Inscriptions of Resistance in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Charlie Wesley
Daemen College

The possibility of native resistance to colonial tyranny and the threat of the loss of colonial "order" is a continual, sustained anxiety throughout Joseph Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness. *Critics have largely ignored or downplayed these inscriptions of resistance in Conrad's text. Much of the criticism that surrounds this novella, according to Patrick Brantlinger, is focused on the European subjects of the text, and therefore renders Africa and its native peoples as a kind of backdrop. Literary critiques of* Heart of Darkness *that do discuss the African natives tend to portray them as victims rather than having any kind of agency. This latent fear of native resistance demonstrates the fantasy of stability and superiority endemic to imperialism: a narrative that the imperial administration must continually tell itself.*

Keywords: Joseph Conrad / resistance / imperialism / anxiety / Congo

> . . . it was the case nearly everywhere in the non-European world that the coming of the white man brought forth some sort of resistance . . . Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was *always* some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.
>
> — Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Charlie Wesley (cwesley@daemen.edu) is an assistant professor of English at Daemen College whose scholarly interests include modern British literature, exile literature, and magical realism. He has published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Modern Language Studies* as well as the collections *Education and the USA* and *Indian Writers: Transnationalisms and Diasporas*. His most recent article is forthcoming in *The Geocritical Legacies of Edward W. Said: Spatiality, Critical Humanism, and Comparative Literature*. Currently he is co-editing a collection of essays on Salman Rushdie with Ana Mendes.

> The state soldiers are constantly stealing, and sometimes the natives are so persecuted they resent this by killing and eating their tormentors.
>
> — The Journals of Edward James Glave (1895)

Belgian colonialists in the Congo during the late eighteenth century enforced their reign through a variety of brutal means. Conscription, severe labor practices, torture, killing, and burning villages by the Force Publique (an army under Leopold's command) as well as employing Capitas—black foremen who were encouraged by the Europeans to enforce a reign of terror—were just some of the practices through which the imperial center tried to control the native people of the Congo. According to the authors of *The Congo: Plunder and Resistance*, a number of rebellions—including the uprising led by King Misri—killed scores of Capitas in a matter of months.[1]

The exploits of one anticolonial Congo leader, Kandolo (from the Kasi region), are detailed by Molefi Asante in *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony*. Kandolo fought continuously against the Force Publique, leading others to attack numerous posts from 1895 to 1897, killing several officers. The resistance[2] he fomented continued for another thirteen years, killing an additional "fifteen white officers" (229). Given the continual resistance the colonialists encountered, their accounts of the natives at times have a tone of resignation. Lieutenant Edouard Tilkens writes of conditions in the Congo near the end of the nineteenth century,

> I expect a general uprising. I think I warned you of this, Major . . . The motive is always the same. The natives are tired of . . . transport work, rubber collecting, furnishing livestock . . . For three months I have been fighting, with ten days' rest . . . I have 152 prisoners. For two years I have been making war in this country, always accompanied by forty or fifty *Albinis*. Yet I cannot say I have subjugated the people . . . They prefer to die . . . What can I do? (*King Leopold's Ghost* 190)

This historical evidence attests to the unbreakable spirit of the people of the Congo, and to the pervasiveness of their resistance to Belgian rule. Conscripted Batetela soldiers resisted the Belgian colonialists in 1896 after their native leader was killed and continued to resist until the last rebels were captured in 1908. And yet, the area of Gandu was described as pacified by Major Malfey in 1902. "Colonial accounts such as these," write Renton, Seddon, and Zeilig, "with their soothing assurances of European invincibility, tend to obscure the fact that this revolt lasted thirteen years, securing large areas of land and the temporary freedom of several thousand people" (34).

Another example of a colonial attempt to acknowledge and then mitigate the possibility of resistance is evident in Edward Glave's characterization of African natives in the epigraph above. This portrayal of the Congolese was written in February of 1895, roughly six years after Conrad visited the Congo and

four years before he published *Heart of Darkness*. It is crucial to note how Glave acknowledges *resistance* to the imperial forces, yet at the same time reduces the native agency to a simple-minded barbarism that denies purpose to their actions. Glaves's depiction of "natives . . . killing and eating their tormentors" demonstrates that descriptions of resistance can be complicit with or emerging from imperialistic visions and representations of native peoples.

