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“THE EARTH SEEMED UNEARTHLY”: CAPITAL, WORLD-ECOLOGY, AND ENCHANTED NATURE IN CONRAD’S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

Caitlin Vandertop

Capital is the only real and omnipotent God. He manifests Himself in all forms—in glittering gold and in stinking guano; in a herd of cattle and in a cargo of coffee . . . in gigantic machines, made of hardest steel, and in elegant rubber goods. . . . When Capital strikes a country, it is as if a hurricane is passing through, tearing down and destroying men, animals, and all earthly things.

—Paul Lafargue, *La Religion du Capital*

The word ivory rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all like a whiff from some corpse. By Jove!

The earth seemed unearthly. . . . It was unearthly.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

In his introduction to the concept of world-ecology, Jason W. Moore urges environmental critics to go beyond the implicit dualism of the Anthropocene paradigm by linking the current global ecological crisis to the historically specific operations of capital, moving toward an understanding of nature and society as mutually constitutive within what he terms “the capitalist *oikeios*” or “Capitalocene” (*Capitalism* 151). For Moore, world-ecology’s focus on the systemic organization of nature by capital offers a

politicizing corrective to Anthropocenic discourse, replacing “nature in general” with a vision of “*historical* natures” (“The Capitalocene” 255). Moore focuses on activities at the frontiers of “non-capitalized natures” (266), from sixteenth-century sugar plantations in the West Indies to contemporary coal regimes, as they form the basis for the “*ecological surplus*” (241). This surplus, he suggests, is acquired through the appropriation of the “Four Cheaps” (253), which are “labor power, food, energy, and raw materials,” from a range of “human and extra-human natures” (249), including women and slaves, forests, soils, and rivers. Essential to this process is the symbolic production of “real abstractions” (246) through knowledge practices and “geomanagerial” “*technics*” (245), as they allow “Cheap Natures” to be identified, quantified, rationalized, measured, and coded, ranging from the standardized physical requirements within slave markets to the language of fertility and women’s work. As these examples indicate, knowledge practices that appear as forms of quantification, rationalization, or equivalence, in line with the neoclassical laws of value, in fact rest on a series of moral and subjective judgments, revealing the production of value to be premised on a series of devaluations. Insofar then as Moore’s world-ecological method demands a relational view of materiality and value (according to which, for example, energy regimes are historically specific “bundles of relations” [254]), it mirrors Marx’s own materialism, with its attention to forms, relations, concepts, and abstractions.

While Joseph Conrad has increasingly been read as an ecological writer in recent years—forecasting “the brewing storm of ecological catastrophe,” as McCarthy puts it (620)—this essay suggests that his writing is less concerned with nature per se than with the consequences of its economic transformation in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

From his depictions of port cities, ivory lands, mines, oceans, plantations, and botanical stations, Conrad's nature appears as a vast socioecological assemblage, which—following nineteenth-century revolutions in transportation, communication technologies, and knowledge practices from colonial botany to cartography—is organized into commodity frontiers for resources as diverse as silver, petroleum, coal, sugar, coffee, silk, bananas, tobacco, and ivory. Across these networked environments, the narratives of volatile climatic disasters and wasted resources in Conrad's fiction can be seen to anticipate both the ecological and epistemological consequences of global capitalism. Indeed, images of capital and nature in his writing are almost always entwined, from the silver mine in *Nostromo* and the cash frozen beneath the Russian tundra in *Under Western Eyes* to the mysterious cosmic force driving the financial disasters of *Chance*. Conradian disasters are never simply natural: the catastrophic combustion of the coal cargo in "Youth" is a man-made event; the shipwreck in "The End of the Tether" is the outcome of the owner's insurance policy; and the storm in *Typhoon*, which describes the radical devaluation and redistribution of the savings of a group of migrant workers, is both a natural and financial disaster. Given also that Conrad makes frequent use of the invisible hand metaphor, which contains suggestions of both natural theology and market mechanisms, it becomes difficult to separate his representation of an unfathomable natural world from the complex processes of its social and economic organization.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, his writing anticipates precisely that bundle of capital-nature relations that, for world-ecological historians, marks the age of the Capitalocene.

This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the "true ivory-country" of *Heart of Darkness* (60), a text that reveals the material and symbolic appropriation of cheap

