Perpetuating the African Myth: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Onitsha*

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Introduction

As the geographer George Kimble wrote in *Africa Today: The lifting Darkness*: “The darkest thing about Africa has always been our ignorance of it.” (1951: 17) This ignorance provides a blank screen on which Western imagination is able to project an image that presents a highly exotic as well as an extremely obscure location. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994), V. Y. Mudimbe studies the construction of Africa in European discourse from Greek antiquity to modern times. He illustrates how this construction oscillates between admiration and repulsion. From a Western perspective, Africa has inspired an ambivalent mythmaking in literature that reflects an equally ambivalent relation with freedom: the escapist desire for liberation from a Western cultural straitjacket versus the fear of excessive freedom that leads to primitivism and moral degeneration. In this dissertation, I want to examine the continuities that underpin this ‘African myth’ by comparing two prominent novels that exemplify the representation of Africa within (post)modern European fiction: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Onitsha*.

*Heart of Darkness*, written on the eve of the twentieth century, builds on a twofold Victorian tradition: its fin-de-siècle sense of doom on the one hand and its tradition of celebrating explorations and adventures on the other hand. Conrad, however, transforms this tradition by introducing the modernist tendency for detachment. As a frame tale, *Heart of Darkness* destabilizes the narrative and questions narrative reliability. This indicates Conrad’s view on the world as lacking in coherent meaning. A subsequent critical tradition focused on Conrad’s emphasis on the subjectivity of perception. Conrad’s literary statement however, has been overshadowed by an intense debate regarding his attitude towards contemporary imperialist ideology. Although
early Western critics lauded Conrad’s visionary denouncement of colonialist abuse, subsequent postcolonial scholars criticized this view. It was the voice of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe that reverberated most loudly in the discussion of Conrad’s supposed racist attitude. However, Achebe’s relentless attack has been criticized by other African scholars such as the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris and the Zambian critic C. P. Sarvan, who, in their turn, hold on to the admiration for Conrad’s moral dissection of colonialism. Whereas critics disagree on Conrad’s ideological perspective, most readings of *Heart of Darkness* reveal a similar tendency to extract the story from its geographical situation. Numerous scholars reduce Africa to a merely metaphorical setting in which the mental disintegration of the Western mind takes place. Adam Hochschild (2006: 143) strikingly enumerates the scholarly perspectives that, “not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its original moorings.” According to Hochschild, analyses “in terms of Freud, Jung and Nietzsche; of classical myth, and Victorian innocence, and original sin; of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism” focus on an underlying psychological motive that neglects the cultural authenticity and identity of the indigenous setting. Francis Ford Coppola’s film adaptation *Apocalypse Now*, which is set in Vietnam instead of Congo, exemplifies this continuing inclination as it considers *Heart of Darkness*, in Hochschild’s words, as “a parable for all times and places”. In this dissertation, I argue that this tendency to fill in the blankness of “unexplored” Sub-Saharan Africa with a Western constructed meaning is part of the ‘African myth’: a historically-grown cultural construct of Africa, as seen from a Western perspective, that combines metaphorical meanings with real-life features. In this respect, there is nonetheless a link between Africa’s metaphorical function in the novel and Africa’s conceptualization in the collective Western mind. The Western construction of what I understand as the ‘African myth’ becomes clearer when examining its continuities over time. Therefore, I find it interesting to make a connection between *Heart of Darkness* and *Onitsha*, a novel that also deals with the African continent, but that is
conceived nearly hundred years later. By comparing these novels, I attempt to bridge the postcolonial “gap” that separates both works ideologically, ethically and aesthetically.

Le Clézio’s autobiographically inspired novel *Onitsha* tells the story of the reunification of a geographically and emotionally divided family. Fintan, a young boy, leaves Southern France with his Italian mother nicknamed Maou to join his English father Geoffroy in Onitsha, a town situated near the estuary of the Niger in the British colony of Nigeria. For Fintan, his arrival in Africa is a second birth. Not only does he finally meet his father, he is also confronted with an entirely different existence in the African savannah. With the help of his local friend Bony, he gets accustomed to a new way of life in full harmony with the environing nature. Whereas Fintan experiences his new homeland as an initiation, Maou faces great difficulties in accepting the colonial society in which she has to fit in. Her disillusion is based on a conflict between the pre-established exotic images she had in her mind when departing from France, and the abhorrent reality of injustice and abuse she witnesses instead. As time passes, Maou finds peace in the rhythm of the open country. Averting her eyes from European artificiality, she finds “truth” in the mere act of watching and listening to the manifestations of nature. Geoffoy in his turn, sees Africa as a refuge from his tormented mental situation. For him, Onitsha is the embodiment of his double life. On the one hand he exerts the dull job of a colonial official in the warehouses of the town, on the other hand he is fully occupied by his quest to unmask the reincarnation of the mythical Queen of Meroë. His obsession with the legend that recounts the journey of this queen with her people through the desert after the destruction of the capital of Meroë is rendered in a separate, typographically distinct story that is interwoven with the rest of the novel. The minor characters each symbolize different aspects of the colonial world in which the family reunion takes place.

Gerald Simpson, the district officer of Onitsha embodies British colonial rule. He bears responsibility for the crimes committed against the natives. Sabine Rodes, in contrast with
Simpson, represents the ‘enlightened’ colonial. Reminiscent of Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Rodes is an erudite man who reads poetry and speaks multiple European as well as indigenous languages. Although Rodes is granted a view that surpasses the ignorance of the rest of the British community, he endorses the colonial activities, mystifying them by deliberately creating a mythological aura around the entire setting. As for the natives, two individuals stand out from the amalgam that Onitsha tends to personify: Bony and Oya. Bony is a boy of approximately the same age as Fintan. He guides Fintan through the savannah, familiarizing him with the dangers and miracles of the local wildlife. Oya is a deaf-mute girl who, in the imagination of the three protagonists, acquires mythical proportions. Her pureness and authenticity remind the reader of the description of Kurtz’ mistress in *Heart of Darkness*. She embodies at once the natural character of Africa and the mythological smokescreen that hinders a clear and unambiguous perception of it.

The different aspects that together constitute the continued “African myth” are thus represented in *Onitsha* through these different characters. Throughout this dissertation, I refer at several points to *L’Africain*, Le Clezio’s short biographical essay written thirteen years after *Onitsha*. Both works are to be read in dialogue with one another. As a non-fictional account of his childhood in Nigeria and the reflections on identity and nationality that go with it, *L’Africain* serves as a point of orientation that distinguishes Le Clézio’s fictionalization from his actual African experience. However, my main focus is on *Onitsha*, and the ways in which it, as a fictional rendering of Nigeria, is formed by a tradition of representing Africa to a Western audience.

The urge to rediscover nature, the remodeling of Africa upon a mythological conception of it, and the ethical contemplation on the colonial enterprise determine what I consider to be the foundations of the persistent image that appears in both Conrad’s and Le Clézio’s view of Africa. In addition, there exists a more tangible connection between both authors. As Alex Demeulenaere (2009: 15) claims, *Heart of Darkness* has had an everlasting influence on fiction writing in an
African context: « Beaucoup de voyageurs n’écrivent pas seulement en dialogue avec l’épopée de Marlow, ils traversent aussi l’Afrique avec le livre littéralement sous le bras. » Le Clézio himself admitted in an interview with Jean-Pierre Salgas in *La quinzaine littéraire* that Conrad has exerted a lasting influence on him: « C’est Conrad qui m’a donné la première fois cette impression de la magie et de l’échange avec l’autre. [...] Il m’a fait comprendre ce que je cherchais en moi-même. » Conrad thus played an enlightening role in the (literary) life of Le Clézio, who is generally considered a well-read and cosmopolitan author. The following chapters will each address an aspect that unites as well as opposes both authors’ views on Africa. In the first, introductory chapter, I will focus on the different Zeitgeist in which Conrad and Le Clézio developed their respective novels. Subsequently, I analyze how colonialism, and by extent the imperialist ideology behind it, provide a moral starting point for both authors. Next, I discuss the different aspects of the ‘African myth’: the role of mythmaking and stereotyping, the significance of sensory perception in the representation of Africa, the importance of nature and its relation to ‘Western’ culture, the resulting Manichean vision, and the influence Africa exerts upon its foreign visitors. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive (thematic) comparison between *Heart of Darkness* and *Onitsha*, but to show the continuities between both works: what aspects of the ‘African myth’ have been able surpasses the respective ideological and cultural body of thought in which the two novels were conceived?
Chapter One | The (post)colonial Zeitgeist

It is important to bear in mind the circumstances in which both authors have developed their works before analyzing in detail how Conrad and Le Clézio portray Africa, and to what extent they incline to stereotyping. Both reflections on colonialism in Africa imply an ethical judgment on the imperialist policy that marked the continent until decolonization, which started approximately when the European empires began to disintegrate after World War Two. Conrad and Le Clézio experienced Africa and colonialism personally as they witnessed the effects of Western supremacy on the spot: Conrad as an employee of a Belgian trading company in the Congo, Le Clézio as the son of a British official in Nigeria. The ideological, political and cultural reality in which both authors have recorded their African experience differs entirely, due to the fact that their literary careers are separated by almost a century. Nevertheless, a similar condemnation of Western colonial supremacy colors their work.

Conrad, the Visionary Victorian

Conrad’s representation of his own African adventure needs to be understood in the context of the late Victorian Zeitgeist at the end of the nineteenth century, when the basis was laid for his revolutionary rendering of imperialist abuse. Patrick Brantlinger (2004: 44) sketches the dominant ideological discourse of the time in his essay *The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent*, where he focusses on the Victorian tradition of portraying an Africa that had to be civilized for its own sake. The Victorian idea of one civilization, one path of progress, and one true religion was a determining factor in nineteenth-century fiction writing on Africa. Propaganda that intended to sustain the political course of the Empire stained the literary production on the colonized over-sea
territories. Brantlinger foregrounds three contemporary evolutions as a moral basis for the British imperialist project: first the anti-slavery campaign, second the geographical attraction of unexplored Central-Africa, and third the contemporary Darwinist social sciences.

The abolition of slavery in 1833 provided the British with a moral stimulus and justification for their presence in a country that was not theirs: “The abolition of slavery in all British territories did not eliminate concern about slavery elsewhere, but the British began to see themselves less and less as perpetrators of the slave trade and more and more as the potential saviors of the African.” (2004: 50-1) European colonizers in general regularly justified their avaricious projects in Africa as having the aim of counteracting the outrageous exploits of Arab slave traders. For European powers, it became bon ton to underline their philanthropic wish to free Sub-Saharan Africa from the Arab terror that flooded the indigenous tribal communities from Zanzibar. In his meticulous historic survey of the Belgian regime in Congo King Leopold’s Ghost, Adam Hochschild (2006) explains how king Leopold II copiously stressed his pretended altruistic aim to free the Congo from the notorious Arab slavery. According to Jeffrey Meyer’s elaborate biography of Conrad (1991: 104), the Polish writer-to-be himself mentioned his proximity to the Arabs near Stanley Falls. Thus, Conrad witnessed from nearby the process of mythmaking, seeing both the input as well as the output of the ingenious machinery that had to win the sympathy of the public in Europe.

Apart from this pretended moral crusade to extingiuish the last remnants of slavery in the world, there was a second important motive: the European attraction towards the last undiscovered spots on the planet. The nineteenth century was the era of grand explorations of the Dark Continent, which explains its mysterious appeal within Victorian fiction. Africa was a suitable exotic setting for adventure novels of which H. Rider Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines is perhaps
the most famous example. As Brantlinger (2004: 69) summarizes: “For the most part, fiction writers imitated the explorers, producing quest romances with gothic overtones in which the heroic white penetration of the Dark Continent is the central theme.” The celebrated encounter between the two principal Victorian heroes Stanley and Livingstone created an overwhelming hype around the mysterious depths of one of the last places on earth that was still shrouded by a seemingly impenetrable darkness. Meyers indicates how Conrad’s childhood was shaped by his determination to solve the mystery of the blank space on the map that lay in the very center of the Dark Continent (1991: 92). When reading Conrad, one has to bear in mind that he wrote in a tradition of Victorian adventure stories influenced by the contemporary urge for exploration. Brantlinger (2004: 75) considers Conrad to be “combining romance and exposé forms”. Therefore, he sees Conrad as a forerunner of the atrocity literature of the Congo Reform Association, realized in novels such as Mark Twain’s King Leopold’s Soliloquy and Arthurs Conan Doyle’s Crime of the Congo.

The moral justification and the mystery created in popular imagination were combined with a third, scientific element: Darwin’s influence on social sciences. In Brantlinger’s words: “The development of physical anthropology and of ‘ethnology’ as disciplines concerned with differences between races was reinforced from the 1860s on by Darwinism and social Darwinism; these “sciences” strengthened the stereotypes voiced by explorers and missionaries. Evolutionary anthropology often suggested that Africans, if not nonhuman or a different species, were such an inferior “breed” that they might be impervious to ‘higher influences’.” (2004: 63) Evolutionary theory and the announcement that human beings were related to apes cleared the way for the creation of a hierarchical view in which the black natives were assigned an intermediary position between humans and animals. Ernest Haeckel’s Welträtsel which propagated ideas of racial hygiene and supported the concept of primitiveness of non-European races was published at the
time Conrad was writing his *Heart of Darkness*. Also in this period natives were presented to the Western audience on exhibitions. In Belgium for instance, this happened at the inauguration of the ‘Palais des colonies’ in 1897 in Tervuren, or at the World’s Fair of 1913 held in Ghent. Given the position of the black race in the collective mind in Conrad’s days, one has to be careful when assessing his rendering of Africa in the light of today’s knowledge. The three mentioned aspects together, namely the patronizing discourse of the antislavery movement, the glorification of the Victorian explorations, and the flourishing of the social sciences (inspired by Darwin’s theory of evolution) combining theories of race and evolution, cleared the path for what Brantlinger calls “the myth of the Dark Continent”, an Africa that necessitated Western imperialization on moral and scientific grounds (2004: 45). How Conrad builds on and departs from these Victorian conventions will be discussed later.