Like Glave's journal, *Heart of Darkness* does not attempt to expunge moments of revolt. But while the text is fraught with racist depictions and assumptions, it (unlike Glave's journal) uneasily acknowledges the humanity of the natives. Marlow states of them,

> 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. (36)

Here agency and action is acknowledged in the physicality of the natives, but recognition of any kind of meaningful cognitive relationship to action is withheld.[3] Like Glave, Marlow depicts activity that suggests the natives are not in control of their own bodies.

These paradoxical descriptions denote the possibility on the part of the natives for resistance and at the same time withdraw it. The natives are depicted with an emphasis on their physicality, ". . . hands clapping . . . feet stamping . . . bodies swaying . . . eyes rolling," in contradistinction to the "higher order" functions of language, reason, and the intellect that Conrad utilizes to describe Marlow and Kurtz (35). The resistance of the natives is immediately incorporated into narratives about the wild, childlike, "savage" mind, rather than as a consequence of a sense of indignity. This hierarchy attempts to deny what it implicitly acknowledges: that resistance is a consequence of human beings' capacity to be outraged and to organize. The inscriptions of resistance in Conrad's text evoke a much richer, more nuanced and complex colonial history than that of the "official" narratives of European imperialists.[4] In colonial accounts of the Congo such as Conrad's, the acknowledgment of the possibility of resistance, as well as anxiety about maintaining order, is central to the dynamic of imperialism.[5]

In Edward Said's "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*," the well-known critique from his magisterial *Culture and Imperialism*, he locates a tension in Conrad's work between, on the one hand, a position that seeks but fails to imagine an alternative to imperialism, and a textual attitude that is inseparable from the zeitgeist of imperialism on the other. He writes that "Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end" (25).[6] It is paradoxical, given the centrality of resistance as a theme in *Culture and Imperialism* (evident in the

epigraph quoted above), that Said chose not to acknowledge the inscriptions of resistance among the natives in his reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. One underappreciated aspect of Conrad's text is that it represents what Said calls the "violence and waste" of imperialism, while at the same time fretting over the natives' resistance to the imperial apparatus (26). As Said points out, the narrative is a "recitation"—as well as a performance—for "a set of like-minded British hearers" (23, 24). Said argues that Conrad's text not only embodies imperialist attitudes—which prevents any compelling representation of the experiences of the Other—but also, and owing to Conrad's depiction, allows "later readers" an opening, an opportunity to "imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies" (24, 26).[7] Building on Said's reading, I suggest that evidence for native "resistance" is already latent in the text. Conrad's language continually reinforces the measures of control and anxieties of enforcement necessary to keep the colonial edifice from crumbling, hinting at the fragility of imperialism's façade, while at the same time denying such weakness exists.

Peter Nazareth writes that with *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad "shatter[ed] the benign worldview of colonialism projected at home" (183). Nazareth and Benita Parry point out the subversive elements of Conrad's text—namely in its resistance to colonialism—which, for them, takes place principally in Marlow's critique of imperialism's dark side (which *comes from* the West) as well as in the text's unflinching portrayal of the realities of the colonial project. Contemporary criticism has tended to echo this position. The problem is that while Parry calls *Heart of Darkness* "a powerful critique of imperialism," (46) her essay in fact focuses on how European and American interlocutors like Roger Casement and Mark Twain critiqued Leopold's regime (45). The African natives are therefore relegated to the background in her analysis, perhaps because she believes that in the novella, "the people are basically silenced" (50). She argues that Conrad's work is speaking against imperialism "in its intimations of what may yet come out of an 'Africa' that in the fiction cannot speak its name, the book alludes to a reality that lies beyond its own epistemologically constrained field of vision" (50). It is, for Parry, in the roll of drums that Marlow hears a "hidden knowledge" he "cannot articulate" (49). It is of course folly to try to guess what meaning these drums convey, but the possibility that they represent not meaningless sounds but distinct formations of human energies (a "hidden knowledge"), communication, and even the residual but ever-present possibility of resistance are but a few of the notions that makes their sound so terrible to the imperial mind.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the native's energies are depicted largely working in the service of the Belgian colonial forces. However, there exist important moments of rupture where the natives resist, and it is the constant threat of this resistance that heightens the tension of what can be read as an imperialist anxiety in the novella. Conrad's text registers a latent but profound anxiety about resistance to imperialism enacted by the natives, a form of agency fraught with racial and cultural stereotypes. Examining Marlow and Kurtz as agents of Europe, and therefore also of the ideology of imperialism, we can see how their ideas about

the natives of the Congo encapsulate the contradictions within colonialism that must both register the possibility of resistance even while denying it. At its core, *Heart of Darkness* is a text diagramming the workings of colonial administration: anxieties, logistics, punishments, power struggles, and forms of control. It is a diagram of the mechanistic and symbolic forms of power and control, the "brute force" (7) that Marlow says is endemic of colonialists in the novella's opening.