natures at the commodity frontier. As a number of environmental historians have shown, the years leading up to the novella's publication saw commodity regimes for ivory, guano, copper, and rubber violently consolidated in the Belgian Congo, a process that involved seismic geophysical transformations, including the destruction of traditional food sources, the introduction of invasive crop species and diseases, the onslaught of deforestation and drought, and the extinction of local wildlife. Colonists harvested such resources as wild rubber for tires and insulations, copper and cobalt for wires and alloys, and ivory as a kind of moldable protoplastic, as Jennifer Wenzel has discussed. She describes the Congo as one of Europe's most important commodity frontiers, going so far as to ask if modernity could have been "conducted" if not for the resources of the region (2). Critics have also highlighted the extent to which the material objectives of resource extraction depended on the symbolic ascription of subjective and arbitrary values to designate and quantify cheap natures, from elephants to forced laborers. Capturing a sense of the strange conversion of life into cash in the Congo basin, Ryan Murphy notes how the loss of herds totaling thousands of elephants often "amount[ed] to but a single showroom of billiard balls in nineteenth-century Europe" (16). As elephants were manically converted into billiard balls, the ivory formerly put to use as common pillars, stanchions, and door-posts in Congolese homes appeared—according to witnesses such as Henry Stanley—to have been magically transmogrified into "precious tusks" (380). Such conversions of value were accompanied by equally mysterious legal abstractions of the kind noted in Arthur Conan Doyle's account, which captures a sense of the rapidity with which colonists dispossessed Africans of the resources contained in their "ancestral wandering-places" at a single stroke of the pen

(11). A similar picture of the surreal imposition of economic and legal abstractions in the Congo forest emerges in *Heart of Darkness*, where the introduction of “time contracts” (58), “percentages” (66), and discourses of “efficiency” (47) produces what Marlow calls an “absurd” (93), “farcical” (55), and “unreal” situation (65)—one deemed “too stupid . . . to be altogether natural” (63).

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s formally irrealist method of nature writing evokes the production of an unnatural nature at the ivory frontier. Throughout the novella, Marlow describes the African jungle as unreal, enchanted, magical, bewitching, bewildering, dreamlike, and “unearthly”—both as it appears to European observation and as it actually is: “The earth seemed unearthly. . . . It was unearthly” (79). When Marlow observes the dense vegetation creeping “higher than the wall of a temple” (69), he asks: “What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing or would it handle us? . . . What was in there? I could see a little ivory coming out.” Here, the opacity of the jungle proves inseparable from the limits of European vision and its persistent forms of fetish and belief. Yet, as Marlow’s observation makes clear, it is specifically the ivory that is central to the jungle’s enchantment: not only does the commodity regime condition new ways of seeing the environment, but it unleashes “new forces” (57) and “overwhelming realities” (77) that transform nature in seemingly objective, material terms: the earth is—rather than simply appears—unearthly. This essay argues that the “new forces at work” (57) animating nature in *Heart of Darkness* mirror Marx’s concept of real abstraction as the mode by which the forms, values, and categories arising from the system of exchange transform the world through their real, material, and operative effects. That Conrad’s unearthly earth echoes Marx’s own

account of capital as an “*alien* social power” and a supernatural, independent agent (*Grundrisse* 197), the essay argues, suggests not an unknowable, ontological natural universe but a social world transformed by the enchanting, world-historical interactions of capital and nature.

### **“Too Stupid . . . to Be Altogether Natural”**

A key point of intersection between *Heart of Darkness* and world-ecological criticism—defined according to its focus on capitalism as a systemic way of organizing nature—emerges through the novella’s depiction of ecological transformation in the Congo as a process driven by colonial economic practices that generate unnatural forms of waste and exhaustion. Arriving at the station following his journey inland from the port of Boma, Marlow finds that the colonial managers and accountants have produced a “fantastic” (65) and “unreal” situation, “as unreal . . . as their talk, as their government, as their show of work” (66). This situation has emerged in part because—  
notwithstanding all the talk of efficiency and “perfectly correct transactions” (61)—their activities at the commodity frontier are in fact incredibly wasteful in practice.<sup>3</sup> Marlow confronts the visual evidence of wasteful energy expenditure, observing the detritus of needlessly imported materials, “rubbishy” commodities (60) and expended “raw matter” (57), from broken machinery to starving bodies. Contemplating “the great demoralisation of the land” (59), he describes “scene[s] of inhabited devastation” (56): abandoned imported drainage pipes (“a wanton smash up” [58]), “a waste of excavations” (56), and workers blasting holes into rocks and digging vast “artificial hole[s]” for no apparent reason (57). Marlow repeatedly condemns the illogicality of a system in which short-term competition for “percentages” (66) means that nothing useful



is produced and resources are deployed wastefully. Observing a sunken steamboat—an act made to look like an accident, but which he suspects to have been a deliberate form of sabotage—he suggests that the short-sighted, competitive scheming of the ivory traders has produced a situation “too stupid . . . to be altogether natural.” There are echoes here of other unnatural disasters in Conrad in which speculators and insurers, in their short-term drive for percentages, embrace a financial logic that profits from the possibility of destruction and waste. Furthermore, the fact that the African workers ultimately starve on salaries of cheap brass wire (a resource which, Marlow claims, is useless “unless they swallowed the wire itself” [85]) reveals the unnatural effects of man-made food regimes and the engineered scarcity brought about by the conversion of nature into cash. In this way, *Heart of Darkness* portrays a commodity regime so unnatural in its organization of nature that it relegates entire regions and their inhabitants to disposability and abandonment.