**Le Clézio and the Postcolonial Decline of the Exotic**

In contrast with Conrad who was writing at the time when the ‘Scramble for Africa’ was entering its final phase, Le Clézio witnessed the end of the colonial era. His ancestors emigrated in the eighteenth century from Brittany to the island of Mauritius, although he was born in Nice. At the age of seven, he moved to Nigeria with his mother in order to join his father who had stayed there as a doctor during the Second World War. This journey marked the premature beginning of his writing career and is reflected in *Onitsha*. Considering himself both Mauritian and French, Le Clézio displays a hybridity that comprises insights from both a Western as well as non-Western point of view. This multiple identity he has in common with Conrad, who was born near Kiev in the Ukraine, spent his childhood in diverse Polish cities, then moved to France, travelled the entire world as a seaman, and ultimately settled in England. Their major difference lies in the ideological environment of their time. Whereas Conrad witnessed the very beginning of permanent Belgian
colonial authority in the Congo, Le Clézio looks at the colonial epoch retrospectively; not only as a period that determined his own childhood, but also as a time during which Western imperialism as a historical fact came to an end, or at least assumed a different shape. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that Conrad, being in the first place a sailor, was largely a self-taught man. He travelled the whole world, seeing with his own eyes the direct results of imperial power exercised over foreign nations. These experiences resulted in highly critical novels that give a psychological insight in what happens when Westerners are confronted with the non-European ‘other’. Le Clézio departs from his childhood memories in the colonies, followed by a profound academic education at diverse universities. Being an occasional literature teacher himself (in Seoul for instance), it is more than reasonable to believe that current literary theory has influenced the critical awareness in his writing.

The post-war era saw the arrival of a new cultural and ideological consciousness: postcolonial awareness. The reflections of post-structuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism in general have contributed to a reconsideration of the ways in which (Western) truth is staged. His familiarity with postcolonial discourse and the historical reality behind it provides Le Clézio a metalanguage to speak of colonialism, since colonialism as a defective, obsolete political system has entered the collective awareness of the audience. In L'Africain, for example, the narrator apologizes to the reader for using the word case, a word that bears in itself something ‘colonial’ (2004: 11). This proves the attempt to find a language to talk about colonized nations without imposing a colonial framework on them. Unlike Conrad’s critique, Le Clézio’s rejection of the Western imperialist policy in Africa does not come unexpectedly. It is important to consider both authors in their respective contemporary tradition of writing about Africa: Conrad being situated between the Victorian tradition of the adventure story and the transition to the 20th century; Le Clézio writing in a postcolonial late 20th century tradition. The latter has been confronted with
literary theories that deconstruct truth and postmodern discussions that propagate relativist views upon cultural production and perception in a continuously globalizing world. Besides, an important shift in rendering the ‘exotic’ has taken place since the postcolonial transition. In *Carnets de doute: Variations romanesques du voyage chez J.M.G. Le Clézio*, Isa Van Acker (1998: 9) refers to the growing suspicion towards exotic literature after the dismantling of the colonial empires. A rejection of the exotic voyage in the wake of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ denunciation of travelling as being illusionary and corrupting has replaced the imperialist and ethnocentric mentality. Under influence of Michel Leiris and Henri Michaux, a new kind of voyage appeared in literature: the voyage into the self. Nevertheless, Van Acker points at a growing reaction against the presumed death of the exotic. A new urge for adventure and exploration results in a renaissance of primitivist ‘back to basics’ ideas within contemporary literature. Perhaps, this rediscovered interest in the pre-modern, non-Western roots of humanity can be related to the interior voyage propagated in post-war anthropological and cultural thinking. In any case, the idea of exploration of the self in a pre-industrial world is indisputably present in Le Clézio’s work.

Since Le Clézio’s hybrid exploration of identity is embedded in a postcolonial, postmodernist pattern, it is all the more interesting to make the connection with Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* stages a similar introspection in an alien and confronting setting as *Onitsha*. There seems to be a continuity between both authors’ representations of Africa in terms of symbolic and metaphorical conceptualizing. Regardless of the literary and political framework in which both authors have conceived their works, a similar underlying psychological exploration is rendered against an exoticized background in the light of colonialist offence. Unlike what the late 20th century reversal in attitude might make us believe, several important elements in Conrad’s African imagery have survived the postcolonial revision of pre-established cultural meaning and postmodern questioning of universal values. Before analyzing the continuities and connections that interlink both the late
Victorian / early modernist tradition and the postmodernist tradition of depicting the exotic in terms of language and imagery, I will consider the ethical starting point that both authors adopt in their depiction of a colonial society.
Chapter Two | A Moral Reflection on the African Colonial World: Two Different Scopes, One Similar View?

Literary representations of African colonies in the first half of the 20th century cannot be separated from their inherent moral reflections on the colonialisit realizations of imperialist ideology. Imperialism is an ubiquitous presence, a superimposed system which determines not only every aspect of both the lives of the colonizer and the colonized, but also the way in which the non-Western world is presented to us, the reader. After having focused on the ideological environment in which both authors’ conceived their work, I will take a closer look at how they approached imperialism from an ethical point of view. The author’s stance towards this crucial force reveals in the first place how he perceives African colonial society as a whole, and to what extent he or his text are influenced by an imperialist discourse.

Imperialism as Conrad’s Moral and Ontological Starting Point

When talking about Conrad and imperialism, one famous quote from Heart of Darkness cannot been ignored:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. What redeems is the idea only. (2007: 7)

This one sentence entails an ethical reflection on imperialism that must have been quite remarkable in Conrad’s days. In one breath, it asserts that imperialism, and therefore its colonialisit practice, equals to conquering; it relativizes racial differences; and it invites the reader to
contemplate the matter. This is perhaps the most outspoken critique on Western colonialist policy in the novel. The only thing that redeems is the imperialist doctrine behind it. In his essay on Conrad's life, Owen Knowles (The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad, 2004: 14) emphasizes the singularity of Conrad's critique: “Unlike most of the domestic British fiction of the time, Conrad’s work seems uniquely at home in exploring the despoiling effect upon individual lives of violent and aggressive Weltpolitik.” Conrad’s contemporary Rudyard Kipling for instance, was far more conformist in this matter. He did not conceal his admiration for the Empire and confirmed the propaganda on which it was built. The title of his poem The White Man’s Burden immortalized the ideology behind the imperialist doctrine.

In every respect, it is indeed remarkable how Conrad diverged from the common approach to the British Empire, a mode of representation in which nothing but the missionary zeal of the colonizer is foregrounded. These ideologically underpinned renderings were heavily supported by great politicians of the day such as Joseph Chamberlain, who formulated his imperialist viewpoints in several books such as The True Conception of Empire. Conrad’s challenge to this pre-established Western perspective is acclaimed by his discoverer Edward Garnett in a review for The Academy and Literature published on December 6, 1902. It goes as follows:

A most amazing, consummate piece of artistic diablerie – an analysis of the white man’s morale when let loose from European restraint, and planted down in the tropics as an “emissary of light” armed to the teeth to make trade profits out of subject races. The gulf between the white man’s system and the black man’s comprehension of its results – the unnerved, degenerating whites staring all day and every day at the heart of darkness which is alike meaningless and threatening to their own creed and conception of life –
In other words, Conrad pronounces a fierce critique on the colonizer’s imperialist project and denounces ‘the white man’s morale’. However, *Heart of Darkness*, and the preliminary short story *An Outpost of Progress*, were not his only objections against the horrifying regime led by king Leopold. Also his novel *The Inheritors*, written together with his friend Ford Madox Ford, satirized Leopold II and questioned the king’s deceitful humanitarian intentions (Meyers, 1991: 96). Although the degree in which Conrad bestows a full-fledged human value on the native is open to debate, no one can deny the fact that Conrad subverts the common propagandist imperial image of Africa that dominated public opinion in his day. As Brantlinger (1988: 57) points out, Conrad’s first concern was to break through the Victorian myth of the Dark Continent in which great heroes as Livingstone and Stanley explore the last dark spots on the earth in order to bring enlightenment to those to whom civilization had been denied. Conrad refuses the naïve presumption of a morally justified exploration by calling the explorers literally “burglars”: “To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (2007: 31) Marlow’s experiences are sharply contrasted with the perception of colonialism in the contemporary public opinion, reproduced in the character of Marlow’s aunt, who believes in the *mission civilisatrice* of the European colonizer: “She talked about ‘weaning those ignorant millions from their ‘horrid ways,’ till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.” (2007: 14) Zdzisław Najder (1988: 126) believes that Conrad’s first objective was to unmask the false pretenses of colonization and to clear away the misconception of the colonizing practice at home in Britain, by criticizing Belgian colonialism in the first place: “The personal passion he displayed later in his private and public attacks on King Leopold II – he treated no other politician with such venom – suggests the existence of some deep-seated grudge. The irony of “An Outpost of Progress”, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Inheritors* is directed mainly at the false pretenses of ‘civilizing’ activity.” However, this does not mean that Conrad did not pay attention to the harm that was done to the native
population, yet it may have been on a later moment in his account. “It is evident that Korzeniowski [Conrad’s original Polish name] was struck at first by the greed and duplicity of the white bearers of ‘civilization’ eager for quick profits, and by the chaos and stupidity of many of their enterprises. It was only later that he became aware of the outrages perpetrated against the native population and their country.” (1988: 133) In any case, Conrad’s critical tone broke the silence that hid the abuses of colonialism on the spot.

Various scholars have tried to answer the question as to why Conrad’s view is so distinct from other cultural and literary voices at the end of the nineteenth century.

Andrea White (2000: 182) indicates some important elements that can possibly help to formulate an answer to this question. Firstly there is the logical assumption that Russian imperialism, which ultimately was responsible for the death of Conrad’s patriotic Polish parents, influenced his stance towards a merciless ideology that kills for the sake of imperial expansion. Secondly, there was the shifting nature of European imperialism itself. All of Europe indulged in the voracious ‘Scramble for Africa’. As the amount of untouched African soil dwindled, the eagerness of European expansionist policies increased. Apart from these two determining factors that shaped Conrad’s attitude towards imperialism, White also refers to the upcoming debate at home in Britain between what she calls the ‘bombastic’ and the ‘pessimistic’ camp. The former was in favor of imperialist expansion overseas, the latter regarded the Empire as useless and burdensome (2000: 185). Consequently, Conrad was not the only one who spoke about colonialism with a negative voice. But still, what was his motivation to do so? If he can be sorted in the second, ‘pessimist’ camp, a more important question arises: was the fate of the harassed natives of any concern to him, or did he see the colonialist practice resulting from an imperialist ideology in itself as an evil force that degrades the colonizer to the same primitive level of the colonized?
At first sight, the latter seems to be true. In this case, Conrad’s report suggests an ethical statement that is, at the very least, morally ambiguous. According to Cedric Watts (2000: 53), Conrad criticizes as well as endorses imperialism by equalizing the colonizer and the colonized as being both equally barbarous: “Conrad neither believes in the cultural superiority of the colonialist nations, nor rejects colonialism outright. The ‘message’ of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society – a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them.” In this respect, Conrad does not deny the barbarous character of the indigenous population of the Dark Continent, but uses the native as a metaphor to express his cynical view on the human species as a whole.

The way Conrad portrays colonialism at the very beginning of *Heart of Darkness* can bring some clarification when assessing this matter. Two elements are noteworthy when considering the opening chapter. First there is the contemplation on the glorious past of the Thames, which encapsulates a double stance towards imperialism. Secondly there is the question as to what form of colonialism Marlow denounces. While being anchored on the Thames, Marlow reflects:

> Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires. (2007: 5)

Elevated intentions of enlightening the dark places on earth and crude treasure hunting are linked to one another in a highly ironical manner. In brief: “hunters for gold” and “pursuers of fame” are
revalued as the “germs of empires”, as if greediness is the only true incentive to explore the wide unknown world. Yet, Conrad also speaks of “dreams of men”, which refers to the geographical attraction of exploring the unexplored. In Orientalism, Edward Said (1995: 216) stresses the importance of this urge for discovering, which influences the way of morally perceiving the exotic: “Yet geographical appetite could also take on the moral neutrality of an epistemological impulse to find out, to settle upon, to uncover – as when in Heart of Darkness Marlow confesses to having a passion for maps.” (2007: 8) Said refers to the following quote:

I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At the time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. (2007: 8)

Besides this somewhat ironic laudatory speech on the Thames as empire founder, Marlow recounts how Britain was once a dark place, until Roman colonizers brought civilization to it: “And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” (2007: 5) Marlow elaborately compares Rome’s sophisticated civilization with the swampy and misty land that one day would accommodate the center of the world. Although Marlow denounces the brutal force by which the Romans seized land that was not theirs, there are some important reflections to be made. First of all, a comparison with the Roman colonization of dark, pre-historic Britain entails a complete denial of any form of African indigenous civilization, since this suggests that Africa is still imprisoned in darkness in the same way as Britain used to be before the arrival of the Roman army. Secondly, it equals colonizing with civilizing, since the Romans are, in spite of their brutality, considered as those who brought light to this dark spot on earth. Moreover, Marlow tries to feel empathy for the conquerors by imagining how it must have been like to leave civilization and settle
in the wilderness. Indisputably this leaves the impression that he tries to exempt the ruthlessness of the Romans. At the same time, he does not applaud the Romans for their bravery either. The power of the one accidentally comes forth out of the weakness of the other:

They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get and for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and man going at it blind – as is very proper those who tackle a darkness. (2007: 7)

In summary: Marlow sees colonialism as blind greediness that originates from an inequality in power that finally results in bringing out the worst characteristics of men. Thus, Marlow denounces imperialism by presenting it as mere robbery, but he does not deny the current idea of an uncivilized Africa that is still in darkness, waiting for the civilized to bring light.

In addition, there is the question as to what kind of colonialism Marlow denounces. Marlow expounds on the atrocities of Roman and (implicitly) Belgian colonializing practices, but British colonialism is left aside. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1994: 69) suggests that Marlow makes a distinction between ‘Belgian rapacity’ and ‘British rationality’. Therefore Said speaks in terms of salvation and redemption:

Salvation in this context is an interesting notion. It sets “us” off from the damned, despised Romans and Belgians, whose greed radiates no benefits onto either their consciences or the lands and bodies of their subjects. “We” are saved because first of all we needn’t look directly at the results of what we do; we are ringed by and ring ourselves with the practice
of efficiency, by which land and people are put to use completely; the territory and its inhabitants are totally incorporated by our rule, which in turn totally incorporates us as we respond efficiently to its exigencies. Further, through Marlow, Conrad speaks of redemption, a step in a sense beyond salvation. [...] Redemption is found in the self-justifying practice of an idea or mission over time, in a structure that completely encircles and is revered by you, even though you set up the structure in the first place, ironically enough, and no longer study it closely because you take it for granted.