Conrad's text opens with Marlow detailing his exploits to a lawyer, an accountant, and a director, figures that Peter Nazareth calls "manipulators of the whole colonial machine" (176). These figures play a part, at the very least, in regulating colonialist institutions. The "bond of the sea" that unites the men "had the effect of making [them] tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions" (3). The narrator's description reveals the sense of community among men who share common experiences. Therefore the text is first and foremost a dialogue directed specifically at an audience that is receptive to the codes and assumptions of the colonial project writ large.[8] The "second" narrator's identity is never fully revealed; he is nameless, yet positioned on the boat. The scene is written in first person point of view ("... I was awake. I listened ..."), thus the narrator is not omniscient because of his/its situatedness among the other men ("our hearts") (27). Nazareth speculates that perhaps this narrator is the "'I' of Europe" (176), but what is unmistakable in this opening scene is that the unnamed narrator, like Marlow, feels a kinship among the men, and therefore is also a participant in the imperial narrative, reifying the obligations and anxieties of colonialism's "supreme monolithic world view" (Nazareth 174). To extend the notion of the "imperial audience" beyond that of the fictional conceit of the novella itself, it should be noted that when *Heart of Darkness* was first published in serialized form, the readers of *Blackwood's Magazine* were largely supportive of British expansionism, invested in its emotional and ideological project, and direct beneficiaries of its economic exploits.[9] Thus the notion of anxiety would have been much more visceral as a critical assumption orienting this colonialist text.

Marlow is a seaman, which means that he finds a boat to be "home" and the sea a "country," but he's also a "wanderer," implying a life of transgressing boundaries and limits (5). This combination of movement alongside a sense of rootedness makes Marlow's tale relatable for the agents of imperialism who listen. Marlow's narrative is therefore an attempt to clarify the colonial experience to his fellows and to himself. By rearticulating his experience to an imperialist audience on the yacht, Marlow reveals his assumptions about native populations, his relationship to Kurtz, and "home." Further, Marlow's narrative projects an imperialist fantasy about the imperial subject that hides within it an anxiety about the forces that constantly threaten to undo that fantasy.

In *Outlandish*, Nico Israel theorizes the multiple narrators that comprise the *Heart of Darkness*. Borrowing from Freud, Israel writes that "the socially inferior or powerless 'natives'" comprise the "second person" or "brunt" of the joke that is carried on between Marlow and his listeners on the ship at the novella's beginning (42). Setting aside the questions that accompany comparing Conrad's

multi-voiced narrative structure to Freud's formulation of a joke, I would like to pause over Israel's characterization of the natives. His assumption that they are powerless unfortunately reinforces what Patrick Brantlinger notes in "Imperialism, Impressionism and the Politics of Style," namely that readings of Conrad's novella too often focus on "European civilization, not Africa" (270). Brantlinger is commenting on Lionel Trilling's reading of the novella, but his critique applies to a long tradition of literary criticism on *The Heart of Darkness*, such as Albert J. Guerard's work *Conrad the Novelist* (1958). Unfortunately, critical approaches to *Heart of Darkness* all too often relegate the natives to a position that is marginal, powerless, silent—and therefore unimportant.

In fact, *Heart of Darkness* offers ample evidence to the contrary. It is not an accident that the first depiction of the natives is one of resistance to colonial belligerence. Marlow tells his compatriots that he was able to obtain his position in "the Company" in the Congo because "one of their Captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives" (9). Fresleven, according to Marlow, had "started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick" until a man—possibly the chief's son—killed him with a spear (9). This moment of native resistance is the first of a series in the narrative that have been largely overlooked. Chinua Achebe writes that in *Heart of Darkness* "Africa is a metaphorical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity" (788),[10] and while Achebe's argument is a powerful one, the example of the chief's son counters the idea that the natives do not have a "recognizable humanity," or that they are simply "incidental" as "objects of representation" as Abdul JanMohamed argues (90). Indeed, *Heart of Darkness* is powerful precisely because it cautiously recognizes the distinct oppositional energies of brutally oppressed human beings. The way Conrad accomplishes this is tentative at best, leading Benita Parry to write that "awareness of resistance to the European physical presence and its metaphysical gaze *is* recognized [in *Heart of Darkness*] even as it is displaced onto an unnamed and autonomous 'Africa' . . ." (40). For Parry, this textual attitude is situated in Marlow's struggle with language and his inability to articulate the possibility of a reality that is alien to him.