The unnatural nature in *Heart of Darkness* might therefore be connected to the economic logic of the commodity frontier as it generates waste, exhaustion, and racialized exclusion. That this logic is inscribed onto the emaciated and abandoned bodies of workers as they slowly waste away (“they were dying slowly,” Marlow observes, as “black shadows of disease” [58]) suggests an almost mundane, everyday violence at the commodity frontier. This evokes the form of “slow violence” (11) that Nixon defines as a complex and structural violence “enacted slowly over time,” which is characteristic of resource enclaves. In this context, the slow economic and ecological basis of the novella’s “scene[s] of inhabited devastation” undermines the catastrophic temporality of the natural disaster narrative. This echoes Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s

suggestion, in his study of Victorian imperialism as a regime whose economic and agricultural policies created environments of disaster, that the so-called natural disaster is less an exceptional and extreme event than a “normal” (8) condition whose destructive potential exists within the context of a historically produced vulnerability. While ecocritical readings have rightly viewed the “grove of death” sequence in *Heart of Darkness* (61) as a portrait of ecological devastation, there is critical force to the suggestion that the novella’s inhabited violence is a product of historically normal socioecological practices. Yet if the violence of the resource enclave is structural and mundane, it also takes the appearance of a quasi-supernatural force. Such a representation echoes Nixon’s analysis of the way in which the economy can appear as a supernatural or spiritual force for residents of resource enclaves, exposing the material violence of export culture, resource dependency, and bondage as a kind of “resource curse” (69). This resource curse has been observed in gothic fiction by Michael Niblett, who identifies the quasi-supernatural “monstrosity” of capitalism’s appropriation of life-energies in representations of waste (1). Capitalism’s drive to accumulate is wasteful both because it exhausts the labor of low-value workers and because it turns pools of potential workers into so-called surplus populations. Yet although capitalism maximizes profit by minimizing its dependence on labor power, Niblett suggests, it nevertheless depends on the laboring body. The fact that what cannot be converted into abstract social labor is deemed inessential means that waste itself becomes a haunting structural remainder. As an essential yet excluded feature of the enchanted world of finance capital, waste ends up shadowing value with what it nominally displaces: the “concrete particularity of the labour of the human body” that it

seeks to overcome. It is this gothic quality of waste as monstrous remainder that is overwhelmingly present in Conrad's grove of death sequence, where sickly "shapes" (58), "shadows," and "figure[s]" (112) haunt Marlow as they materialize and waste away, and where—under the influence of the resource curse—the earth itself becomes unearthly, its indigenous inhabitants "nothing earthly now" (58).

Viewed from a world-ecological perspective, the incursion of elements of the unearthly in *Heart of Darkness* corresponds to the central conflict staged within the novella, that between the economic discourses of efficiency espoused by the European accountants and the monstrous effects of waste and exhaustion generated by capital's activities at the commodity frontier. This conflict plays out spectacularly through the figure of Kurtz, who appears as the very embodiment of capital's gothic monstrosities and world-ecological contradictions. Described as a "shadow" (106), "apparition," "vapour" (112), and "phantom" (125), Kurtz is animated by "frightful realities" (121) and speaks as if "words had been torn out of him by a supernatural power" (115). Just as the earth is unearthly, so too does Kurtz appear as an abstraction supernaturally removed from the earth: "There was nothing either above or below him. . . . He had kicked himself loose of the earth" (113). Significantly, Kurtz's threat to consume "all the earth" (106) resonates with Moore's account of "capitalism's voracious appetite for non-capitalized natures" ("The Capitalocene" 266), which operates in service to the utopian project of the endless "accumulation of wealth as abstract labor" (256) that Moore terms the "correspondence project, through which capital seeks to compel the rest of the world to correspond to the imaginary (but quite real) desire for a universe of 'economic equivalence'" (257). Kurtz—who is the agent of a similarly utopian project associated

with a “higher intelligence” (67), “a singleness of purpose,” and “the cause”—uses “burning noble words” (95) and “magic currents of phrases” to give symbolic power to the economic laws of expansion, equivalence, and universalization that underlie his desire to turn “each station” (76) into “a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade.” Yet this desire for a universe of economic equivalence is tangibly severed from material reality: what Kurtz actually trades—when “grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush” (87)—is bullets: “he had no goods to trade. . . . There’s a good lot of cartridges left” (102). In doing so, he grounds the value of the commodity not in the laws of exchange but in its violently unequal activity. Moore contends that the objective world of value operates through the subjectivities of “capital’s imagination” (Haiven qtd. in “The Capitalocene” 256), suggesting that the calculation of value is not simply a matter of capital using objective knowledge based on dualism and quantification, but rather “of capital deploying its symbolic power to represent the arbitrary character of value relations as objective” (256). If Kurtz gives voice to the ideals of equivalence and expansion that are central to capital’s imagination, it is telling that Conrad turns him into a figure of myth and fairy tale: a cultic propagator of “magic . . . phrases,” a “pitiful Jupiter” (106) and “an enchanted princess” (87). In this way, Kurtz’s representation as a figure of enchantment works to displace the assumptions of objectivity contained within the language of value.