Consequently, there are not only multiple geographically and chronologically defined ‘imperialisms’, but also two different aspects of imperialism: the act of conquering, and the self-justifying ideology behind it that legitimizes geographical conquest. The former is based on a straightforward vigorous idea, unmistakable in its force and consequences; the latter developing towards a self-justifying regime that separates the victim of imperialism from its perpetrator (1994: 69). As noted above, Marlow states “what redeems is the idea only” (2007: 7) which means that the ideology is the ultimate redemption. This raises the question if, and to what extent, Conrad himself is tainted by a subconscious intention to redeem the British empire from moral introspection.

Notwithstanding the question what kind of imperialism is denounced and additionally, whether we hear Marlow speaking or Conrad himself, one can distill a generalized statement on imperialism, that surpasses its geographically, temporally and ideologically determined characteristics. The reference to brutal Roman and Belgian imperialism and the British self-sufficient view on it ultimately result in a general image of colonialism, rendered through Marlow. Wilson Harris (1988: 269) explains in his essay The Frontier on Which Heart of Darkness Stands, that his view on imperialism falls into three classes, varying in terms of directness. “The first type is
a direct, straightforward attack and is exemplified in his descriptive analysis of the Roman colonization of ancient Britain.” Marlow unambiguously criticizes the vulgar, criminal basis of a system that was officially presented in Victorian propaganda as being noble and altruistic. The emphasis on the discrepancy between reality and ‘the Victorian myth’ leads obviously to a second, ironic approach towards the European colonial hegemony: “The second is ironic and is well illustrated by his references to the ‘noble cause,’ the ‘jolly pioneers of progress,’ and the ‘improved specimen’ who was his fireman.” (269) Proceeding on his journey on the river, Marlow’s irony shifts in blunt sarcasm. Even more stinging mockery is achieved through a third rendering, namely the use of the metaphor:

To lash out against colonialism. Thus Brussels is likened to a “whited sepulchre,” and the offices of the trading company which runs the steamers on the Congo to ‘a house in the city of the dead.’ The African natives, victims of Belgian exploitation, are described as ‘shapes,’ ‘shadows,’ and ‘bundles of acute angles,’ so as to show the dehumanizing effect of colonialistic rule on the ruled. Kurtz becomes “an animated image of death carved out of old ivory,” a “voice” and a “shadow,” suggesting the loss of personality that colonialism effects on the rulers. (1988: 269-70)

Marlow’s portrayal of colonialism as an evil force within humanity is clear and unambiguous. How he sees the perpetrators of it, and more important, its victims, is a different question.

Metaphorically, the native is hollowed out until he is nothing more than a part of the uncultivated wilderness. Therefore, Conrad’s dehumanization of the native is not always understood by critics as being aimed at disclosing the effects of colonial rule. Rino Zhuwarara (2004: 237) elaborates on this in his essay *Heart of Darkness Revisited, The African Response*:
As the language becomes more abstract and metaphysical, the very victim of imperialism is, by a strange twist of logic, turned into a devil and, as such, he becomes a scapegoat as well as the author of his own misfortunes. It may sound old-fashioned and simplistic but it needs saying nevertheless: there is something of a moral untidiness that sits at the heart of Conrad’s masterpiece. This has all to do with the moral conception of the whole story. Conrad makes Marlow equivocate on a very crucial moral issue here and this makes him remain as ethnocentric and self-centered as the pilgrims of whom he is so disdainful. Marlow is simply incapable of acknowledging the humanity of those blacks conscripted by the forces of history to take part in an imperialist drama.

In other words, Marlow condemns the abuses of this “imperialist drama” without recognizing the victims of it. Herein Zhuwarara echoes Chinua Achebe’s accusation of racism in his well-known essay *An Image of Africa*. Achebe too comes to the conclusion that Conrad has difficulties in admitting the kinship between the Congolese and the British. Therefore, Achebe believes that Conrad’s primary concern was to establish an antithesis between Europe and Africa. Nevertheless, its resulting dehumanization and depersonalization of the native remains intertwined with his general rendering of imperialism, which makes it even more difficult to understand in what way it relates to the system he abhors. In any case, as will be analyzed in the next chapter, the generalization of Africa to one amalgamated blur, is part of a continuous discourse inherent to the portrayal of the continent. At this point, it is important to bear in mind that imperialism indisputably contributed both to the conception as well as the perception of an at first sight derogatory discourse.

The influence of colonial ideology upon the representation of Africa proves that, apart from
the underlying imperialist motive for the conquest of the continent, imperialism as a historical element also played a determining role in the perception of non-Western societies and cultures. This is what Edward Said underlines in his *Culture and Imperialism*. Imperialism is not only comprised of politics, but also aesthetics and even an ontology; a way of seeing the world. Said relates this explicitly to Conrad: “*Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialist, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable.” (1994: 24) Said asserts that *Heart of Darkness* is unavoidably colored by an imperialist interference with art, but he still endorses Conrad’s innovativeness in seeing the effects of the impassive imperialist enterprise.

In his essay *The African Response*, Zhuwarara separates the moral reflections of *Heart of Darkness* from its aesthetic achievements. Instead, he weighs out arguments for and against Conrad’s supposedly Victorian racist attitudes. He questions to what extent Conrad overturns the self-provided moral authorization to embark upon a conquest of the African continent. As Zhuwarara says: “Far from subverting the simplistic moral categories of imperialistic discourse Marlow’s perception of Africa confirms the worst about Africa.” (2004, 228) Yet, the question remains to what extent Conrad has voluntarily adjusted reality to a rendering that suits his literary goals. David Daiches points out the fact that Conrad himself was aware of his exaggerations concerning the actual character of the African and his native soil, which proves that Conrad indeed followed a literary aesthetics. By doing so, Conrad gave priority to form at the expense of being loyal to reality. Afterwards, Conrad sought to justify his over-dramatization of evil in the following terms:

*Heart of Darkness* is experience too; but experience pushed a little (and only very little)
beyond the actual facts of the case for the *perfectly legitimate*, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers.” Its theme “had to be given a *sinister* resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck. (in: David Daiches, ed. *The Black Presence in English Literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985, 7)

Conrad himself explains his over-dependency on stylistic and metaphoric devices as being aimed at giving an obscurity to his story that fits the conditions in which darkest Africa was to be found those days.

Nonetheless, Zhuwarara speaks of a duality in Conrad’s intention: on the one hand a straightforward denouncement of human degeneration in a colonial context; on the other hand the attempt to achieve this by simplifying Africa and thus maintaining an imperialist discourse. According to Zhuwarara, Conrad does not represent the colonial reality in Africa, but on the contrary, he confirms Western racist ideology:

*His treatment of the Congolese setting and its people can only harden the racist attitudes of his European audience. It is a paradoxical achievement that in order for Conrad to revitalize Europe spiritually he has to dehumanize and distort Africa beyond recognition first. His handling of the African dimension of his story amounts to a very cheap way of entertaining a jaded Europe afflicted by self-doubts; but, ultimately, every broad-minded reader has to come to terms with a story notable for its harsh exclusions and embarrassing racism. (2004: 239)*

Other critics stress the fact that Conrad implements Africa as the ideal setting in which human
barbarity can reign, as if Africa triggers the worst characteristics of the human species. In *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* Abdul R. JanMohamed makes a similar statement: “Conrad systematically uses this Western notion of Africa as an evil place, bereft of social order, where the darker side of human nature could be played out.” (1983: 3) According to JanMohamed, Africa serves as a metaphor to explore what he calls “the destructive capacity of unchecked libidinal desires” while the European colonizers see Africa as a “repository of evil” (3) Therefore, he refers to what Franz Fanon (1968: 41) asserts to be “a Manichean world”:

> The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. [...] The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negations of values. He is, let us dare admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil.

The actual character of this Manichean division will be analyzed more thoroughly later in this paper. At this point, it is important to consider the difficulty involved when assessing Conrad’s view on Africa. Only a provisional conclusion can be drawn here: although the question whether Marlow’s vision and Conrad’s can be equalized is still debatable, Conrad too cannot be seen loose from, as Said claims, the contemporary “Hegelian” philosophical mentality that saw “the Orient and Africa as static, despotic, and irrelevant to world history.” (1994: 168) Although Conrad, through Marlow, has a clear morally founded view on imperialism, his conception of the native stays problematic, particularly in our twenty-first century perspective. His critique on imperialist ideology and the resulting colonial practice displays a concern for the degenerating effect of it on its perpetrators. Their consequences for the subdued natives, at first sight, seems to be of lesser
importance. However, a closer look at the portrayal of the native, especially in contrast with the civilized colonizer, sheds a different light on Conrad’s representation of Africa altogether. What unites both Conrad and Le Clézio in their visions on Africa is a similar cultural stereotyping, that at the same time constitutes their conceptions of Africa as victim of imperialist aspirations of the West, and Africa as a cultural unity.

**Le Clézio and Imperialism**

Compared to Conrad, Le Clézio implements a similar mechanism to represent the native, although he uses different evaluative terms. As noted above, Le Clézio, unlike Conrad, has a metalanguage at his disposal to describe colonialism as a historic fact within the collective mind of his readers. In Le Clézio’s epoch, the Western attitude has altered considerably. A postcolonial consciousness of guilt has replaced the presumptuousness of the West Conrad bravely defied in his novels. Le Clézio did not have to break through stubborn fixed ideas regarding the colonial enterprise. Moreover, in a globalizing world, the West has become more familiar with the non-West; the Dark Continent is not as dark anymore as it used to be. This allows Le Clézio to proceed some steps beyond Conrad’s denouncement of colonialist rule. At times, Le Clézio’s critique comes across as straightforward in its description of Western abuses, but at some points, he disguises his critique in metaphorical renderings that remind us of Conrad’s symbolist technique. Le Clézio’s major concern is not to reveal the cruel reality that is hidden in darkest colonial Africa, but to find and imply a language to speak of both colonized and colonizer.

In both *Onitsha* and *L’Africain* there are extensive descriptions of how the child protagonists, Fintan and Le Clézio himself as a child, ruthlessly destroy the impressive termite mounds in the savannah for the mere pleasure of it: « Au bout de la plaine, il y avait une sorte de
clairière de terre rouge. Fintan l’avait découverte tout seul, les premiers jours où il s’était aventuré si loin. C’était la ville des termites. » (Onistha, 1991: 80) Fintan symbolizes the colonizing power that discovers outlandish elements in the landscape and consequently destructs them. Just like the British colonial forces ruined the oracle of Aro Chuku, he annihilates the mystical, extraordinary structures in the savannah. Fintan’s blind rage is represented as a mixture of an ignorant lack of connection with the earth on the one hand, and impotence with regard to his emotional instability due to the lack of familiarity with the environment on the other hand: « Fintan avait attaqué les termitières l’une après l’autre, avec sauvergerie. La sueur coulait sur son front, sur ses yeux, mouillait sa chemise. Il ne savait plus trop ce qu’il faisait. C’était pour oublier, peut-être, pour détruire. Pour réduire en poudre sa propre image. Pour effacer le visage de Geoffroy, la colère froide qui brillait parfois dans les cercles de ses lunettes. » (81). This reminds of Marlow’s reference to the Romans. Even though they ruthlessly terrorized the British isles, Marlow reflects on how the civilized Romans must have suffered from the hostile wilderness along the Thames, with “nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine” (2007: 6). Although less explicitly than Conrad, Le Clézio also connects the colonizer’s brutality with his feeling out of place. Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz turns into a demon out of sickness and solitude in a hostile environment. However, unlike Conrad, Le Clézio confronts the colonizer’s violence with a native voice. Bony, the native child in the story, does not comprehend why Fintan attacks the mounds: « « You ravin’ mad, you crazy ! » Il avait pris la terre et les larves des termites dans ses mains. « C’est dieu ! » » Nature is seen as divine, and Fintan, the odd Western boy threatens God out of pointless rage, stirred up by his powerlessness in an environment that is alien to him. This disaccord between both children serves as a sample for a similar conflict on a higher level. As Fintan’s pointless violence disturbs the natural harmony of the savannah, the British colonization of Nigeria in general disturbs the natural harmony of the native society. The resemblances to Conrad’s record of colonialism are striking: the displacement of the white in the alien, exotic African environment discloses the deepest flaws of the human
character, namely his inability to cope with ‘the other’. Violence thus becomes an inherent part of the entire act of colonization. Moreover, both authors agree on the fact that they consider Africa as a mirror in which the Westerner faces his own deficiencies.