Given this struggle to recognize a distinct humanity in the Africans of the novella, Fresleven's act of resistance marks a crucial moment. The chief's son's desire to protect his father demonstrates a longing to be treated with dignity, fairness, and respect that is shared among all human beings.[11] This point is further established in the way that Conrad tries—but ultimately fails—to discuss the injustices of imperialism that are predicated on racial differences. In Marlow's story, told through the narrative filter of "the Company," the people of the village scatter after Fresleven is killed. The very notion that a white man—the figure of superiority—has been killed signals, without actually articulating, a creeping sense of disorder, loss of control, and the crumbling of hierarchies. Marlow can only gesture at the unthinkable inversion by using an otherworldly register: "The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell" (9). Marlow's retelling offers a critique while it reifies the assumption of white superiority in strict hierarchical demarcation from the "savage" native.

This characterization is later rendered in a less complex form through Kurtz's attitude toward the natives. Kurtz states in his seventeen page "report" that, "... we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] as supernatural beings'" (50). Kurtz mixes imperial power with metaphysical superiority, equating the brutal imposition of power with hierarchical dominance. Marlow's telling is subtly ironic, playing on audience expectations while challenging the hierarchy it sets up. Hierarchies therefore symbolically reinforce this fantasy of control central to the novella. What makes this desire for control — a central motif of *Heart of Darkness* — necessary is the dawning recognition that the natives do have agency, and that it is only a matter of time before they exercise it. The story can therefore be read as an attempt to mitigate or make sense of the haunting anxiety of the imperial administrator stemming from the continual threat of the loss of control.

Marlow's narrative regularly acknowledges the natives' humanity while agonizing over their capacity to resist imperialist order. Not long after he arrives in the African Congo, he encounters "six black men" with "iron collar[s]" on their necks (15).[12] Marlow notes what he thinks is the "deathlike indifference" on the faces of the "unhappy savages" (16). And yet, he cannot "let that chain gang get out of sight before I climbed that hill" (16). Marlow follows up this comment with "You know I'm not particularly tender; I've had to strike and to fend off. I've had to resist and to attack sometimes — that's only one way of resisting — without counting the exact cost — according to the demands of such sort of life I had blundered into" (16). Marlow's response to these men on the trail anticipates their agency. He is anxious around them, and their mere presence causes him to imagine and justify the necessity of defending himself against them.

Here Marlow's idea of "resistance" is connected to maintaining colonial order rather than upsetting it: he's had to "resist" by "attacking." In the cultural logic of imperialism, "resistance" to the disorder of the native population is the goal; it is an attitude unaware of its own illogic, according to which the roles of subjugation and violence are necessary to its resistance against resistance. He notes a "white man ... with weapon on his shoulder" guarding the natives with satisfaction, feeling a part of his "exalted trust" (16). Within this depiction — especially in Marlow's desire to maintain "sight" of the natives and his immediate thought, after they are out of sight, of "striking" — is the tacit acknowledgment that resistance is possible, and that what is being done to the natives is cruel and inhumane.[13] But Marlow's narrative acknowledges this only in imagining his possible response to revolting slaves.

Critics like Peter Mallios have noted Marlow's failure to fully acknowledge native intelligence. He writes,

> ... the emphasis falls on the white narrator's perceptual limitations in direct relation to the agency and intelligence of the subversive black characters [in] the scene that Marlow describes as "quite a mutiny," where after much verbal abuse from Marlow the impressed African slaves run the hammock carrying Marlow's sickly "white

> companion" into a bush, and also [in] the scene in which the "screetching," abused and unrepentant African slave burns down the Central Station's grass shed . . . (183)

For Mallios (and Parry) resistance is tied to native intelligence, but this capacity for thought is largely unrecognizable to Marlow and outside of his epistemic purview. Therefore the novella uncomfortably stages native intelligence via the capacity to resist alongside the necessity of maintaining imperial control. Marlow reports these moments as connected to the imperial will to power. For example, Marlow sees a "nigger being beaten" for starting a fire (23). When the chief of the Inner station hears the man moaning he states, " 'Serve him right. Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future" (26). The stakes of control are high, and therefore the methods for enforcement are swift and brutal. Marlow observes that "The pilgrims could be seen in knots gesticulating, discussing. Several still had their staves in their hands. I verily believe they took these sticks to bed with them" (26). These passages help to detail the anxieties of colonial administration—the "knots" that men would tie themselves in to maintain order, power, and the myth of superiority. Marlow's narrative teaches us that the key to imperial administration is maintaining the fiction of always having the upper hand. As the manager suggests, instant punishment is the best way to ward off the possibility of future transgressions, which are the building blocks of insurrection. That these little acts of resistance are given so much attention by the ever-watchful imperial eye (which constantly denies they could be the organized actions of human intelligence) is what is so significant about them. There is a constant anxiety that small transgressions may reinforce and encourage larger, more serious acts.