The contradictory nature of Kurtz’s project is also implied in the recurring metaphor of his prodigious appetite, which threatens to consume the natural world and its inhabitants. Marlow is haunted by a vision of Kurtz “opening his mouth voraciously” (121): “I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect as

though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him” (106). Significantly, Kurtz is represented throughout the novella as a vessel for larger forces: while he lacks “restraint in the gratification of his various lusts” (104), Marlow insists that the “wilderness had. . . . whispered to him” and that “it echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.” Marlow links these whispering forces explicitly to the “wilderness” of the jungle, before connecting this wildness to the region’s “fantastic invasion.” This move from the abstract wildness of the jungle to the specific historical wildness of the invaded commodity frontier links Kurtz’s personal greed and depravity to the destructive logic of world-ecological accumulation in the region. It is this logic that underscores his treatise on Africa’s improvement with its single “terrifying . . . post-scriptum” (95-96): “Exterminate all the brutes!” (95).<sup>4</sup> Confronting the ideology of trade and development with the underlying fact of extermination, this document provides the “exposition of a method” devoted not to the universalization of the value form—as implied in Kurtz’s plan to convert every station into a “beacon . . . for trade” (76)—but to a short-term, highly uneven process of enrichment contingent on extraction, dispossession, and exhaustion: the tearing of “treasure out of the bowels of the land” (73). Conrad’s use of the language of appetite, in this context, anticipates Rosa Luxemburg’s suggestion that capitalism itself “feeds” on the ruins of non-capitalist organizations (397), as well as Moore’s notion that capital consumes the resources of non-capitalized frontiers on which it depends. However intrinsic the internal domains of unpaid work might be to capital, Moore argues, human and extra-human natures are “exhausted, and externalized by capital just as readily” (“Wall Street” 45). Not only do we see that Kurtz’s appetite leads to his personal undoing, then, but we learn that it has

“ruined the district” (104) both in economic and ecological terms: “confound the man, he had kicked the very earth to pieces” (113). Thus, through Conrad’s depiction of Kurtz’s monstrous appetite as well as of “inhabited devastation” at the commodity frontier (56), *Heart of Darkness* undermines the universalizing rhetoric of market discourse, staging a contradiction between the utopian project in whose service capital acts and the exhausting effects of its voracious world-ecological drive.

### **Ivory as Real Abstraction and Religion**

If *Heart of Darkness* connects forms of ecological disruption to the economic appropriation and exhaustion of human and extra-human natures at the commodity frontier, then a second key way in which the novella intersects with the world-ecological paradigm—with its focus on the historical interrelation of nature and capital—is through its attention to the symbolic practices by which cheap natures are produced and organized. Specifically, its representation of these practices suggests that world-ecological transformations rest on subjective knowledge practices and arbitrary definitions of value. From the outset, Marlow’s view of Africa as absurd and unreal is connected to the modes by which abstractions create tangible material effects. When, for example, he is haunted by the “incomprehensible” (55) and “insan[e]” image of a French gunboat “firing into a continent,” the combination of material violence and symbolic domination shows how Africa is in a sense produced by the abstractions of the law and map. The image is absurd because it shows how colonial domination is both abstract in its machinations and strikingly concrete in its effects. Just as the symbolic power of the map transforms Africa’s landscape into a continent and thus an abstract shape—the border of which, Marlow observes, “ran straight like a ruled line” (54)—so

the African subjects are discursively produced as “enemies, criminals, workers” through legal terminology (105). Having been “brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts” (58), the workers are transformed into the numeric units of a cheap labor reserve and literally become abstractions: “bundles of acute angles” (59), “vague forms” (90), “black shapes” (58), and “moribund shapes [as] free as air.” For Marlow, the workers are empty, strolling carriers of value, their presence tangible only through “the stamp and shuffle of sixty pair of bare feet . . . each pair under a sixty-pound load” (61). He observes how, behind the “raw matter” of a chain gang, “one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle” (57). Dehumanizing as such images are, the novella’s surreal visions of strolling forces capture a sense of the bizarre way in which abstractions, values, and facts have physically transformed the raw matter of human and extra-human natures. The image of resources animated by intangible forces also appears in the descriptions of fetishistic objects like the abandoned boiler “wallowing in the grass” (56), the “railway truck lying there on its back. . . . as dead as the carcass of some animal,” or the “evil spirit” residing in the ship’s boiler (80). Here, although it is a local fireman who identifies a devil in the boiler, the observation is verified by Marlow, who concedes that “the boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it” (81). Later, he soberly describes his shoe “flying unto the devil-god of that river” (92). As the language and voice suggest, the landscape’s magical agents of causality are not simply the projections of superstitions or subjective mental processes but capture a situation that is itself unreal—a situation in which humans, nature, and their hybrids have been transformed and animated by the “overwhelming realities” and “new forces” of the colonial economy. In other words, the

novella gestures toward the symbolic processes by which human and extra-human natures are brought to life by impersonal forces that have become more real than matter itself.<sup>5</sup>