Given Le Clézio’s retrospective view on the colonial era, his critique goes beyond this depiction of actual Western atrocities on the spot. The colonization of Africa has left a problematic heritage that thwarts a peaceful and prosperous existence of the African continent until today. Raymond Mbassi Atéba (2008: 30) asserts that Le Clézio’s work encapsulates three types of critical discourses: « celui d’une résistance à la colonization européenne, celui d’un désaccord avec le règne néocolonial, et celui d’une critique des impasses du présent transmises par le système colonial. » The first type, namely the rejection of the colonialist enterprise, is especially voiced through Maou. Unlike her husband who mentally escapes to his dreamy world of ancient legends, she denounces the injustices inflicted to the native population. She protests for instance when chained convicts dig Gerald Simpson’s swimming pool in the sweltering heath without food or water. Furthermore, the Western penetration is portrayed as disastrous for African artifacts. The destruction of Aro Chuku, symbolically translated in Fintan’s attack of the termite mounds, exemplifies the remorseless brutality of colonial forces in an overseas environment. As the story continues however, the reader witnesses the end of the colonial era. The Empire is likened to the ‘George Shotton’ a ship anchored in the Niger. Once it was a glorious expression of the British colonial rule, but as time passes it becomes a wreck that slowly sinks into the river, just like the Empire gradually comes to its end. Although the Empire has left Nigeria, its ghost still haunts the region in the shape of Western oil companies that taint the once unspoiled surroundings of Onitsha. Through his father’s opinion, Le Clézio gives a violent critique on the Western legacy in Africa, which is reported in Le Clézio two remaining critical discourses that Atéba identifies. The last chapter of L’Africain, ‘L’oubli’, recounts his father’s opinion on a broad selection of postcolonial
political developments on the African continent. His fervor when hearing the latest successes of
the independence movement in Kenya and the Zulu protest against segregation in South Africa;
and his anger towards French armed intervention in Algeria, gradually fades away in deception. As
for Nigeria, he initially hoped for a flourishing young nation, freed from injustice. Instead, he
witnesses the establishment of a corrupt regime that continues the abuses that characterized the
British rule. « Loin de la société corrompue et profiteuse de la côte, il avait rêvé de la renaissance
de l’Afrique, libérée de son carcan colonial et de la fatalité des pandémies » (2004: 113) France and
Great Britain help to grant power to dictators as Jean-Bédel Bokassa in the Central African Republic
and Idi Amin Dada in Uganda, while their industries overflow the idyllic landscape. In the
meantime, Africa is exposed to its old demons again: famine and diseases. The father’s lamentation
however, is stimulated by a great amount of nostalgia. « Ce qui disparaissait aux yeux de mon père,
c’était le charme des villages, la vie lente, insouciante, au rythme des travaux agricoles. » (2004:
114) In vain, the former expat holds on to the idyllic picture of the Africa he has known. The
Nigerian-Biafran War in 1968 finally shatters the image he tries to conserve in his mind. The final
chapter of Onitsha, ‘Lion d’Onitsha’ is set during this Nigerian civil war in which the Igbo
population declared its independence, followed by a mass invasion by the federal Nigerian army.
This meant the total destruction of the Onitsha Fintan and his parents had lived in. Once back in
Europe, the only images he ever sees broadcasted on television of Nigeria are images of misery and
devastation. The conflicts in the multi-ethnic state of Nigeria are one of the “impasses du présent
transmises par le système colonial” as mentioned above. Le Clézio suggests that its roots lie in the
artificiality of the borders drawn by the Western empire in their partition of Africa. In L’Africain, Le
Clézio mentions how his father long before the war already suggested that the Biafra region had
better been part of neighboring Cameroon, a country that ethnically corresponds with the south-
eastern part of Nigeria. Unfortunately, Cameroon was part of the French empire, whereas Nigeria
was British. This is yet another indication that the political and social instability of Africa in the
postcolonial era can be traced back to the Western imperialist campaign that started a couple of generations earlier. Ultimately, the three critical discourses observed in Atéba’s analysis of Le Clézio’s oeuvre (corresponding to colonialism, neocolonialism, and the present-day impasse) converge into a mixture of fatalism and nostalgia, emotionally interwoven with personal memory. The colonial world the characters have experienced generated its self-destruction, and at the same undermined the future of an independent Africa.

Whereas Conrad attacks the ruthlessness of colonialist practice by tracing it back to the inhuman conditions Africa imposes on Western fortune-hunters that dare to set foot on its soil; hereby, according to some scholars, risking to surrender to the imperialist discourse behind it himself; Le Clézio adopts a broad perspective that also envelops the consequences of colonialism on a large historical scale. He extends his critique to the neocolonialist Western policy that hinders Africa’s development up to the present. At the very heart of his critique however, Le Clézio, like Conrad, connects the brutality of colonial rule with the psychological and emotional condition of the colonizer. At this point, the two authors meet again, in spite of the postcolonial political, ideological and cultural metamorphosis of Western thinking that separates them. Consequently, their approach towards colonialism entails a juxtaposition of the colonizer and the colonized. Whether this results in a dual rendering of Africa or not will be assessed in a later chapter. First, it is important to understand the language both Conrad and Le Clézio adopt when speaking of Africa. A discourse that reveals as well as disguises the native within his hazy environment, to the extent that fact and fiction become one and the only way to see reality is through myth.
“‘Africa’ has been the victim of generalizing statements, simplifying histories and prehistories, stereotyping and imaginings from ancient times until today.” This is the opening statement of Robin Derricourt’s (2011: vi) research of how Africa is constructed, or, as he claims, ‘invented’ in the Western mind. The resulting ideological construct of Africa is achieved by what Said terms ‘Africanist discourse’ in *Culture and Imperialism*: “[A] systematic language for dealing with and studying Africa for the West. Conceptions of primitivism are associated with it, as well as concepts deriving a special epistemological privilege from the African provenance, such as tribalism, vitalism, originality.” (1994: 193) The present chapter will analyze how Africa is ‘constructed’ in Conrad and Le Clézio’s work. Africa’s past and present seem to be subjected to a fictionalization that ultimately raises the question whether this continent is able to retain its own identity within its literary representation.

Africanist discourse, according to both Said and Derricourt, can, at least partially, be traced back to the slave trade and the critical reactions it has provoked over time. The abolition of slavery reconfirmed an intensely colored rendering of Africa and its inhabitants. Derricourt clarifies how slavery, and subsequently its abolition, demanded a reconfiguration of the exotic: “[T]o reflect […] and justify it in a Christian ethic, the peoples and societies of Africa had to be reclassified by European societies as less than human; they lost individuality, history, culture and humanity in the ideology of the nations involved in the Atlantic slave trade over four centuries.” (2011: 17) Ironically, the subsequent reaction to slavery provoked a new, similarly simplifying reconsideration of the African world. Patrick Brantlinger (2004: 48; 50-1), for instance, suggests that the antislavery movement contributed to the creation of the idea of the noble savage, who had to be rescued by
even nobler saviors, the British. This entails the contradictory vision on Africa, in which romanticized exotic portraits in the tradition of Rousseau are confronted with pessimist renderings of a helpless and ignorant people that implores the help from a civilized Europe. The frequently mentioned danger involved in discovering the last places on earth covered by darkness emphasizes the heroic character of those who dare to explore the Dark Continent. This results in a Manichaean vision that opposes a good, spiritual world of light, and an evil, material world of darkness. In this chapter, I examine how Conrad and Le Clézio have been influenced by this Africanist cultural stereotyping, lingering between exotic optimism and fatalistic pessimism. I question whether both writers represent the African people’s own truth, or whether they impose their own fictionalized version on it.

Conrad’s ‘Africanist Discourse’

In his introduction to Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, A Casebook, Gene M. Moore (2004: 12) refers to Rino Zhuwarara’s twofold reflection on Conrad. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Zhuwarara admires Conrad’s refraining from imperialist propaganda, but reproaches his “rather lazy over-dependence on metaphors and stereotypes”. In Heart of Darkness Revisited, The African Response, Zhuwarara (2004: 227) studies how Conrad, by shaping an image of a primitive and dangerous Africa, reconfirms the Western imperialist ideology: “In a sense Africa and its inhabitants are reduced into a threatening symbol which [...] harbors an anarchic potential which the civilized world has striven to ‘repudiate and destroy’” The danger of making Africa into a symbol is of course exaggeration and over-dramatization of the otherness of the indigenous population.

In order to confirm his diabolic portrayal of Africa that appropriates and dilutes Africa’s
innate cultural characteristics, Conrad silences the native by subjecting him to a purely Western interpretation. As Conrad himself admitted, *Heart of Darkness* is experience transformed in order to add “a continued vibration”. Edward Said explains this interference between experience and an ideological coloring, resulting in the application of pre-established images, as follows:

Conrad’s Africans [...] come from a huge library of *Africanism*, so to speak, as well as from Conrad’s personal experiences. There is no such thing as a *direct* experience, or reflection, of the world in the language of the text. [...] What we have in *Heart of Darkness* – a work of immense influence, having provoked many readings and images – is a politicized, ideologically saturated Africa which to some intends and purposes was the imperialized place, with those many interests and ideas furiously at work in it, not just a photographic literary “reflection” of it. (1994: 67)

The result is a reconfirmation of eccentricities and strangeness of Sub-Saharan Africa. In spite of his skepticism towards imperialism, his bias towards the native is repeatedly endorsed by Marlow, who rehearses the actions of Mr. Kurtz, the ivory trader he has to find in the deep jungle. In this way, the colonial framework is reconfirmed and Africa recedes in meaning, especially when Mr. Kurtz dies and Africa “once again becomes blankness his imperial will had sought to overcome.” (1994: 165) The West seems incapable of fulfilling its pretended wish to enlighten this last dark spot on earth. It is striking that natives are barely allowed a voice in the story, except for instance when “an insolent black head” announces the death of Kurtz. Africa is thus reduced to a blank screen on which Western ambitions are projected: “[M]uch of Conrad’s narrative is preoccupied with what eludes articulate expression – the jungle, the desperate natives, the great river, Africa’s magnificent, ineffable dark life.” (1994: 165) The native is portrayed as a passive but dangerous element that seamlessly fits in this wild environment. The African is seen as part of the exotic
scenery and is denied a proper identity.

Despite their fineness and reticulation, then, the inclusive cultural forms dealing with peripheral non-European settings are markedly ideological and selective (even repressive) so far as “natives” are concerned, just as the picturesqueness of nineteenth-century colonial painting is, despite its “realism,” ideological and repressive: it effectively silences the Other, it reconstituted difference as identity, it rules over and represents domains figured by occupying powers, not by inactive inhabitants. (1994: 166)

Therefore, Said (1994: xviii) sees Conrad as both progressive and reactionary: he denounces the corrupted, deceptive system, but, at the same time, he deprives Africa of an independent identity. As explained above, the native dissolves in his or her environment and becomes part of the mute setting. Therefore, the indigenous African is dehumanized while his or her reputedly bestiality and primitive drives are foregrounded. This total lack of personal identity together with the silencing of the native constitute the biggest part of what Said and Derricourt understand as ‘Africanist discourse’. However, some scholars point at the hybridity and ambivalence of colonial discourse, which complicates its interpretation instead of simplifies it like postcolonial critics as Said tend to do. In his study of the representation of Africa in French colonial literature, Alex Demeulenaere (2009: 8) refers to Homi K. Bhabha’s critique on Said. Bhabha points at the postcolonial fixation of colonial stereotyping in fetishes. Bhabha proposes an alternative, psychoanalytical reading of colonial discourse in order to adjust Said’s restricted interpretation. Therefore, I find it essential to include the psychological motives of the characters when assessing their conceptualization of the native and the environment.
Distancing through Dehumanization and Depersonalization

Both Conrad’s and Le Clézio’s protagonists distance themselves from the indigenous population, and use the natives as a moral mirror on which they, consciously or unconsciously, reflect themselves. Besides, as he or she is silenced and dehumanized, the native becomes literally part of the alien, hazardous environment in which he or she is born. Ultimately, it is the unsettling hostility of the ‘Other’ that challenges not only the image of Africa, but also the image of the self.

Marlow’s confrontation with the self results in a crude demonization of the local population. Wilson Harris (1988: 275) suggests two reasons for this:

It is as if Marlow, not being able to cope with his guilt feelings about possessing unsocial drives and urges, transfers them to a perfectly innocent, though apparently fearsome, group of people, and labels them as devotees of the powers of darkness because (1) that way he can get out of thinking that they and he are both human, (2) that way he can blame somebody else for his own problems.

Initially, the local population is dehumanized semantically, by the use of substantives that accentuate its strangeness such as “devils”, “creatures”, “phantoms”, “miracles” and so on. (HD 19-21) Instead of focusing on their actual character, the narrator mystifies the identity of the ‘Other’. Another way of denying the natives’ humanity is by rendering them as a faceless amalgam that does not stand out from the environment. Africa is seen as an untamable and shapeless mass that cannot be appropriated. It is his failure to get hold of Africa that challenges the self-deluding mindset of the colonizer. Consequently, Marlow considers Africa as one collective impenetrable body. As a result, his personification of the geographical entity entails at the same time a de-
personalization of its inhabitants. When Marlow describes Kurtz’s disillusion incited by his greediness, he proclaims the wilderness as the winner: “I heard him. ‘My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my – ‘ Everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places.” (2007: 60) Consequently, Africa is seen as one and the same untamable entity that seems invincible, not due to the actions of its inhabitants, but because of its impenetrable and elusive character. Initiatives taken by the native are seen as insignificant, or nearly inexisten, since he or she is only part of that indomitable mass.

Nevertheless, as he proceeds on his journey, Marlow has to admit that the native population is indeed human, an acknowledgement that is hard to accept:

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. (2007: 44)

Even though Marlow accepts that the natives are human, it remains difficult for him to see them as full-fledged individuals. When he speaks affectionately of his indigenous helmsman, Marlow anticipates the astonishment of his company on the Nellie: “Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara.” (HD 62)

In brief, Marlow tries to soothe his moral self-questioning by negating and reducing in value the victims of the colonizers by blurring their image. This can be achieved through denying their
humanity and individuality.

The Moral Mirror

In Le Clézio’s work a similar methodology can be noticed, but its immediate effect seems to be exactly the opposite. Instead of a reduction in meaning of the primitive native, which emanates from Marlow’s report, the deficiencies of the rationalized colonizer are highlighted in Fintan and Maou’s experience. Although Conrad’s writing contains a certain ironical value, the ultimate goal of both depictions of the confrontation between the colonized and the colonizer stays equal: a disapproval of imperialism and a questioning of Western superiority. Just like in *Heart of Darkness*, Le Clézio’s African characters hardly speak. The most striking example is Oya, the incarnation of everything that Africa represents to Geoffroy. She is literally mute, but at the same time she emanates a pureness that affects the European characters in the story. Like Aphrodite being born out of the river, she reaches mythical proportions. Especially Maou is attracted to the sense of freedom that Oya represents: « Ce qui attirait Maou, c’était l’impression de liberté. Oya était sans contraintes, elle voyait le monde tel qu’il était, avec le regard lisse des oiseaux, ou de très jeunes enfants. C’était ce regard qui faisait battre le cœur de Maou, qui la troublait. » (1991 : 173) Oya’s pureness reminds of Kurtz’s mistress, who in a similar manner defies European artificiality. As in Conrad, one could argue that the silence of the native in Le Clézio serves as a moral reflection. The African instigates an introspection, for which words seem to be redundant, as if an encounter with the native becomes an encounter with natural consciousness. Consequentlty, the native is represented as morally superior to the Westerner, but his/her depersonalization and identification with the ‘back to basics’ idea still entails a denial of his/her own cultural identity. Oya’s look is likened to that of a child, which indicates the infantalization that goes together with the portrayal of pure innocence within the native. When considering both Conrad and Le Clézio’s picture of the
native as a moral mirror, the traditional idea of Rousseau’s noble primitive that patronizingly accentuates the pureness and simplicity of the indigenous people is never far away. Another point that remains problematic is the way in which both authors deny a proper history to the native, and by doing so, question the proper identity of the native. Therefore, it is interesting to consider why Africa’s past is so often transposed to the realm of imagination.