In response to this "threat," Marlow's narrative attempts to reestablish the hierarchy between white imperialist and black native. *Heart of Darkness*'s depictions of the natives acknowledge that native resistance to imperial aggression is a reality; the natives are not powerless, even though they are depicted throughout the novella as savage, mindless, subhuman, subservient, and at times complicit with imperial power. As the novella progresses, Kurtz becomes the incarnation of white superiority and the purveyor of its most obscene ideas. Endowed with complete control over the native population, Kurtz represents the embodiment of the colonial ideal, an ideal so powerful that it threatens to undermine itself, as I discuss later.

Marlow seeks out Kurtz because of his position in the upper echelons of this hierarchy and his ability to wield incredible power over the natives. Marlow's ideas about Kurtz are predicated solely on stories about him; his fascination grows as he hears more of the narratives that construct Kurtz (32). Kurtz is portrayed to Marlow not only as a successful ivory trader, but also as a supernatural figure. He is described as "chief of the Inner Station" (25) and as having "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (49). Kurtz has managed to make "order" out of the implied "chaos" of the interior. Further, Kurtz inhabits land far from the ocean and from the safety of any ship, yet has managed to thrive (through domination

Obsession with Kurtz → embodiment of colonial ideal

and profiteering) in the most impossible, dark, and chaotic of places—according to the cultural assumptions animating Conrad's text. Given Conrad's historical biases and misgivings, Africa was the embodiment of the most extreme example of otherness imaginable to him—a place totally inhospitable to the imperialist Western mind that idealized an "ordered" reality (343). Because Kurtz could inhabit this chaotic space and flourish—even make this space "home"—to Marlow and his audience he becomes the embodiment of a colonial ideal.

Marlow's journey to meet Kurtz straddles the line between "home" (the steamboat) and "the unknown"—the continent of Africa itself. In *Heart of Darkness*, the land exists in opposition to the ship (Marlow's "home"), so that for Marlow to step across this boundary is to move from a familiar, ordered space to the unfamiliar, "wild," space of the Congo. After departing Europe, he finds himself encountering "foreign shores" (5), on which, according to our unknown narrator, "a causal spree" will "unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing" (5). Once Marlow enters the Leopoldine Congo, he becomes increasingly attached to the steamboat. Section 2 of the novella begins, "One evening as I was lying flat on the deck of my steamboat I heard voices approaching . . ." (31).[14] "Secure" on the steamboat, Marlow overhears a conversation about Kurtz between the Manager and his uncle. Here Marlow's imaginary projection of Kurtz reaches its apex and he "see[s] Kurtz for the first time" (32). This moment clarifies one reason for Marlow's interest in Kurtz: "It was a distinct glimpse . . . the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home perhaps . . ." (32). Marlow's fascination with Kurtz, like the primordial force that drives the "beetle," fuels his desire to understand how Kurtz is able to create a new order in this chaotic wilderness (35). Language creates a fantastic vision of Kurtz, just as Marlow's words on the yacht propagate the imperialist fantasy for the men who are gathered around him.[15]

After 230 miles of travel, Marlow arrives at the second station only to find his steamboat sunk. This moment symbolizes the loss of home and his alienation from everything familiar and comforting. This moment also represents the power of the wilderness to inhibit and undermine the colonial project. Having lost the ordered safety of the ship, and impaired from traveling further inland, Marlow is forced to improvise, using substitutes to stand in for his lost vessel: "I lived in a hut in the yard, but to be out of the chaos I would sometimes get into the accountant's office" (18). "Home" is fleeting; the spaces Marlow describes serve only as temporary dwellings. The desire for order and sense making overwhelms Marlow's ability to cope with what he perceives as the "chaos"—a tenuous, continually threatened colonial order surrounding him.

Marlow frequently gives voice to this sense of loss and confusion. He tells his listeners, "You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you had thought yourself bewitched and cut off from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps" (34). And further up the river he states,

"We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings . . ." (35). Note the repetition—a key motif utilized throughout the novella—of the term "cut off" here, denoting the sudden alienation which accompanies the loss of home, meaning, order, and comfort. As Marlow says, "The rest of the world was nowhere . . ." (40).