The activities of the colonial agents of this symbolic and material transformation, meanwhile, are described in equally abstract terms by Marlow as unreal, their “show of work” revealing the fictitious nature of the knowledge practices with which the Europeans are engaged. Hence, when Marlow passes a white man charged with the “up-keep of the road” (62), he notes that he did not see “any road or any up-keep”; likewise, when he encounters an agent entrusted with the “making of bricks” (66), he observes that “there wasn’t a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station.” Here, the landscape’s invisible bricks and absent roads function as spatial correlates to the gap between the developmental discourses embraced by the colonial administrators and the reality of their roles as the symbolic producers of cheap natures. Tellingly, Marlow notes how the real occupation of the Europeans consists of waiting for commissions to roll in: despite the agent’s unreal “show of work,” “the only real feeling was the desire to get appointed to a trading post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages” (66). What Marlow observes, then, is not simply the hollow discourses of efficiency and “perfectly correct transactions” at the commodity frontier, but the “real feeling” of a landscape transformed by the rule of percentages. As such, the “overwhelming realities” transforming nature in *Heart of Darkness* can be seen to give form to the real, animating effects of financial abstractions, anticipating Moore’s definition of finance as “a way of organizing nature” (“Wall Street” 43).

Conrad’s persistent evocation of the language of religious belief also furthers this



essay's reading of *Heart of Darkness* as world-ecological in its attention to the role of the value form in and on nature. Although the organization of nature according to the percentages of colonial accountancy might appear to imply a Weberian process of rationalization—suggesting the economic, social, and political organization of life according to the requirements of bureaucratic and instrumental rationality—the forces animating the Congo forest in *Heart of Darkness* are consistently represented in religious terms as the work of “angel[s]” (69), “devil-god[s]” (92), and “pilgrims” (78) who appears to be “praying” (65) to the ivory.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, this religious language could be seen to cohere with Moore's view of the symbolic constitution of cheap natures as a process that relies on inherently subjective definitions and devaluations, even as it invokes the language of objective value, economic rationality, and neoclassical laws. Conrad's decision to focus on ivory, rather than rubber or guano, evokes a specific historical link between ivory and religious iconography, given that, as Myers notes, religious imagery dominated the earliest examples of European ivory carving. This suggestion of the theological qualities of the commodity evokes Marx's observation that commodity fetishism mirrors the abstractions of religious thought insofar as “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own” (*Capital* 1: 165). Importantly, however, Marx's substitution of commodity relations for religion does not imply a personal, fetishistic worship of the commodity but imbues the commodity regime with an essentially religious structure. Marx thus identifies a form of abstract domination rooted, as Alberto Toscano points out, in “the everyday world of production, consumption, and circulation” (25)—a world in which, Marx writes, men “have . . . already acted before thinking” (*Capital* 180). Rather than understand religion

as a mental construct or a reduction of external complexity, then, a Marxian framework suggests that social life is always-already abstracted—by coinage, speculation, value—within the secular cult of capitalism, which resembles an actually-existing metaphysics or “religion of everyday life” (*Capital* 3: 969).

In the early twentieth century, materialist studies of the sacred by scholars such as Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic* or Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* prioritized the function of religion within a particular social body. Although not directly influenced by these writers, Conrad presents religion in similar terms as a feature of everyday life under capitalism, anticipating Walter Benjamin’s suggestion in “Capitalism as Religion” that the forms of abstraction, fetishism, and belief characterizing secular capitalism produce an “essentially religious phenomenon” (288) and “purely cultic religion,” whose bank notes form the new holy iconography.<sup>7</sup> The ivory frontier in *Heart of Darkness* is very much a secular cult: Conrad describes the Europeans as “*faithless* pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence” (65; emphasis added), that is, less believers in an eschatological process that shows scant signs of concrete evidence than actors within a system that requires them to wait faithfully for commissions to roll in from the “precious trickle of ivory” (60).<sup>8</sup> In other words, the pilgrims are actors locked within a system that requires them to invest a certain faith in abstractions. As critics have noted, Conrad’s emphasis on the mechanisms of faith and trust, investment and return, speculation and valuation—in *Heart of Darkness* and across his fiction—reveals a striking attentiveness to the structures of belief on which financial industries depend. Moreover, his work frequently suggests that capitalism relies on faith rather than knowledge: accounts of unintelligent, uninformed corporate