**Following the Trail of History**

A central theme in *Onitsha* is Geoffroy’s quest for the Queen of Meroë, the mythical figure who can be traced back to the intriguing city of Meroë, and even further to the Egyptian pantheon. According to the legend that is at the center of the novel, the Queen of Meroë led her people through the desert after her kingdom had been sacked by the Ethiopians. Geoffroy, being completely absorbed by this myth, connects it to the geographical area in which he lives. He sees the actual people of the Onitsha region as the descendants of the Queen. As history repeats itself, the former inhabitants of Meroë today suffer from the British conquerors, in the same way they had to defy the Ethiopians centuries ago. At first sight, Geoffroy’s half invented story incorporates a fascination for Egyptian antiquity. At the same time it confirms that African history, as well as the true African nature in general, is still confined to the domain of mythology. A mythology that becomes personalized and connected to the own experiencing of Africa. His personal story becomes interwoven with the story of Onitsha. Madeleine Borgomano (1993: 246) affirms: « Ces dates d’une histoire tout à fait individuelle (et largement fictive) se trouvent hissées au rang des dates historiques inscrites dans le roman, traces des couches temporelles, avec lesquelles se construit le texte. » History and myth are projected on the personal experience of Africa and vice versa, in order to distill a highly individual conception of reality.
The history of Africa, the cradle of humanity, is at the same time the history of man. Possibly, this is why the African past is represented as an adventurous journey humanity has travelled. Conrad and Le Clézio see the relation between Africa and the course of time in terms of a river, respectively the Congo and the Niger. As Sabine Rodes explains in Onitsha, the river marks the beginning of human history: « Sabine Rodes disait que c’était le plus grand fleuve du monde, parce qu’il portait dans son eau toute l’histoire des hommes, depuis le commencement. » (1991: 119) Time is measured according to the flow of the continuous stream that carries the Western characters downstream in both authors’ work. Besides, the perception of time and reality is different from Western ratio and insistence on precision. Africa is perceived as a journey without a beginning or an end. What counts is how the protagonists experience it. Imagination and reality become problematic terms, since they become inextricably intertwined.

The legend that is tied up with the story of Fintan and his parents recounts the journey of the Queen of Meroë, who as a redeemer leads her harassed people through the desert in order to find a new place to settle. The Queen’s visionary dream that precedes her mission pictures the same clichéd idealized image of Africa as pre-established in the Western mind: fertile plains, savannahs abundant with elephants, rhinoceros, lions, crocodiles and exotic birds. (1991: 147-8) The Queen of Meroë’s dream corresponds to Maou’s imagining of her future in Africa. On her way to her destination, Maou imagines the savannah, the gazelles, the cries of exotic birds and monkeys in the forest (1991: 167). Instead, she found a society of gossiping and narrow-mindedness. Unlike her husband, Maou seems too sensible to take refuge in an imaginary, dream-like world that endures her pre-established idealized vision. In his obsession with the Queen of Meroë, Geoffroy starts to confound his daily life as British clerk in Onitsha with his delusionary imagination. Africa’s mythical past becomes a substitute for the disappointing reality to which the
Western expats are confronted when they arrive in the colony. In their incapability of comprehending the alien environment in which they arrive, the Westerner falls back to the images that were pre-established in the collective Western mind. Instead of solving the secret of Africa, Geoffroy has to carry out a dull and trivial job in the storehouses of Onitsha. Not the actual reality of Africa, but the colonial exploitation of its land affects the exotic image that the West has constructed.

The inspiration for the idealization of Africa, as emblematic as the clichéd semantic Africanist approach, results from a Western perspective on the exotic. The awareness of the clichéd ‘African myth’ in its representation is what distinguishes both authors. At several points, Le Clézio hints at the cultural and ideological constructedness of Africa’s image. Sabine Rodes, who as the ‘enlightened’ colonizer reminds of Mr. Kurtz, admits to Maou that he lies at the basis of Geoffroy’s obsession with the legend of the Queen of Meroë: «Vous savez, c’est moi qui lui ai parlé la première fois de l’influence égyptienne en Afrique de l’Ouest, des ressemblances avec les mythes yorubas, avec le Bénin. […] C’est moi qui lui ai parlé d’Aro Chuku, du dernier culte d’Osiris, c’était mon idée. » (1991: 197) Ultimately, the prime representative of the colonial regime is responsible for perpetuation of the ‘African myth’, as if Africa’s mythological appeal is an entirely Western construct. Rodes lies at the very basis of Geoffroy’s intertwining of myth and reality. When speaking about Oya to Maou, he calls her ‘the last Queen of Meroë’ and ends his speech by asking the rhetorical question “est-ce qu’elle n’a pas l’air d’une reine?” (1991: 198) The fact that Oya is considered as the reincarnation of the Queen symbolizes how present reality is transformed into the continuation of a myth. Mythology is not only a cultural construct in the collective mind, as Roland Barthes explains in his Mythologies, but also a personal device that orders and gives sense to individual experience. Rodes, being a colonial officer, implements mythology to make Geoffroy and Maou believe what he wants them to believe. The myth becomes an instrument. For Geoffroy,
the entire story of the Queen of Meroë corresponds with how he experiences Onitsha in his imagination. When his world crumbles because of the war and the changing political circumstances, Onitsha itself becomes part of the legend, a legend that in the meantime almost has become an individualized faith for him: « Maintenant, tout est différent. La guerre efface les souvenirs, elle dévore les plaines d’herbes, les ravins, les maisons des villages, et même les noms qu’il a connus. Peut-être qu’il ne restera rien d’Onitsha. Ce sera comme si tout cela n’avait existé que dans les rêves, semblable au radeau qui emportait le peuple d’Arsinoë vers la nouvelle Meroë, sur le fleuve éternel. » (1991: 276) The eternal river, the course of time, will never end. Just like the sacking of Meroë has led to its renaissance, the destruction of Onitsha can bring a new resurrection. Oya, as a new Queen of Meroë, incorporates the hope for a new beginning, perpetuating the mythical cycle of Africa’s past.

As Robin Derricourt (2011: 19) explains in his Inventing Africa, especially the African interior has always been a breeding place for an exotic imaginary past that over time got confused with real history. Probably, its reason lies within the African oral tradition of storytelling that ultimately resulted in a totally different conception of fact and fiction. The absence of written history together with the highly spiritual interpretation of events results in a subjective experiencing of reality. Africa lends itself to the making of an own, personalized truth. Madeleine Borgomano (1993: 246) asserts that the lives of the characters in Onitsha are projected on a history that spans nearly two millennia. The text is constructed around three important events in African history: the pillaging of Meroë around 350, which is at the same time the origin of Geoffroy’s obsession; the destruction of the oracle of Aro Chuku by the British in 1902 which marks the beginning of the colonial era; and the devastating Nigerian-Biafran War of 1968. These three events are transitions within a continuing cycle of destruction and resurrection, opposing fatalism and hope. The way in which the characters distill a personal mythology out of Africa’s past invites some important
observations. First of all there is the belief that the origins of the people of Onitsha find their roots in the Egyptian Empire. A. V. Murray underlines the lack of a history in our sense of the word in large parts of Africa, except in Egypt. According to Murray (1938: 19), this has had two main consequences: the absence of a self-conscious culture and a lower status of Sub-Saharan cultures in comparison to the antique Mediterranean empires. Murray’s view confirms the lack of a proper historically founded identity for the Nigerian population. Out of Western inspired imagination, the roots of Onitsha are traced back to the only African historical reality the West is familiar with: Egypt. Proponents of the négritude movement such as the Senegalese writer Cheikh Anta Diop have spent several works on the influence of Egypt on African civilization. The question remains whether the extension of the Egyptian past to an African past can be situated in the postcolonial urge to glorify the history of Africa, or whether the attribution of heroic historical facts to outlandish cultures is due to a denial of African history and thus also identity. On the one hand the reference to Egypt confirms that the historical roots of Onitsha are both glorious and indigenously ‘African’, but on the other hand it is just another perpetuation of a myth that generalizes Africa as one entity, regardless of its internal cultural and ethnical variety. In any case, according to the historian J. D. Fage (1997: 37), Meroë stands for the connection between inner African and Egyptian traditions. Being the cultural epicenter of the African continent, Meroë serves as a unifying symbol for the mysterious dark continent. However, the idea of the ‘lost race’ led through the desert is far from new either. Moses’ march through the Sinai with his people proves that similar legends are rooted in the Christian tradition. From the late nineteenth century onwards, several literary works were dedicated to the Queen of Sheba and the descent of the African race. *The Queen’s Land*, written by the explorer Verney Lovett Cameron is a suitable example of this genre. (2011: 22) These adaptations of a central exodus legend connect a mythical past with hope for a better future. The legend of the Queen of Meroë entails the message that a new salvation is near.
Geoffroy’s myth formation intertwines his personal feelings about Onitsha’s past, present and future. Jacqueline Dutton studies the nostalgic references to a mythical past in relation to a utopian representation of Africa:

Les mythes du paradis perdu, de la nostalgie des origines, et de l’enfance, sont perçus comme s’inscrivant dans ce mouvement régressif qui est souvent étudié chez Le Clézio et qui suggère un désir de retour à la source, à la nature, à l’origine. En tant qu’un des principaux mythes fondateurs de l’utopie, ce mythe qui valorise le bonheur des origines et le paradis perdu dans le passé est de première importance. La représentation d’un passé parfait encourage non seulement une croyance dans l’existence possible d’un meilleur monde, mais aussi le désir de projeter dans une société future tous les aspects positifs qui s’associent au paradis passé, c’est-à-dire le désir de s’élancer vers l’utopie. (2003 : 24)

Dutton hints at an escapist attitude in Le Clézio’s work that is expressed through nostalgia, childhood memories and myth. However, this anchorage in past settings carries in itself the hope for a better future. As he builds up his story around the cyclical movement of decline and renaissance, Le Clézio refrains from the fatalist undertone that often characterizes representations of Africa. Onitsha is staged as a former paradise that, in spite of the (neo)colonial threat, retains the mythical link with an eternal cycle of resurrection.

Apart from its nostalgic and utopian basis, Le Clézio’s use of myth also comprises a reconsideration of the values of “true” history. This second element can be framed in the literary fashion to which postmodernist novels such as Onitsha can be related. Postmodernist historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Linda Hutcheon, tends to de-construct history in
order to highlight its subjectivity. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon extensively discusses the fact that history and fiction are both sides of one and the same medal: “Both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’.” (1988: 89) Le Clézio, by openly stirring together myth, history and biographical truth, corresponds exactly to Hutcheon’s definition. Moreover, Africa, being devoid of a distinct caesura between fact and fiction, serves as an ideal opportunity to prove the subjectivity of human perception and constitution of reality.

In Conrad’s era, the relationship between historiography and literature was conceived in a strikingly similar way. For Conrad’s friend and fellow-writer Henry James, fiction is even more powerful than history when recounting the ‘truth’: “Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting – on second-hand impression” (1988: 231). If fiction based on observation is indeed a more fruitful method of conveying reality than the reliance on secondary sources, subjectivity is unmistakably part of the process of meaning making. In this sense, Conrad and Le Clézio’s conceptualizations of representing reality tend to resemble. Just like the main characters in *Onitsha*, Marlow spins his own story out of his African adventure. The fact that he is telling his story on a ship anchored in the Thames, far away from the actual setting, points at the fact that his narration is not actual history, but a testimony: a highly personal perspective on a personal experience. Moreover, as he calls the natives “prehistoric men” and speaks of the “prehistoric earth” he wanders (2007: 43), Marlow stresses the fact that the dark and primitive setting of his story actually redirects him to the beginnings of time. Africa is represented as a prehistoric place where history, and thus the opposition between fact and fiction, still has to be
created: “We could not understand, because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories.” (2007: 44) With neither understanding nor remembrance left, the only thing that stays behind is the experience itself; the mere fact of being situated at the very heart of darkness, where no strict knowledge of its present and past is at hand.

Both *Heart of Darkness* and *Onitsha*’s narratives are based on a combination of personal experience and a highly imaginary understanding of Africa. This creates the impression that both authors deliberately quit the domain of the truthful. Rather than giving a factual account, they make sense of their experience by relying on a combination of myth and personal perception of reality. In order to achieve this, the narrators rely on a discourse that metaphorically and literally mutes the native. He or she is restricted to the position of bystander, who looks silently upon the abuses of European imperialism. Feeling lost in an environment that mentally and physically torments them, the Westerner falls back on pre-established images of Africa, with its stunning nature and wildlife, and on existing myths that fill in the void of a documented history. However, this escapist reflex ultimately appears to be in vain. Both authors look beyond the hallucinatory impression of Africa by confronting it with the gloomy colonial reality. The difficulty lies in the attempt to find a language to describe colonial Africa without modeling it after longstanding Western images. Even though Le Clézio, unlike Conrad, presents a meta-reflection on mythmaking, he still confirms the fact that speaking about Africa is at the same time speaking in terms of myths.
Conrad and Le Clézio’s style of writing establishes another important continuity between their works. In both cases, the abundant references to sensory perception invites to brand both authors as impressionists. Conrad and Le Clézio capture the scenery in terms of vision, odor and noise. Since Africa guides its visitors to their natural roots, the senses gain importance. Western rationalism recedes in meaning, in the same way as the impressionist art movement refrained from pre-established classicist artistic rules. Africa cannot be forced into a traditional narrative mold, it has to be experienced via the senses.

