linguistic criticism—while contextual criticism alludes only to "the Achebe controversy," which stands in for "multiculturalism and postcolonial discourse" as well as "feminist and gender" criticism (156). The dichotomy between the metaphysical and political Conrad could hardly be more clearly stated or more officially codified.

Readings that deliberately violate the practice of separating formal from political analysis include Bette London's "Reading Race and Gender in Conrad's Dark Continent," which is concerned primarily with the gender implications of the textual production of Marlow's narrative authority; Carole Stone and Fawzia Afzal-Khan's "Gender, Race, and Narrative Structure: A Reappraisal of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (*Conradiana* 29.3 [1997]: 221–34), which argues that the text features a feminine narrative economy because of its "non-linearity, circularity, open-endedness, ambiguity and multiple perspectives," all of which are "inherent in a 'female' narrative mode" (225); and Terry Eagleton's analysis of the novel in *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: NLB, 1976), in which he argues that the characteristically modernist aesthetic of the narrative results from an ideological "conflict between Romantic individualism and social organicism" (132). In "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature" (*"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986], 78–106), Abdul R. JanMohamed briefly takes note of *Heart of Darkness* in developing his argument that colonial literature functions as "manichean allegory." JanMohamed argues that the novel "deliberately thematizes the libidinal economy of the [Lacanian] 'imaginary,'" and that the narrative economy of the novel is therefore determined by Conrad's demystification of "important aspects of the fetishistic and occluded mentality of the colonizer" (89–90).

[18] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Dover, 1990), 24. All other references to *Heart of Darkness* will be parenthesised in text with the title abbreviated as *HD.*

[19] Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, 18.

[20] Ibid., 61.

[21] Peter Brooks, "An Unreadable Report: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, 4th ed., ed. Paul B. Armstrong [New York: Norton, 2006], 376–86), 376.

[22] Tony E. Jackson, *The Subject of Modernism: Narrative Alterations in the Fiction of Eliot, Conrad, Woolf, and Joyce* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998), 103.

[23] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, "The Failure of Metaphysics" (*Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, 4th ed., ed. Paul B. Armstrong [New York: Norton, 2006], 415–21), 415.

[24] Miller, "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?", 24.

[25] Ibid., 24.

[26] Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore observe that although Conrad's story "describes the journey as a return to prehistoric times … the actual river was not quite so utterly isolated as his tale suggests. At the time of Conrad's journey, some eleven steam vessels belonging to various companies were disturbing the waters of the Congo. Stanley Falls (Kisangani, Kurtz's Inner Station) was not just a hacked-out clearing but a small permanent settlement with offices, warehouses, worker's quarters, vegetable plantations, a jail, and even a hospital." (Knowles and Moore, "*Heart of Darkness,*" 153).

In referring to the "African wilderness" I have no intention of referring to any historical reality of the Congo, only its fictive representation in *Heart of Darkness*.

[27] John Batchelor notes that *"Blackwood's Magazine's* readers tended to be army and navy officers and administrators of the empire, ex-public school middle-class Englishmen who liked to have their self-esteem reinforced by stories about people like themselves: men of action doing good jobs in hazardous circumstances." (Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad*, 94).

[28] Anthony Fothergill explains that "[c]annibalism has been the stock-in-trade of European inscriptions of the primitive Other since Herodotus, for it epitomizes all forms of categorical transgression, all that 'we are not'" ("Cannibalizing Traditions: Representation and Critique in *Heart of Darkness*," *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, 4th ed., ed. Paul B. Armstrong [New York: Norton, 2006: 444–54], 454). Fothergill argues that while Conrad recognised the reference to cannibalism as "compulsory in late nineteenth-century descriptions of Africa," he also frequently employed this stereotype subversively, for instance, in equating it to the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist (454).

[29] J. Hillis Miller has argued that the "complex contradictory structure of Kurtz's ideology of imperialism *repeats exactly* the complex ideology that sees a literary work as the apocalyptic promise of a never-quite-yet-occurring revelation" [italics added] (Miller, "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?", 35). Miller therefore finds the critique of imperial ideology offered to be identical, in the novel, to the problem of discovering any metaphysical guarantee of meaning.

[30] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (*Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001], 85–126), 109.

[31] Ibid., 111–12.

[32] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 5.

[33] David Simpson has asserted that "*Heart of Darkness* is so clearly an investigation of fetishism that it might seem redundant to point it out once again" (*Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982], 106). Simpson, however, mainly investigates phallic imagery, such as the staked heads lining the approach to Kurtz's hut, which testify to a textual economy of "lack," and does not apply this logic to an analysis of race in the novel.