administrators, insurance companies, and monopolists—with names like the Orb Bank and Spectre Trust, in *Chance*, for example—reveal how financial agents thrive on reckless speculations and partial, mystical knowledge, compelling obedience not despite but because their actions cannot be fully grasped or totalized. Among the Europeans in *Heart of Darkness*, it is Kurtz in particular who has faith irrespective of whether he adopts a believing or a skeptical position: he “had the faith—don’t you see?—he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything—anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party. . . . Any party” (120). This notion that Kurtz’s faith is severed from his personal belief in any one particular thing echoes Marx’s understanding of commodity fetishism as an intrinsic facet of social reality rather than a product of the mind. Similarly, when Marlow describes the Congo forest as a place in which “the word ivory rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed” (65), the passive voice works to de-individualize belief, grafting it onto the environment of a participatory value regime. Just, then, as the European metaphysical tradition was inscribed in ivory, as Myers suggests, so Conrad inscribes the theological niceties of ivory onto the external world of the commodity frontier. Hence, while world-ecological criticism highlights the subjective nature of the knowledge practices by which human and extra-human natures are mapped, coded, quantified, measured, and (de)valued, Conrad’s unearthly landscape can be seen to give aesthetic form to the operative reality (or “real feeling”) of these abstractions as they act on, transform, and animate life at the commodity frontier. Documenting a moment of profound world-ecological transformation and sensitive to the interactions of capital and nature, *Heart of Darkness* imagines a process of re-enchantment driven by forces that—though predicated on subjective,

irrational, and racialized devaluations—take on a life of their own.

### **Enchantment, Sublime Materialism, and Extra-Human Revolt**

The enchanted and veiled character of Conrad's language in *Heart of Darkness* has often been understood as a form of protomodernism that seeks to undermine Victorian realism's pretensions to transparency and the stability of meaning. Yet such a characterization risks overlooking the historical conditions under which this aesthetic emerged.<sup>9</sup> In a recent discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, Franco Moretti describes the novella's evasive language—its numerous “veil[ed]” forms (“Fog” 66), “laborious and ubiquitous similes,” countless digressions and over thirty references to darkness—as a form of literary “re-enchantment.” Demonstrating how Conrad's text enshrouds its objects in a mysterious “fog” as part of a strategy that endlessly obfuscates—even while it gestures toward—imperial violence, Moretti situates the text within a wider process of discursive re-enchantment characteristic of Victorian literature more generally, according to which historical and social precision are replaced with a vague sense of moral significance.<sup>10</sup> Yet, if the evasive language of Conrad's novella obscures its historical specificity at points, the text's ghostly traces of “abandoned villages” (61), “paths, paths, everywhere,” and “settlements, some centuries old” (54) evoke the haunted social and historical emptiness of a place whose former residents have fled forced labor and ecological genocide. Read in the context of socioecological transformation and crisis, *Heart of Darkness* is less deliberately obfuscating than attentive to the enchantment of world-ecological accumulation, attesting to both its sensory effects and to its reliance on the symbolic production of abstract nature itself.

Indeed, if we situate Conrad's modernism in this context, it is worth noting that

the very idea of world-ecological literature implies a transcendence of realism. Thus, in her “Conjectures on World-Ecological Literature,” Sharae Deckard recognizes literature for its ability to capture a sense of the lived experiences, structures of feeling, and sensory effects of world-ecological transformation, which are not necessarily recordable in realistic ways. Similarly, Amitav Ghosh asks whether, given the European novel’s characteristic foregrounding of mundane, everyday scenes over fantastical events and improbable disasters, the climatic events of the Anthropocene can be represented in traditional realist modes at all. To introduce these into a novel, writes Ghosh, is “to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been residence; it is to risk banishment to . . . those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as ‘the Gothic,’ ‘the romance,’ or ‘the melodrama’” (24). Yet this schism between realism and the fantastic has been called into question by Fredric Jameson, who suggests that, in the context of the dizzying upheavals of global capitalism and the surreal imbalances of its manifestation in the world-system’s peripheries—where, due to “paradigmatic unevenness,” the most bizarre wonders are observed as simple empirical “fact[s]”—it is the real itself which becomes the true marvel (“No Magic”). Jameson identifies the surreal narrative “raw material” of an everyday life bewitched by capitalist modernity in a body of texts usually associated with modernism and magical realism (Dostoevsky, Kafka, Joyce, Gabriel García Márquez), where he identifies “a materialist sublime” that contains “no magic, no metaphor.” Similarly, the unearthly ivory frontier of *Heart of Darkness* registers the experience of a world-ecological process so vast and incomprehensible that it comes to resemble a supernatural power. This is perhaps the essence of Conrad’s materialist sublime: from the “new forces” strolling on two legs to

the “vague forms” that materialize out of thin air, and from the “devil-god[s]” that reside in the machines to the ivory that “whisper[s]” in the air, the presentation of surreal socioecological determinations as empirical facts allows Conrad to transform the quasi-magical machinations of real abstractions into the objective features of a suprasensible environment. Read historically, in the context of a moment in which countless settlements were abandoned, borders conjured out of thin air, and herds of elephants converted into billiard balls, the novella’s irrealism and linguistic obscurity does not simply reveal the limits of subjective observation but captures the real feeling of a region transformed by socioecological abstractions to an unthinkable extent.