Conrad’s Impressionism

In Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, Ian Watt (1980: 174) explains why he would label Conrad’s writing ‘impressionist’: “Heart of Darkness is essentially impressionist in one very special and yet general way: it accepts, and indeed in its very form asserts, the bounded and ambiguous nature of human understanding; and because the understanding sought is of an inward and experiential kind, we can describe the basis of its narrative method as subjective moral impressionism.” The most distinctive expression of Conrad’s impressionism, according to Watt, is his visual sense. Furthermore, according to Watt, Marlow represents the incapability of man to seize reality. The only thing that is left is a personal version of reality that is confined within the mind of one person. Marlow’s vision is turbid, he does not manage to achieve a clear vision through the haze that envelops what he perceives on his journey. The setting is described as misty, and the noises of the jungle cannot be localized exactly. Linda Costanzo Cahir (2004: 183) notes that in Heart of
Darkness, the mediating narrative voice vanishes until the reader is left alone with Marlow. Thus, the reader gets lost in Marlow's ambiguities and vague indications. The general impression is left that nothing can be precisely explained in a clear, unambiguous narrative. Watt developed the concept of “delayed decoding” to define Conrad's habit of describing events impressionistically before identifying what actually happens. Apart from postponing reality, Conrad also partitions reality by allocating evidence to multiple voices. In Decolonising the mind, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o (1992: 76) refers to Conrad’s polysemic narration style by indicating how every event is deconstructed from different characters’ perspectives: “With Conrad the same event could be looked at by the same person at different times and places; and each of these multiple voices could shed new light on the event by supplying more information, more evidence, or by relating other episodes that preceded or followed the event under spotlight.” The shattering of information across different perspectives, highlighting the subjectivity of perception and the flaws of the senses, results in a multi-layered rendering that makes reality shift into the symbolic. Conrad himself admitted in a letter to Barrett H. Clark (in G. Jean-Aubry, 1927: 204-5): “a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character.” Conrad achieves this symbolic value by restricting the development of his narrative uniquely to what is perceived by Marlow’s senses. By doing so, he creates a haze in his work that obscures factual truth, but captures and accurately renders experience. As Robert F. Haugh (1957: 40) points out: “[T]he assumption of a straightforward narrative pattern, [is] inadequate to extract the meaning of Conrad, and especially from ‘Heart of Darkness’.” Conrad systematically challenges the traditional ways of perceiving and representing reality. He fragments a logical order of storytelling into multiple impressions that vary on a chronological level and rely on a strictly private sensing of the world.
Conrad’s emphasis on the unreliability of perception and disbelief in objective representation has made him one of the pioneering figures of early modernism. Kenneth Graham (1996: 206-7) believes that Conrad can be situated at the intersection of three elements: (1) a modernist tendency to aim at detachment and a multiplicity of viewpoints indicating a lack of established meaning; (2) the Victorian sense of doom in which the hostile universe is influenced by Schopenhauer’s philosophy of universal pessimism; and (3) the French realist tradition of his literary examples Flaubert and Maupassant. At the basis of *Heart of Darkness* lies a hybridity of styles and influences that ultimately results in Marlow’s fragmented account of a continent that above all is nearly impossible to comprehend through Western eyes. Therefore, it is hard to say to what extent Africa played an determining role in Conrad’s refraining from the classical methodology of rendering the mysterious exotic and his emphasis on the subjectivity of the senses. In every respect, nearly one hundred years later, a postmodern author writing about Africa likewise falls back on a highly sensorial drawing of the Dark Continent.

**Le Clézio’s “Vertige”**

At the very basis, postmodernist representations of reality have a primordial aspect in common with Conrad’s writing, namely “a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture.” (Hutcheon, 1988: 108) Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Le Clézio too renders the experience of colonial Nigeria as a history that is constituted by different experiences from different family members. He intertwines biographical elements with mythology and thus lays bare a highly private manner of sense-making out of an alien reality that is hard to comprehend. Subjectivity is all the more foregrounded by an impressionist sensorial drawing of reality that does not aim at giving an overall image of a scene, but at revealing the perception mechanism that constitutes the interpretation of
a factual reality. Just as in Conrad’s writing, the senses fragment reality into a puzzle that has to be solved by the reader. In *Conversations avec J.M.G. Le Clézio* (Lhoste, 1971: 19-20), the author himself insists on « l’insuffisance de la parole à pouvoir dire tout ce qui ce passe dans la vie quotidienne. » As he explains further: « Chaque seconde c’est un milliard de choses, même plus c’est un infini de choses qui se passent autour de nous » The elusive abundance of things that happen, according to Le Clézio, forms the major deficiency of writing. Le Clézio’s answer to this question lies in his presentation of multiple perspectives. These perspectives are in their turn constructions of individual interpretations. Warren Motte (41: 2012) refers to the example of Geoffroy, who is at the same time a narrator as well as a reader. He interprets the legend of Meroë for us, the reader, and reinvents it through his narration. Motte claims that the emphasis of the constructedness of the narrative is one of the main critiques expressed through *Onitsha*:

Or, une des caractéristiques de la lecture, c’est qu’elle rend possible la narration car chaque lecture repose forcément sur un ensemble d’interprétations disposées en séquence et chaque lecture épouse obligatoirement une forme narrative. C’est ici une des principales leçons *critiques* de ce roman. Et si une lecture neutre est inimaginable, l’idée d’une narration neutre l’est tout autant.

Madeleine Borgomano (247: 1993) presents another example of how Le Clézio reveals the literary mechanism that transposes imaginary worlds to actual reality. The first chapter, ‘Un long voyage’, is named after Fintan’s own novel he writes during the sea voyage to Nigeria. Borgomano states that « Ce roman en abyme, que l’enfant continue à Onitsha, transpose sur le mode imaginaire les expériences et les rêves de Fintan, à travers les aventures d’Esther. L’effet de miroir multiplie les perspectives jusqu’au vertige. » Fintan’s writing exemplifies Le Clézio’s literary concern on a smaller scale. The multitude of perspectives however, results in a multitude of impressions. As these
impressions become too abundant to reproduce narratively, the characters seem experience recurrent vertigo.

Whereas Conrad envelops his story with a haze, Le Clézio emphasizes the *vertige*, i.e. the dizziness of his characters; as if the abundance of impressions makes them lose their sense of stability. The accurate rendering of those impressions is achieved by a precise observation of the perception of different senses: sight, hearing, smell and touch. Fintan and Maou’s first moments on African soil are at Dakar. The following excerpt describes this very first encounter with the continent:


Behind the mysterious name ‘Dakar’ the strong odor of peanut oil is hidden. At once, Fintan associates the whole setting with this strong scent: the soil, the sky, the palm trees, the white houses, the people in the streets. Fintan captures reality in terms of its odor, which exemplifies how Le Clézio throughout the novel utilizes different senses to describe what is to be perceived. For Fintan, the city of Dakar acquires its meaning through its scent, which encapsulates every aspect of the townscape. Apart from the odor, the light and noise of the city have a dazzling impact on the two visitors too. Every impression is rendered as having an unsettling force: « [I] y avait
une telle force dans cette odeur, dans cette lumière, dans ces visages ruisselants, dans les cris des enfants, c'était comme un vertige, comme un carillon, il n'y avait plus de place pour des sentiments. » (1991 : 37) Fintan and Maou get absorbed by the power of their impressions until they are so overwhelmed that they can no longer make sense of it. As in Heart of Darkness, every image of the environment evaporates into an unstable multiplicity of vague impressions. The sweltering atmosphere has a hallucinatory effect on the characters in the novels. The music of the drums and the sound of the insects make Maou muse on the piano playing in her youth back in Livorno. These are only two out of many examples of how Le Clézio foregrounds sensory perception at the expense of a realistic rendering of indisputable facts. Instead, he prefers to give the reader an insight into the psychological process of making sense out of the highly impressive environment that Africa appears to be. Dreamy and private associations with memories and personal sentiments often replace the urge for describing objective reality.

Ultimately, one could state that Le Clézio’s emphasis on the role of the senses results in a synchronization with the surrounding nature:

C’était le commencement des pluies. Le grand fleuve était couleur de plomb sous les nuages, le vent ployait violemment la cime des arbres. Maou ne sortait plus de la maison l’après-midi. Elle restait sous la varangue, à écouter la montée des orages, loin, vers les sources d’Omerun. La chaleur disloquait la terre rouge avant la pluie. L’air dansait au-dessus des toits de tôle. De là où elle s’asseyait elle pouvait voir le fleuve, les îles. Elle n’avait plus envie d’écrire, ni même de lire. Elle avait seulement besoin de regarder, comme si le temps n’a plus d’importance. (1991 : 167)

The coming of the rain literally evaporates Maou’s observation of the landscape. Combining the
forces of sight and hearing, she abandons her interest in reading and writing (activities of the mind), in order to listen and watch instead. She follows the rhythm of nature and thus shakes off the power of time. The only thing that matters is what she perceives around her. Maou, influenced by the magnitude of Africa, distances herself from the restrictedness of European rationality. Africa stimulates her to be in touch with nature by opening up the senses. Consequently, Africa has a purifying effect on its visitors, leaving no one unaffected. It reminds the Westerner of his lost affinity with nature and thus makes him think with the heart instead of the mind.

The (post)modern literary concern of highlighting the unavoidable subjectivity of perception and the multiplicity of truths this generates, once more consolidates this effect. Africa recalls to memory that the only reliability in life is what we feel and what we sense to be true. The believe in one single sanctifying truth is a merely ideological construct of the Western mind.

Whether through the opposition between male and female or reason and sensation, Africa is seen as a trigger of natural instincts. In all its impressiveness, The Dark Continent defies common reason. It therefore reveals two main shortcomings of Western culture: its aim to restrict human impulses, as made clear through the male-female distinction; and the optimistic belief that Western scientific ratio is able to make sense out of the world in an objective manner. This statement however, engenders a twofold reaction. Either the back to basics idea can result in an enthusiastic appraisal of nature as a liberation from Western corruption, or the release of hidden instincts evolves in a gloomy fatalism. Both ideas are expressed to a certain extend by Conrad and Le Clézio, which leads to another continuity in their approach to Africa: a Manichaeism that opposes good and bad.
Chapter Five | Towards a Nature-Culture Divide and Beyond

Whereas Marlow’s merging of the native and his environment has a rather gloomy effect on the reader, the union between the African and his native soil seems at first sight far less pessimistic in Le Clézio’s work. Nevertheless, the colonizer and the colonized occupy similar roles in the novels: the former intrudes into the unspoiled environment of the latter, which results in a dialectic between nature as basic pureness and culture as a disturbing threat to the natural balance. However, the connection between Africa and the dichotomy between nature and culture goes far beyond literary renderings of it. Anthropologists point at a renewed interest in magical knowledge as a substitute for the shortcomings of Western science. A relatively recent example of this is the emergent ‘Afrofuturist’ aesthetic, which combines science fiction, magic realism and Afrocentricity. The idea is far from new though: the urge to lessen the impact of culture and find a way of rediscovering the lost connection with nature in general can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment and beyond. The result stays the same: an idealized image of a pre-colonial Africa that throughout history has maintained its contact with the earth. Therefore, rationality gives way to a predominance of the senses. Therefore, it seems logic that Conrad and Le Clézio emphasize the role of the senses in their impressionist renderings of the setting. They question Western rationality by providing a shattered image of Africa that highlights the subjectivity of human perception. Ultimately, the renewed interest in the natural basis of humanity brings to the surface another pre-established fixed idea in the Western mind: the identification of nature with the female. All of these abovementioned ideas; the rejection of the Western ratio, African moral liberty, the importance of the senses, and the feminization of Africa, come together in both Conrad and Le Clézio’s portraits of Africa. The present chapter will offer a thorough analysis of how these different aspects of the recurrent dichotomy between nature and culture (and the relations
between them) are handled by both authors. In this analysis, special attention will be given to the role of the African woman.

**The Western Mind versus the African Heart**

As noted earlier, Africa is presented as a moral parameter that reminds its visitors of their lost bond to nature. The indigenous population, contrary to Westerners, seems to live in harmony with the soil, the fauna and the flora of their environment. Bony’s bewilderment when he sees Fintan attacking the sacred termite mounds is a remarkable example of the discrepancy between the colonizers and the natives. A similar incident happens when Geoffroy shoots the Ugo bird, an animal that is believed to be a god. Bony is appalled to see the sudden “emptiness in the sky where the falcon drew his circles” (1991: 80). The bird was not only the representation of a god, it also bore the same name as Bony’s grandmother. Family, spirituality, and nature are thus strongly tied together. Violating nature in this case, also means violating the population and its religious identity. The strict separation between mankind and the animal kingdom, inherent to Western cognitive understanding of the world, does not apply to the African conception of the world. Bony seems to be representing the conscience of nature by imitating the sounds of the wildlife and addressing the elements: « Des cris traversaient le vacarme, sortaient Fintan de sa stupeur. Des enfants couraient dans le jardin, sur la route, leurs corps noirs brillant à la lumière des éclairs. Ils criaient le nom de la pluie : Ozoo ! Ozoo ! » (1991: 71) Soon after, a thunderstorm takes off. The natives apparently seem to have a sixth sense that connects them to the seemingly untamable forces of nature. Although the natives are characterized as ‘primitive’, following a longstanding tradition of stereotyping, they are positively evaluated, as being morally superior to the Westerner.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the primitiveness of the indigenous population leaves a different
impression. The native merges with his/her natural environment. The voyagers on the Congo River are portrayed as helpless and ignorant in the way they try to overcome the natural obstacles they are confronted with. The treasure hunters on the steamboat are exposed to untamable forces of nature and violent attacks of tribes along the river. Feeling out of place, Marlow senses that the environment is not very welcoming to visitors, “as if Nature herself tries to ward off intruders” (2007: 16). Marlow concludes “it was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.” (2007: 17) The West, in spite of its ratio and enlightened visions in an era of unprecedented industrial and scientific progress, seems to fail in its attempt to get hold of darkest Africa. In a period of unlimited trust in the capacity of the human mind, primitive Africa raises an unsolvable task. Ironically, the reason for this lies in this endless confidence in the Western genius. The colonizers, Mr. Kurtz first, are portrayed as hollow figures, detached from their emotions, focusing solely on their quest for financial profit. This results in an image of the Westerner as being estranged from his emotional and moral awareness. The Westerner is considered as confined to the mind, whereas the native is portrayed as fiercely and impulsively acting with the heart.