[34] Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress," *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Penguin, 1976, 459–89), 466.

[35] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, and Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 191.

[36] Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (New York: Signet, 1983), 41–2.

[37] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 184. To employ a term still more precise, we might state that the black body functions, in *Heart of Darkness*, as a Lacanian *objet petit a*, as a material object that serves as the "point of vanishing being with which the subject confuses his own failure" (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [New York: Norton, 1998], 83). The black body serves as the object that marks the ontological inconsistency of Marlow's subjectivity at its own foundations; and, by substituting what is experienced as a self-apparent sensual truth for a conscious awareness of this ontological inconsistency, the black body is supposed to set in motion a process of disavowal that enables the sense of a unified self. Marlow, however, becomes uncomfortably aware of what Alenka Zupanĉiĉ labels the "dialectical illusion," because he realises there is, in the black body, a "something … where there should in fact be nothing" (Zupanĉiĉ, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* [New York: Verso, 2000], 66). That is, to the extent that he recognises his own constitutive "lack," the aporia of his own subjective origins, in the black body; to the extent that he realizes the black body / *objet a* is merely "an object in the place of the lack of an object"; to precisely this extent, Marlow recognises the dialectical illusion required by an imperial subjective economy of self-presence (Zupanĉiĉ, 66).

[38] Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 3.

[39] Ibid., 3.

[40] Ibid., 17.

[41] Ibid., 9.

[42] Ibid., 10.

[43] There is certainly a thick irony defining the entire critical debacle of the Achebe controversy. I have argued that reading *Heart of Darkness* in the terms suggested by Achebe results in the discovery of a sustained deconstruction of racial identity, and, in some sense, validates the novel in the face of his charges. (To say that the novel deconstructs race, of course, is not to say that Marlow—and Conrad—do not participate in the very racism that is exposed as fetishistic. Fetishes, as Conrad recognised, can easily accommodate quite contradictory ideas and attitudes.) The need of literary critics to frequently revisit "An Image of Africa," misinterpret it, and rediscover in Achebe an African straw man against whom to posit the intellectual complexity of the Western literary tradition, on the other hand, undoubtedly substantiates Achebe's diagnosis in the article of a particular racist tendency of interpretation within the academy. That is to say, the response to the article is exactly what we would predict if Achebe's argument about the Western academy were true. I would therefore place Achebe and Conrad on one side of the "racism" debate for exposing the logic of race, and the majority of Achebe's

critics on the other side, for practicing this logic (at least in relation to the subject of Achebe and Conrad); a logic that can be sustained, moreover, only on the basis of a symptomatic refusal or inability to recognise the criticisms of Achebe or, ironically, Conrad.

[44] In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Robert Young asserts that the predominant view of race within both intellectual and social scientific circles beginning in the 1860s was created through the coalescence of "the evolutionary method" and the discourse of polygenism (48). In making this argument, Young relies heavily on the account of the emergence of "classical evolutionism" (alternately termed "sociocultural evolutionism") given by George Stocking in *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 169–85. For a concise and cogent analysis of how the racial sciences of the late-nineteenth century differ in their formula for human difference from the primarily monogenist religious discourses on difference that predominated until the mid-nineteenth century, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Race," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (ed. Frank Lentricchia and Tom McLaughlin [Chicago University Press, 1989], 274–87. Appiah comments specifically on the different practices of reading bodies that distinguish late nineteenth-century discourses on race from previous discourses of difference. Timothy Christensen, in "The 'Bestial Mark' of Race in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*" (*Criticism* 46.4 [2004]: 575–95), discusses the role of the scansion of the surfaces of black bodies in specific works by Francis Galton and Edward Tylor.

[45] The fact that Conrad forces his protagonist to undergo this form of measurement in order to diagnose his intellectual or moral capacities should, perhaps, be read in light of the fact that "Conrad's Polish nationality appeared to his English friends and associates as a racial difference" (Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* [New York: Oxford UP, 1994], 51). To support this assertion, North quotes many of Conrad's contemporaries including H. G. Wells ("he expresses himself as an Oriental and not a Nordic"), Edward Garnett (who speculated that Conrad "might have Eastern blood in his veins"), and Ford Madox Ford (who found Conrad "very Oriental indeed," and thought he resembled "a Caliph entering a slave market"). Even more to the point, we might note Edwin Pugh's remark that Conrad gave the impression of a "savage pungency" so strong that he appeared "simian," or Conrad's description of his own appearance as a cross between "a gorilla and an angel" (51).

[46] Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, 42.

[47] Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 33.

[48] Qtd. in Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*, (London, MacMillan, 1983), 3–4.