In this context, a third and final intersection between Conrad and world-ecology arises: that of the notion of extra-human revolt as discussed by both world-ecological theorists and literary critics. Moore focuses on incidents of ecological revenge—from storms to viruses and superweeds—as moments in which life “rebels” against the value nexus of capitalist modernity (*Capitalism* 205). Deckard identifies similar moments of extra-human revolt as registered unconsciously in gothic aesthetics, observing the genre’s ubiquitous “uncanny returns of the repressed, plagues, swarms, and monstrous excrescences” (23). We might link such moments to the various storms, fires, fog, becalmed winds, shifting tides, and malaria outbreaks that appear in Conrad’s fiction. In *Heart of Darkness*, it is the dark, brooding jungle with its malevolent will that becomes an agent of revolt; not only does the “wilderness” whisper to Kurtz and precipitate his downfall, but Marlow finds a “vengeful aspect” (77) and disturbing agency in the dense vegetation, asking, “Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us?”

The problem, however, is that Marlow follows this with his observation of “a little

ivory,” and his narrative elsewhere suggests that it is the ivory, rather than nature as such, that will “handle” the Europeans. Is *Heart of Darkness* a story about the power of nature or the power of the ivory regime? Is the jungle’s triumph over Kurtz evidence of extra-human revolt or commodity determinism? As ever with Conrad, it is difficult to separate natural disasters from the speculative losses, currency crises, insurance scams, and bank crashes that they invariably accompany, and it is never quite clear if events are overdetermined by ecological or economic forces. Significantly, while *Heart of Darkness* ends with Marlow’s inability to repeat “the horror” to Kurtz’s intended (125), what is perhaps most interesting is the fact that he is silenced by a whispering, quasi-natural force: “I was on the point of crying at her, ‘Don’t you hear them?’ The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. ‘The horror! The horror!’” The agency of the environment here—the ability of a force “like” the wind to “whisper” the horror witnessed in the Congo—recalls Marlow’s earlier observation of “the word ivory . . . ring[ing] in the air” (78). While Marlow hears Kurtz’s last words whispered in the wind, he is unable to repeat them aloud and contemplates the consequences of speaking: “It seemed to me the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle” (126). Marlow imagines that saying “the horror” will cause the foundations of the house to collapse, yet, when he recognizes that speaking the truth will not bring about any kind of structural transformation, he remains silent. If “the horror” is externalized as a facet of the environment, it gestures toward the paralyzing structural embeddedness of colonial exploitation within the material and architectural forms of the metropolis itself (what

Jameson, in *Representing Capital*, views as the “past . . . labor” that congeals in “whole cities and landscapes” [102]). Marlow’s lapse into silence can thus be read as a pessimistic commentary on the structural relationship born by colonial history, a relationship that has effaced the desirability and consequentiality of knowledge altogether.<sup>11</sup> The novella’s frequent breakdowns of communication are also explicitly linked to the commodity form, from the hollow Kurtz’s “ivory ball” (93) of a head to the colonial manager at the station with his glittering “mica disc” eyes (67), which suggest both the Latin *micare* (glitter) and a mineral found in nineteenth-century Africa and used for telegraph cables. This juxtaposition minimizes the possibilities of human thought and action in the face of the overwhelming material power of the commodity regime. Just as Marlow continually berates his listeners for their complacent detachment from the events in the Congo, his narrative everywhere hints at the inconsequentiality of communication in the face of the materially unmediated, structural reality of European resource dependency. Perhaps, then, the force that whispers “the horror” is not an agent of extra-human revolt, but represents the monstrous, uncontrollable agency of the Capitalocene itself.

All of this suggests that *Heart of Darkness* fails to articulate a challenge to the value nexus of capitalist modernity, in Moore’s terms, and that human and extra-human life is subsumed by the very logic that the world-ecological paradigm sets out to critique. Yet even if *Heart of Darkness* fails to provide an ethical solution to the vast and complex socioecological system that it depicts, the fact that it refuses to lose sight of the categories of the commodity and imperialism in its representation of nature remains valuable today. This is a story of the Capitalocene rather than of nature or its inverse,



the Anthropocene, which Moore calls a “quasi-empty signifier. . . . not only because it is plastic, but because it fits comfortably with a view of population, environment and history governed by food and resource use—and abstracted from class and empire” (“The Capitalocene” 238). The worst effects of an ahistorical approach to the environment can be observed in the Congo today, for example in processes of green-grabbing that justify evictions in the name of conservation, as well as in theories of scarcity that abstract problems of ecological justice from the histories of capital and colonialism and the economic factors that make food unaffordable relative to income. *Heart of Darkness*, shifting from the metropolis to the commodity frontier and back again, is not simply a story about humanity’s ill treatment of nature. Rather, it reveals the unequal distribution of world-ecological violence and the unevenness of its effects. The result is that it is no longer enough to talk about nature without identifying the role of colonial economic activity, or what Stoler, when describing the environmental legacies of colonialism, calls the leftover “*toxins of imperial debris*” (5) that continue to be imbricated in contemporary climate issues from land dispossession to toxic dumping. To the extent that Conrad’s fiction invites a historical examination of the entwined activities of nature and capital, then, it continues to be an invaluable resource for ecocritical scholars today.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> A number of studies of Conrad have raised ecocritical questions in recent years. McCarthy, for example, asks if *Heart of Darkness* unsettles evolutionary discourses, while Myers questions whether Conrad's depiction of nature as a nondescript "mass" (103) is evidence of an underlying anthropocentrism. Several scholars have also focused on world-ecological questions concerning the identification and economic appropriation of nature in Conrad. For example, Parker explores the interrelation of value and nature through the representation of silver mining in "*Nostramo* and World-Ecology." Another example is MacDuffie's reading of *The Secret Agent* in the context of petroleum and an emerging "global economy of energy forms" (76). Mishra has discussed the role of the storm in Conrad's maritime fiction as an impediment to surplus accumulation, and Francis offers a comprehensive study of plantation economics and colonial botany in *Culture and Commerce in Conrad's Asian Fiction*. These studies affirm the importance of world-ecological themes to Conrad's work, both in terms of its historical context and its continuing relevance.