This difference in attitude corresponds to a strongly diverging conception of society. The rigid European colonial society is sharply contrasted with this African sense of freedom and release from restraints. The advocate of Western strictness, and thus the antithesis of African liberty, is Gerald Simpson, the District Officer of Onitsha: « Chacun à son rang » était la devise de Simpson. Il voyait la société coloniale comme un échafaudage rigoureux où chacun devait tenir son rôle. Naturellement, il s’était réservé le rôle le plus important, avec le Résident et le juge. » (1991: 166) The hierarchical and competitive character of the petty-bourgeois society of secluded whites which he stands for, is a recurrent theme throughout literature on the colonies. E. M. Forster’s contemptuous depiction of the white enclave in his Passage to India is another famous example of this, even though it is set in India. In Heart of Darkness, a strikingly similar rendering of the
hypocrisy and mutual rivalry within the white community is to be found:

They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way. There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. (2007: 29)

Personal profit (“percentages”) is contrasted with universal divine traits of nature. Both Conrad and Le Clézio depict the natives as worshipping nature, while the colonizers only exploit nature, worshipping its saleable products rather than the thing itself: “The word ‘ivory’ rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it.” (2007: 27) In Onitsha, the same contrast can be found. Le Clézio contrasts African mythological names with the names of Western companies, as if a new, less elevated and more mundane religion has taken over the ancient indigenous faith in natural forces. Bony speaks of ‘Oya, la mère des eaux’ and ‘Asaba, le grand serpent qui vit dans les failles’ who need to be offered gifts in order to placate these natural spirits. In the next paragraph though, these divine, spiritual and invisible powers are replaced by economic powers that reign over the city: « [L]a Société commerciale de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, Jackel & Co, Ollivant, Chanrai & Co, John Holt & Co, African Oil Nuts. C’étaient des noms étrangers pour Fintan, quand Geoffroy parlait avec Maou, des noms de gens inconnus, qui achetaient et vendaient, qui envoyaient des bordereaux, des télégrammes, des injonctions. » (1991 : 90) By confronting these paragons of Western capitalism with the names of African spirits, Le Clézio creates a juxtaposition that reflects the recurrent divide between the West and Africa.
In conclusion, Conrad and Le Clézio see Africa as a reminder of the corruption of Western colonization, thus adopting an ethical viewpoint as described in chapter two. Africa reveals the contrast between the triviality of European fortune seeking in a harmonious environment that unites man and nature. This conflict between elevated spirituality and vulgar materialism reverses the common perception of African primitivism. From this point of view, the primitive becomes morally superior and situates himself highly above capitalist ambitions. Africa has become the heart: corporally and emotionally connected to the earth. The colonizers in their turn are restricted to the rational and pragmatic mind, devoid of emotions and feelings. The meeting of these two at first sight incompatible opponents, results in a transformation of any of the characters that get exposed to Africa. The purgation and purification instigated by the Dark Continent will be treated later on. First, I will focus a little further on the representation of this manifest dichotomy between nature and culture by analyzing the role of the female.

The African Woman

Since Africa as a whole symbolizes the force of nature, the African woman serves as the embodiment of the continent in both novels, as she incorporates all the stereotypes that are attached to its frankness and pureness. The European woman is considered prudish and superficial while her African counterpart is truthful and detached from artificial regulations. It is interesting to see how the feminization of African naturalness leads back to a longstanding tradition of equalizing ‘Mother Nature’ with the female. In what follows, an overview will be given of how Conrad and Le Clézio symbolically implement the woman as antithesis of everything that the West represents.

Starting with *Heart of Darkness*, it is useful to consider Rino Zhuwarara’s (2004: 234) opinion about Conrad’s treatment of the female. He has paid particular attention to the role of the African
woman in Conrad’s novel and comes to the following conclusion:

[T]he African woman symbolizes a barbaric magnificence: she is majestically alluring yet with a gaudiness which is gratuitously repellent; she is the ivory which beckons fortune seekers, but only to destroy the morally unwary. Her vitality is as seductive as it is sinfully corrosive: it is part of that sexuality hinted at by the words “passion”, “mysterious”, and “fecundity”, but a sexuality which is demonic and therefore morally dangerous. [...] She is the darkness which awakens the primeval instincts in Kurtz and as such, part of the black peril which casts a dark menacing shadow across the width and breadth of the whole land.

In this sense, Kurtz’s African mistress symbolizes the recurring dichotomy between good and bad. She is magnificent, but at the same time morally threatening, at least to Western standards. She “awakens the primeval instincts” and thus transcends the Victorian regulations of sexuality. She has a liberating force, by which she, as no other character in the novel, disseminates a sense of corporality inherent to Africa. Threatening the Victorian morality, she acquires demonic proportions. Her passion and mystery escapes the rational mind. The following excerpt reflects Marlow’s perception of her appearance:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes, treading the earth proudly with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen
suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the
fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at
the image of its tenebrous and passionate soul. (2007: 75-6)

She is rendered as the personification of the primitive liberty that Africa bears within itself. In all
her magnificence, she is literally described as the “soul” of Africa. Marlow contrasts her barbarity
with the proud elegance of her movement. She is seen as “savage and superb”, “wild-eyed and
magnificent”. In short: Kurtz’s mistress holds in her both a primitiveness that is both superior and
threatening. However, it has unchained considerable accusations of racism and stereotyping.

Perhaps the most violent and loudest voice of critique on Conrad’s supposed racist attitude
is uttered by Chinua Achebe (1987) in his famous lecture at the University of Massachusetts. He
compares Conrad’s description of Kurtz’s mistress with how Conrad presents Kurtz’s ‘intended’ to
the reader. Achebe accuses Conrad of a clichéd rendering of African women in order to re-establish
his views upon African primitivism:

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons.
First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad’s special brand of approval and second, she
fulfills a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European
woman who will step forth to end the story:

She [the intended] came forward all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the
dusk. She was in mourning .... She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard
you were coming."... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.”
(quoted in Achebe)
Achebe denounces the fact that Conrad bestows on the European woman the ability of expressing herself while the African mistress is considered incapable of human expression. Moreover, Marlow praises her capacity for “fidelity”, “belief” and “suffering”. This is in sharp contrast with the earlier mentioned unrestrained lustfulness of his African mistress. C. P. Sarvan (1988: 284), however, refutes that Conrad believes the African woman incapable of having human emotions:

Achebe also noted that Kurtz’s African mistress is the “savage counterpart to the refined, European woman.” But the European woman is pale and rather anemic, whilst the former, to use Conrad’s words, is gorgeous, proud, superb, magnificent, tragic, fierce, and filled with sorrow. She is an impressive figure and, importantly, her human feelings are not denied.

Apparently, Sarvan significantly nuances Achebe’s conclusion. The European woman is artificial, pale and fake, whilst the African woman is genuine and full of passion. This contradistinction corresponds with the overall twofold image that is left of Africa and the West in general, of which the woman metaphorically serves as evidence.

Following Sarvan’s point of view, important similarities between Conrad and Le Clézio come to the surface. In both Onitsha and L’Africain, the African woman is similarly portrayed as genuine and impressive, while the European woman is artificial:

La vieillesse, sans doute plus choquante pour un enfant sur le corps d’une femme puisque encore, puisque toujours, en France, en Europe, pays des gaines et des jupons, des soutiens-gorge et des combinaisons, les femmes sont ordinairement exemptes de la
In Europe, women can hide their imperfections, whereas African women are portrayed as beautiful in their truthfulness. This is what both Conrad and Le Clézio stress in their renderings of African femininity. If Kurtz’s mistress is seen as the female incorporation of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, then Oya fulfills the same roll in *Onitsha*. Her description is characterized by a similar attention to authenticity. Moreover, as noted above, Oya adopts a mythical dimension:


By identifying Oya with the black goddess, Oya takes up the role of the Queen of Meroë, the symbol of hope and fertility who leads Geoffey through his imagined world just like the queen led her people through the desert. Just like the Queen of Meroë, Oya is represented as the redeemer, the last beacon of hope in bad times. Oya, and by extent the African woman in general, is portrayed as bringer of life, maintaining the eternal cycle of life and thus guaranteeing a fruitful future. Maou is astonished by her appearance and, as a European woman, is extremely attracted to the sense of freedom Oya emits:

Here again, a dreamlike image of pureness and exquisiteness creates an impression of infinite freedom. She is likened to Egyptian masks, while her look is believed to be unprejudiced and free from corruption. Therefore, a symbolic connection is made with the look of innocent of children and the precise, unwavering vision of birds. Le Clézio’s rendering of Oya is strikingly similar to Conrad’s description of Kurtz’s mistress. Both women impress by their appearance, they express the liberty of the senses, and both are denied speech; Oya even literally since she is deaf-mute. Over hundred years, the symbolism of the African woman has not changed. Zhuwarara’s statement that “the cliché-ridden description of the savage mistress with her dark and tempting sexuality is part of a long-standing stereotype in which blacks are perceived as possessing a lustfulness and bestiality associated with the animal Kingdom” (2004: 234-5), still applies. Yet, the rendering of the African woman includes more than just her overt sexuality. As she represents a return to human nature, she stands for openness and candor. Ultimately, the female represents life (as bearer of children), while the male is considered to be life-threatening (the male European colonizer being opposed to the indigenous woman). Perhaps this can be ascribed to a persistent image in which the female, as bringer of life, is opposed to the male, as destroyer of it with his irrational violence. This dichotomy is reinforced by the African colonial setting, in which both fertility and brutality are competing forces. Fertility is related to African religion and a bond with nature, while brutality originates from the imperialist, European enterprise.

Conrad and Le Clézio describe the imperialist campaign as performed by men only. Female characters in their stories are always opposed to the restricting and competitive male colonial enterprise. Kurtz’s mistress and Oya are silent but honorable victims of western imperialism, while Maou is merciless in her critique on the white community and the way they treat the blacks. Maou is the only character that stands out of the male-female duality sketched above. As an Italian, her
Latin temperament shocks the reticent British colonials, for instance when she protests against the working conditions of the black convicts.

Within both Le Clézio and Conrad’s works, Women serve as reminders of the moral consciousness of men. Since both Africa and the female are reminders of the natural state of being. This longstanding stereotyped symbolism fits in the Judeo-Christian concept of female life-giving and male culture. The fact that both author’s rendering of Africa lean on this nature-culture dichotomy once more perpetuates the myth of Africa as natural and thus moral basis of humanity. As such, Africa becomes the ideal locus to rediscover the self, as discussed in the seventh chapter. This power of attraction however, has engendered a lot of collective and individual dreams in the European mind, more than often ending in a nightmare. The apparent divide between nature and culture shifts into a more complex entanglement of binary constructions that ultimately constitute a multiform image of Africa. One of these dualities is a Manichaeist opposition between good and bad.
Chapter Six | When the Exotic Dream Becomes a Nightmare: a Manichean Rendering of Africa

The association of Africa with a natural universe that is repressed by Western moral regulations is indisputably related to the exotic attraction this continent has exerted upon the West for over centuries. Reminding of Rousseau’s hypothetical state of nature, a simpler, more primitive way of life is more than often automatically considered to be a happier way of life. In *L'exotisme d'Homère à Le Clézio*, Roger Mathé explores the history of the exotic attraction of non-Western settings. He indicates how the quest for the exotic is at the same time a quest for happiness: « En tout cas, qu’il soit imaginé ou vécu, le sentiment exotique s’associe toujours à un rêve de bonheur. Il aboutit à la création ou à la découverte d’une contrée, de conditions d’existence, de rapports humains qui donnent au moins l’illusion d’un paradis retrouvé. » (1972: 16) The source of happiness that is looked for can differ, but the incentive seems to be always an escapist attitude towards the over-regulated and restrictive Western civilization. This escapist desire is thus at the same time a desire for freedom. This aspired freedom can be situated on different levels. Conrad, and his narrator Marlow, pursue a spatial freedom, given their boyish desire to fill in the blank spaces on the map. Besides, there is also a desire for moral liberation, translated in the rendering of a corporal, unrestrained Africa. In short, Africa stands for the ultimate release from restrictions felt at home.

The Exotic Deception

Africa becomes a cure for every negative aspect in the life of those who dream of it. The different characters project their desires upon the mystified blank screen that hides the actual character of this vast territory. Fintan for instance wants to break away from the suffocating family situation at
home in France. A painting in the bedroom of his grandmother together with the magical name of Onitsha allure him to leave his home and embark upon a journey to this mysterious destination:

Il voulait s'arrêter, entrer dans la ligne sombre de la côte, traverser les fleuves et les forêts, jusqu'à Onitsha. C'était un nom magique. Un nom aimanté. On ne pouvait pas résister. « Quand on sera à Onitsha... » Maou disait cela. C'était un nom très beau et très mystérieux, comme une forêt, comme le méandre d'un fleuve. Grand-mère Aurélia avait dans sa chambre, à Marseille, au-dessus de son lit bombé, un tableau qui représentait une clairière dans la forêt, où se reposait une harde de cerfs. Chaque fois que Maou parlait d'Onitsha, Fintan pensait que ça devait être comme cela, comme dans cette clairière, avec la lumière verte qui passait dans le feuillage des grands arbres. (1991: 52)

Mathé (1972: 24-5) expounds that the most direct expression of the exotic lies in its image. This image is already translated through the place name. Mathé refers to Alexandre Dumas, who claimed that the name ‘Africa’ contains something magic and prestigious that is nowhere else to be found in the world. To Fintan, the name ‘Onitsha’ has a similar power of attraction. Its allurement is twofold. Firstly, Onitsha embodies his hope for a better future, away from the suffocating conditions in which he and his mother have to live. Secondly, he conceptualizes the mysterious name of Onitsha by associating it with a painting in his grandmother’s bedroom. Fintan’s example demonstrates the mechanism behind the appeal of the exotic. Initially, the conceptualization of the exotic is based on a highly personal desire for a promising future. Therefore, it relies on pre-established images of external beauty. The mysterious blankness of Africa in the Western mind suits perfectly for a highly personalized coloring that suits personal desires and ambitions. For Maou, Africa represents the reunion with her husband, while Geoffroy is fully absorbed by the legend of the Queen of Meroë. Marlow in his turn, enchanted by that “mighty big river” (2007: 9),
wants to fulfill his boyish dream of exploring the unknown. In short, Africa is represented as a welcoming place for a variety of escapist motives.