The boat—coded as "home"—represents a space that Marlow has been able to take control of and order. This desire is acknowledged once again through Marlow's comment on the condition of Kurtz's station, when he remarks that the hill is "perfectly free from undergrowth" and that "there was no enclosure or fence of any kind, but there had been one apparently, for near the house half a dozen slim posts remained in a row . . ." (52). The rough order of Kurtz's station confirms for Marlow the ability of "civilized" man to structure and tame the "wildness" of the land. Also implicit in this formulation is the idea that the natives have been disciplined to carry out the will of their imperial masters. Earlier Marlow states that the native fireman is "useful because he had been instructed" (37). The fireman's usefulness is defined by his instrumentality within the imperialist structure. It's not surprising then that Marlow later refers to the steamboat helmsman as an "instrument" (50). The natives' usefulness is directly predicated on how well they further the goals of imperialism.

Kurtz's actions are directed, in Marlow's telling, by a set of "moral ideas" (31). Kurtz's report, like that of all imperialists, portrays itself in altruistic terms: "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded" (50). But his text ends with a simple statement: "Exterminate the brutes!" (50). Here the fantasy of benevolence that masks the violence of imperialism is rendered visible. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz," Marlow points out (49).

The true sources of Kurtz's power (and Marlow's fascination with him) lie not only in his control over the natives and his mastery of imperialism's ideological regimes, but also his ability to seize vast amounts of material wealth. Marlow states, "Ivory! I should think so. Heaps of it, stacks of it. The old mud shanty was bursting with it. You would think there was not a single rusk left either above or below the ground in the whole country" (48). Here we see the desires that drive imperial conquest—profit, ownership, power.[16] "Colonialism and its latter-day version, neocolonialism, are primarily economic and political exploitation," writes Peter Nazareth, "but they have cultural/psychic counterpart, which is both cause and consequence. *Colonialism, in this counterpart sense, means the imposition of one world-view on peoples of another*" (174). Kurtz's domination is not only physical but also ideological. He imposes an instrumentalist vision of objects and ownership over the land and its peoples. "Everything belonged to him" Marlow mockingly says, disavowing what he previously admired (48). And even after Kurtz's death Marlow's admiration of his power and ability to turn great profits haunts the text: "The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously around his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression" (68).

Inching ever closer to Kurtz on the steamboat, the sudden arrival of fog, the unpredictable "wilderness" that threatens the colonial project—like the native's agency—makes Marlow and the crew feel vulnerable. "Will they attack?" says one (40). "We will all be butchered in this fog" says another (40). During this scene Conrad gives voice to a native African:

> Their head-man, a young broad-chested black, severely draped in dark-blue fringed cloths, with fierce nostrils and his hair all done up artfully in oily ringlets, stood near me. "Aha!" I said, just for good fellowship's sake. "Catch 'im," he snapped with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp teeth—"catch 'im. Give 'im to us." "To you, eh?" I asked; "what would you do with them?" "Eat im!" he said curtly. . . . (40)

The native's hair is "artful," in Marlow's depiction, suggesting cultural uniqueness. Yet the "head-man's" allusion to cannibalism (which recalls Glave's epigraph) suggests the primitive transgression of a civilizing taboo, and therefore the distance between European culture and African savagery,[17] even while the text once again demonstrates the natives' capacity for agency and organizational energies. We should note, however, that Marlow's narrative has the effect of simultaneously acknowledging and delegitimizing the natives' agency. In this way, his narrative mitigates their subversive potential. We will see this rhetorical move again during the arrow attack discussed below.

In Marlow's telling, fear of attack from outside is compounded by the fear of an insurrection on the boat itself.

> Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us—they were thirty to five—and have a good tuck-in for once amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength, even yet, though their skins were no longer glossy and their muscles no longer hard. And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there. I looked at them with a swift quickening of interest—not because it occurred to me I might be eaten by them before very long, though I own to you that just then I perceived—in a new light, as it were—how unwholesome the pilgrims looked, and I hoped, yes I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so—what shall I say?—so—unappetizing: a touch of fantastic vanity which fitted well with the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time. Perhaps I had a little fever too. (41)

By now the pattern becomes almost axiomatic. Marlow acknowledges the functioning of what we might call a higher order faculty—restraint, despite the power to overwhelm. He then immediately rejects this proposal, stating "Restraint! What possible restraint?" (41). Marlow's depiction, like Glave's, acknowledges the possibility of resistance (in form of the organization energies of human beings) while it simultaneously accentuates the dissipation of these energies.