<sup>2</sup> See Buck-Morss 450 for more on how Adam Smith's use of the term derived from the tradition of natural theology, which similarly emphasized the absence of individual human cause or control by viewing evidence of God's hand at work in the natural world.

<sup>3</sup> Marlow describes the environment as "incomprehensible" (124), "mysterious" (46), "impenetrable" (116), "unreal" (66), and "absurd" (93), repeating the last word thirteen times: "Absurd! . . . And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—exploded! Absurd!"

<sup>4</sup> Murphy argues convincingly that the word "brutes" could in fact refer to elephants (14), noting how the novella's only other reference to the term compares the charmed life of "brutes" in the jungle to those of men. From a world-ecological perspective, this analysis

of Conrad's use of the term as one that could refer to either humans or animals is suggestive of the indiscriminate way in which both human and extra-human natures are appropriated at the commodity frontier.

<sup>5</sup> This conflation of the human and extra-human is of course also central to racist discourse. For this reason, Wenzel has criticized Conrad's portrayal of "essentialized, ahistorical poverty, overpopulation, dirt, and disease" (10). Franco Moretti notes the "contemptuous confusion of the natural and the human" in the colonial romance genre (*Atlas* 60), where "lions, heat, vegetation, elephants, flies, rain, illness—and natives" are "mixed up, and at bottom all interchangeable in their function as obstacles: all equally unknowable and threatening."

<sup>6</sup> See Weber 146 for a discussion identifying the rationalization of the division of labor and the specialization of experts on the basis of a common good as part of an emerging capitalist ethos.

<sup>7</sup> Löwy views Benjamin's fragment as a "creative 'misappropriation'" of Weber's Protestant Ethic which draws on the socialist-romantic tradition (71). Levenson, among others, has outlined the connections between Conrad and Weber, suggesting that they share intellectual and moral concerns. See Levenson 267-69, which links Weber's critical analysis of bureaucracy to Conrad's representation of colonial managerialism and careerism in *Heart of Darkness*.

<sup>8</sup> In Bowers' reading of the novella, "the symbolic meaning of enclosures and shelters speaks to humanity's larger struggle with nature" (312), affirming the futility and moral reprehensibility of European attempts to enclose the jungle. Yet we could also note the historical centrality of enclosures to the identification of commodity frontiers, beginning

with Locke, for whom the Indigenous Americas are externalized as exploitable wastelands primarily because they appear “*unenclosed*” (311) by fence or garden.

<sup>9</sup> That said, in the face of more nuanced theories of realism, including that of peripheral realisms, celebrations of Conrad’s modernism as a challenge to realist claims to transparency and meaning appear timeworn. In “Realism After Modernism and the Literary World-System,” for example, Cleary shows how greater attention to the formal and historical differences within realism, and particularly those realisms emerging in “peripheral” locations (267), challenges the realism/modernism antinomy; see especially 255-68.

<sup>10</sup> It would be worth connecting Moretti’s formalist analysis of veiling in Victorian literature to Morefield’s theory of deflection within early twentieth-century liberal imperialist discourse. In *Empires without Imperialism*, Morefield shows how imperial intellectuals developed “prolonged and creative forms of deflection” (3) that continually averted the eyes of the reader “away from colonial violence and economic exploitation, and back toward the liberal nature of the imperial society.” This is suggestive of Moretti’s reading of *Heart of Darkness* as a text that points to imperial violence while continually disavowing it. Read in this context, Conrad’s use of dense and veiled language, which emphasizes the difficulties of seeing and interrupts moments of revelation with forms of renewed concealment, can be linked to both modernist aesthetics and the liberal political discourses of the period.

<sup>11</sup> Like Marlow, Conrad also repeatedly betrays a spatially deterministic political pessimism in his letters. Writing to R. B. Cunninghame Graham in February 1899, for example, Conrad doubts the possibility of “fraternity amongst people living in the same



street. I don't even mention two neighbouring streets. Two ends of the same street"  
(114).