Soon the steamboat is attacked by a barrage of arrows (49–50). Here the reader might assume that the natives' resistance finally finds its full expression in

Marlow's account. But the agency of this moment is revoked when we later learn from Kurtz's Russian assistant that Kurtz himself ordered the attack (63). Here the possibility for resistance is deferred to the colonial puppet-master (Kurtz) whose "control" over the natives and mastery of the colonial project renders him threatening to the imperial order itself. Further the steamboat, symbolic of home, is directly attacked by Kurtz and the natives, representing the ultimate threat to Marlow's notions of stability and security, i.e. imperial order.

Marlow's fear of the natives, and his confusion about their alliance with Kurtz, is heightened upon his landing at Kurtz's station. Marlow states, "I don't like this. These natives are in the bush" (53). Marlow is told not to worry because they are "simple people" (53). With a pull of the steamboat's whistle the natives scatter. According to the cultural logic of the novella, Western technology triumphs over native (African) superstition and puts a halt to the possibility of resistance. Kurtz's order over the natives is attained at a steep price. The coupling of Kurtz with the native people through his "mistress"—"savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent" (60)—introduces the imperial anxieties of racial mixing and miscegenation latent in the text. Marlow's narrative suggests that as a consequence of sexual intermingling with the other, Kurtz's "magnificent" mind is overcome by madness (50). Kurtz therefore becomes the victim of failing to observe the racial and sexual hierarchies of the colonial order, and a warning to those who might too comfortably dwell among Africans and other oppressed peoples around the globe.

Near the end of the novella, the natives "don't want [Kurtz] to go" (54). Despite the complexities of Marlow's vision his native subject has a dream to be forever subjugated.[18] The tribe "adored" Kurtz even while he displays the "heads of rebels" on poles (55, 57). Marlow comments that "Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks" (58). Marlow interprets Kurtz's ability to control the native population is something to be admired, striven for, even emulated. And yet at the same time, Kurtz is the uber-imperialist whose methods "ruined the district" (57). He takes the logic of imperialism to its full conclusion, embodying such an unadulterated will to power that it threatens to undermine the projects of imperialism: conquest, profit-seeking, control.

In the famous scene at the end of the novella, an ailing Kurtz is brought to the steamboat—the symbol of order and home—to recover. Later he escapes to take part in a ritual involving a "big fire" off in the distance (63). Marlow, realizing Kurtz's escape from the symbolic home, cuts him off and states, "You will be lost . . . utterly lost" (65). The threat of loss—again repeated—has a strangely compelling effect on Kurtz. Marlow clarifies to his compatriots that he "did say the right thing," as it has the result, when combined with a physical threat, of returning Kurtz to the steamboat (65). "I was on the threshold of great things," Kurtz pleads (65). It is at this threshold limit that Kurtz gives up on his mastery of the Congo and returns with Marlow to the ship.

Marlow recovers Kurtz not from his own insanity, but from the madness and chaos that the "heart of darkness" symbolizes, returning him to steamboat, the

known, familiar, ordered realm ("home") of safety (32). Reflecting on his encounter with this limit-zone, Marlow states, "And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible" (70). The very notion of "threshold" suggests the boundary or border that Marlow crossed into total otherness, which for Kurtz resulted in madness and ultimately death. In this way, Kurtz represents the ideals of colonialist "progress" taken to such an extreme that it works against the larger project of generating wealth and profits for a nation-state (25). Kurtz has managed to change resistance from a force with anticolonial implications to a form of agency that works not in the service of a colonial power, but in the service of his personal interests.

In the cultural logic of the narrative, Kurtz's "recovery" from being "lost" and stumbling into the chaos of "madness" can be read as cathartic moment when imperial order is restored. "The horror! The horror!" Kurtz famously states (69).[19] The "horror" is the loss of reason, control, and the constant threat of imperial order coming undone. It is, for the imperial audience gathered to hear Marlow's story, a warning about becoming-native that threatens the logic and functioning of imperialism itself. Edward Said writes that at the end of the novella what "Marlow and Kurtz . . . saw, disablingly and disparagingly, as a non-European 'darkness' was in fact a non-European world *resisting* imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence . . ." (30).

My analysis suggests that *Heart of Darkness* in fact acknowledges and continually hints at what it most fears: the possibility of native resistance to colonial rule. This possibility is mitigated near the end of the novella when we find out it is in fact Kurtz's order that animates the earlier native arrow attack. The anticolonial resistance I have been tracking in this essay is thus foreclosed by the novella's ending. It is a force that, if realized, might end the exploitative production of wealth and power typically justified though the benevolent imperial narrative of "progress" and "civility" (50). These inscriptions of resistance are an important but underdeveloped part of Conrad's novella.

The true catastrophe in *Heart of Darkness* is not the death, mystery, and existential terror that are common to the rich tradition of interpretation surrounding the novella, but the inability of the natives to overcome Kurtz's monomania. Which is to say, the latent energies of resistance that crackle throughout the text culminate in nothing. The potential for resistance to imperialist rule is ever a source of anxiety for Marlow and the pilgrims, but the consequences of this action are never fully articulated within the novella. Benita Parry notes that "The Congo . . . some 50 years later spoke for itself by rejecting Belgian colonialism" (50). It was precisely this outcome that Conrad's novella hints at and attempts to mitigate.[20]

While colonial depictions of the Congo and critics of the novella have tended to ignore or tone down the significance of native resistance to colonial oppression, *Heart of Darkness* is vexed in the way it alludes to native agency through the colonial assumptions that frame the narrative. Conrad's novella acknowledges genuine

resistance by African natives against colonial rule even while downplaying the significance of these acts. The brief glimpses of native resistance in the novella demonstrate an anxiety about control and order that characterize the concerns of all imperial audiences, including those on Marlow's boat (90). These moments of resistance, however tentative at times, serve an important organizing function in the novella, helping to build suspense in a colonialist context that normalizes the subjugation of the natives. Further, the novella helps to highlight the colonialist concerns with control, order, and domination that could be decoded by its audiences. Most importantly, Conrad's narrative points out a residual sense of agency enacted through native resistance. *Heart of Darkness* frets over the implications of this, despite its colonial assumptions of superiority and implicit suggestion that the native Africans of the narrative do not have the mental capacity for organization, outrage, or meaningful agency. In doing so, *Heart of Darkness* belies a continual anxiety about native resistance that is concomitant with its very possibility.

betrays

so, shows contradiction

Notes

1. See Renton, Seddon, and Zeilig 27–33.

2. When I speak of resistance in this essay, I am particularly interested in the ability of native peoples to resist the physical and intellectual violence of colonialism. Resistance denotes human actions and speech that register displeasure with the administrative, police, military, and institutional apparatuses that govern a given space or territory—and attempts to alter or destroy it. Even though those who resist may not gain what they seek, by enacting resistance and challenging the status quo, they play a role in their fate, even if—especially if—their role is indeterminate, or simply not enough to help them realize their ideals. For Edward Said, resistance is complex and multifaceted. He discusses two forms of resistance: "armed" and "cultural" (xii). The former of which Said clarifies in *Culture and Imperialism* as being potentially "political, economic, and military" (222). Said's formulation of these terms is as mutually reinforcing but distinct spheres. Resistance manifests itself in knowable, tangible actions that are the product of human effort and struggle. Said's stimulating commentary on *The Battle of Algiers* attests to not only the importance of this film as a cultural expression of cultural resistance, but also to its unblinking depiction of armed resistance as central to anticolonial agency. Not all forms of resistance were authentic native uprisings against colonial rulers, nor did all fit Said's categories of "cultural" and "armed." For example, he describes how laborers used "laziness" to resist the Raj in India (203). In other cases, imperial powers fomented native resistance to weaken their adversaries. At times, colonial soldiers mutinied due to lack of pay or other grievances and joined in an (uneasy) alliance with the people of the Congo against colonial rule (Renton, Seddon, and Zeilig).

3. I'm reminded of C.L.R. James at this point, whose text *The Black Jacobins* brilliantly portrays the difficult, heroic, single-minded resistance of slaves who eventually overthrew colonial rule. At points in his history of the San Domingo revolution, James castigates the slaves who submitted to their masters' wills. He writes, "the majority of the slaves accommodated themselves to this unceasing brutality by a profound fatalism and a wooden stupidity before their masters" (15). In this passage James is describing not the inherent inferiority of the slaves but the material consequences of their subjugation by the slave owners. Such depictions can be contextualized in James's hatred of slavery, and especially the power of slavery to twist and destroy the resistant capacities of human beings. *The Black Jacobins* is a lament for the destroyed lives and potential slavery leaves in its wake as well as an affirmation of the human spirit that overcomes oppression.