However, in both Conrad and Le Clézio’s stories, the African dream gradually becomes a nightmare. In his essay *To the End of the Night*, Zdzislaw Najder (2004: 143) describes Marlow’s bitter disappointment after witnessing ruthless imperial looting instead of romantic settings in *Heart of Darkness*:

In place of romance and adventure he found ruthless competition for trade and power, and an organization bent on making quick, huge profits. In place of primordial vegetation, he found a landscape where the jungle, exploding with succulent foliage, contrasted grotesquely with the angular elements of imported architecture. All those European buildings that were a source of pride to the local whites must have given him the impression of façades incongruously superimposed upon the omnipresent density of tropical nature. Even the misshapen steamer, oozing smoke and shaking and croaking, could be taken for a symbol of the repellent, albeit profitable, European penetration.

The expected romantic unspoiled setting appears to be stained by imperialist occupation. European physical interventions in the landscape symbolize the ‘European penetration’. Exactly the same observation is made in *Onitsha*:

Maou avait rêvé de l’Afrique, les randonnées à cheval dans la brousse, les cris rauques des fauves le soir, les forêts profondes pleines de fleurs chatoyantes et vénéuseuses, les sentiers qui conduisaient au mystère. Elle n’avait pas pensé que ce serait comme ceci, les journées longues et monotones, l’attente sous la varangue, et cette ville aux toits de tôle bouillants
Nature has ceded its place for capitalist companies, while the adventurous occupation dreamt of ultimately appears to be a dull and trivial job. The disappointment is initially caused by the contaminating effect of Western intervention in the African scenery. Maou hoped to leave everything that she had known in France, but the most banal Western products turn out to be the foundations on which her husband’s profession is built. The colors she imagined only exist in the “rodomontade” of the British officers. For Maou, the mysteriousness of Africa is completely ruined by European interference. Her attempt to escape the ‘civilized’ world was in vain. Ironically, it was Geoffroy, her husband who now has to make inventories of soap and corned beef, that stirred up in her a fascination with Africa. Once confronted with her dreary and disappointing existence in Onitsha, she thinks back to his devotion to discover the secret of the queen of Meroë and follow her footsteps into the heart of Africa:

C’était bien de repenser à ce temps-là, dans le silence de la nuit. Elle se souvenait de ce qu’il racontait alors, de sa fièvre de partir, pour l’Égypte, pour le Soudan, pour aller jusqu’à Meroë, suivre cette trace. Il ne parlait que de cela, du dernier royaume du Nil, de la reine noire qui avait traversé le désert jusqu’au cœur de l’Afrique. Il parlait de cela comme si rien du monde présent n’avait d’importance, comme si la lumière de la légende brillait plus que le soleil visible. (1991: 96-7)
For Geoffroy, his African mission becomes a substitute for real life. The legend of the Queen of Meroë shines brighter than the sun, as if this imaginary African world replaces the banality of his actual existence. In comparison to his wife, Geoffroy is far less rational in his attraction to Africa. His enchantment by the mythical history of Meroë blurs his perception of the environment to such an extent that he cannot separate facts from myths anymore. While Fintan and Maou want to escape their home, Geoffroy feels the urge to leave a world ‘taken by madness’:

La guerre était en Espagne, en Érythrée, le monde était pris de folie, mais rien n’avait d’importance. Geoffroy était là-bas, sur le bord du grand fleuve, il allait découvrir le secret de la dernière reine de Meroë. Il préparait le voyage de Maou, il disait : « Quand nous serons réunis à Onitsha... » La tante Rosa grinçait : « Porco inglese, il est fou ! Au lieu de venir s’occuper de toi ! Avec l’enfant qui va naître ! » (1991: 97)

Geoffroy does not only abandon the ‘madness’ of the world, translated through contemporary calamities such as the Spanish Civil War, he also neglects his duty as future father as aunt Rosa explicitly comments. Maou, in order to reunite her household, follows the dream of her husband and rejoins him finally. However, being more sensible than Geoffroy and less enchanted by the mythical value of Africa, her disappointment comes quite quickly and overtly: « C’étaient les années lointaines, étrangères. Maintenant, Maou avait rejoint le fleuve, elle était venue, enfin, dans ce pays dont elle avait rêvé si longtemps. Et tout est si banal. Ollivant, Chanrai, United Africa, est-ce que c’était pour ces noms-là qu’on avait vécu ? » (1991: 98) The actual disappointment begins at the conflict between the images the visitor to Africa expected to see and the reality he/she is confronted with when arriving at his/her destination. Maou, having always been enchanted by the word ‘Onitsha’, confronts her expectations with the names of Western
companies: Ollivant, Chanrai, United Africa. These were not the names she had lived up to. The prospect of arriving in an untouched, innocent Africa has been undermined by the imperialist enterprise. Nevertheless, the West is not always explicitly mentioned as the responsible for the frightening experience Africa ultimately seems to be.

**A Manichean Rendering**

The real monsters in the nightmare are purely indigenous and inherent to Africa: cruel barbaric customs, tropic diseases, the unbearable climate... Conrad and Le Clézio, by contrasting fairy-like imaginations of Africa with actual experiences, engage in a Manichean vision of the Dark Continent. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon (1968: 41) describes how the native, lacking any kind of ethics or values, becomes “the absolute evil” within the “Manichean colonial world”. Whereas Conrad, as noted above, largely confirms this horrifying image of the native, Le Clézio seems to reveal the Western construction of it by opposing Maou’s actual experience of the native with the fictionalizing of him/her within the Western community.

Maou attributes an exceptional feeling of congeniality to the local population. Everything she had known starts anew, and with more vigor:

*Jamais elle n’avait aimé personne comme ces gens. Ils étaient si doux, ils avaient des yeux si lumineux, des gestes si purs, si élégants. Quand elle traversait les quartiers de la ville, pour aller jusqu’au Wharf, les enfants s’approchaient d’elle sans timidité, caressaient ses bras, les femmes la prenaient par la main, lui parlaient, dans cette langue douce qui bruissait comme une musique.* (1991: 165)
Maou’s impressions however, do not match the rumors she hears about the cruel customs of this people she experiences as gentle and kind-hearted, as the splendor of the people she encounters is contrasted on the same page with longstanding rumors of sorcery and cannibalism:


Florizel’s account typifies the contemporary diabolization of the native tribes by the West. Similar references of fetishism and cannibalism are to be found in Marlow’s report. Since both authors present fact and fiction as difficult to distinguish from one another, it is hard to find an unambiguous verification of these practices in *Heart of Darkness* and *Onitsha*. In his autobiographical essay *L’Africain* however, Le Clézio elaborates on the native practices and the Western dramatization of them: « En vérité, l’animisme et le fétichisme étaient courants à l’époque. La sorcellerie était aussi une pratique au Cameroun, mais pour mon père, elle avait un caractère plus ouvert, plus positif. » (2004 : 101) As a doctor, his father witnessed the daily life of the local villagers from close by. Although he does not deny animist and fetishist belief, he points in the first place at the negative consequences of their dramatization: « Les histoires qu’on raconte
créent un climat de méfiance, de tension. » (101) His father admits that there is indeed a lot of violence around, but it leaves corpses that cannot be explained in terms of native misdeeds. « Mon père nous répète ces récits effarants, sans doute n’y croit-il qu’à moitié. Il n’a jamais constaté lui-même des preuves de cannibalisme. » (102) His father explains he has never witnessed cannibalism himself. Still, he does not deny the existence of it. Even though he is not confronted with these horror stories, he still gets exhausted of his work in a hostile environment. « Ce métier qu’il a exercé dans l’enthousiasme devient peu à peu accablant, dans la chaleur, l’humidité de la rivière, la solitude au bout du monde » (102-3) At the end of his career in Nigeria, Le Clézio’s father leaves the continent as a broken man, worn out by the climate and the harsh conditions he had to work in. Even as a non-fictional character, he reminds one of Mr. Kurtz, Marlow, and Geoffroy, who all suffered from the cruelty of the African reality, and were not able to distinguish the ‘truth’ behind the African image.

In spite of decades of postcolonial anthropological research invalidating Western mythological constructs of the African character, a highly dramatic image of the tribal practices still re-emerges in contemporary fiction. In Onitsha, a violent and suffocating description is given of a tribal ceremony Maou and Fintan attend, involving two dancers who finally get carried away. When Fintan immediately afterwards asks his mother whether the two men are dead, she does not see the relevance of this: « Est-ce qu’ils sont morts ? » demanda Maou. Marima ne répondit pas. Maou ne comprenait pas pourquoi tout cela avait tant d’importance. C’était seulement un jeu à la lumiére de la lune. Elle pensait à Geoffroy. Elle sentait la fièvre arriver en elle. » (1991 : 218) It is not the ‘truth’ that counts, but the subjective impression of it. Contrary to Fintan who wants to know whether the two dancers have died in the ceremonial dance, she only sees it as “ un jeu dans la lumiére de la lune”. The reader does not get to know what actually happened with the dancers. Only the impression of the mystical rite is transposed into the narrative. Le Clézio does
not aspire an anthropological survey of the southern Nigerian tribes, he limits his description to the confirmation that the only truth in Africa is the subjective impression of a culture that will never be completely understood through Western eyes.

Here, once again, the two authors meet. Their dual rendering of Africa that oscillates between an idealized image of primitive superiority and a highly dramatized portrayal of savage cruelty finally does not say anything about the actual character of the indigenous population itself, but reveals instead the Western perception and interpretation of it, that ultimately sustain the ‘African myth’. Through the deception that follows the attraction of Africa, Conrad and Le Clézio demonstrate the forged character of this ‘African myth’.
Chapter Seven | Towards a Natural Transformation: Between Degeneration and Harmonization

In this final chapter, I focus on the effect Africa exerts on its Western visitors in Conrad and Le Clézio’s works. Once he or she settles on African soil, the Westerner seems to be dragged along a journey through his own person. Many critiques have considered Heart of Darkness as an exploration of the depths of the human soul while separating the story from its African background. The journey to the “heart of darkness” in the deep jungle metaphorically represents the gradual revelation of the darkness of human nature. Notwithstanding the tendency to de-localize the novel, the suggestion remains that Africa instigates a transformation in the character of its visitors. As Linda Costanzo Cahir notes: “[Heart of Darkness] is a bildungsroman, an initiation into darkness and chaos” (2004: 183) As the psychological complexity deepens, the human capacity of idealism and brotherhood are put to the test. Le Clézio’s rendering of Africa however, uncovers a similar initiatory journey. Therefore, I suggest that the African initiated metamorphoses of its Western visitors, albeit largely in a passive manner, is also part of the perpetuated image of Africa. This metamorphoses however corresponds to the overall dual rendering of this continent. Africa can lie at the basis of a ‘reversed’ Bildung: the rediscovering of the instincts instead of an intellectual cultivation, but it can also instigate a moral degeneration, as every form of moral regulation fades away.

Harmonization with nature: Fintan and Maou

Madeleine Borgomano (1993: 243) sees Onitsha as a part of a tradition of classical novels of formation, as she names the novel a « nouvelle recherche du temps perdu ». 
La construction classique du texte est soulignée par les titres des quatre parties : ‘Un long voyage’ ; ‘Onitsha’ (où Fintan se trouve au cœur de son rêve’) ; ‘Aro Chuku’, où son père remonte le fleuve du temps jusqu’au cœur des ténèbres. Le voyage est bouclé par un retour, clôture géographique et narrative, institué par le dernier titre, ‘Loin d’Onitsha’, comme exil irrémédiable.

The novel has a chronologically closed structure. Its final chapter, as in _Heart of Darkness_, includes a perspective in hindsight, situated back in Europe, on the past time in Africa. In both cases, the narrator speaks as a transformed person, shaped by his experience.

Fintan and Geoffroy are more explicitly transformed during the novel than Maou, although she alters her view on Africa and its inhabitants too after becoming adapted to her new environment. Geoffroy becomes mentally absorbed by a semi-real Africa that serves as a refuge for his psychologically tormented soul. For Fintan however, the migration to Africa is at the same time an initiation. As Borgomano (1993: 245) suggests, Onitsha is his second birth after the initiatory journey on the ship that brought him to Africa. John Taylor (1999) considers Fintan’s story as “an initiation in reverse”: “Whereas the classical _Bildungsroman_ often illustrates how the hero is educated, rises in society and acquires artistic or intellectual skills, here Fintan, raised as a Westerner, must learn how to re-establish a direct, fearless, respectful relationship with Nature.”

His initiation to an existence inspired by nature is symbolized by his determination to run barefoot through the savannah, just like his friend Bony. Stimulated by the muddy soil after a thunderstorm, Fintan decides to take off his shoes: « La boue suçait ses pieds. Fintan ôta ses chaussures, il les accrocha autour de son cou par les lacets, comme un sauvage. » (1991 : 72) From now on, Fintan belongs to the ‘savages’ and abandons the Western attributes that literally prevent him from touching the African soil. As his initiation nears its completion, Fintan’s feet have adapted to the
savannah: « Maintenant, Fintan avait appris à courir sans fatigue. La plante de ses pieds n’était plus cette peau pâle et fragile qu’il avait libérée de ses souliers. C’était une corne dure, couleur de terre. Ses orteils aux ongles cassés s’étaient écartés pour mieux s’agripper au sol, aux pierres, aux troncs d’arbres. » (1991: 104-5) His feet literally have adopted the color and shape of the ground. Fintan, just like Bony, becomes one with nature. Synchronized with the rhythm of nature, Fintan senses the dangers and caprices of nature: « Maintenant, il savait faire cela, marcher pieds nus sans craindre les fourmis ou les épines, et suivre une trace à l’odeur, chasser la nuit. Il devinait la présence des animaux cachés dans les herbes, les pintades blotties contre un arbre, le mouvement rigide des serpents, parfois l’odeur âcre d’un chat sauvage. » (1991: 180-1) Fintan’s years in Africa correspond with his transition to adulthood. His initiation to a natural way of life is at the same framed in a coming-of-age story. « Son visage et son corps s’étaient endurcis, ses pieds étaient devenus larges et forts comme ceux des enfants d’Onitsha. Il y avait surtout dans sa physionomie quelque chose de changé, dans le regard, dans les gestes, qui montrait que la plus grande aventure de la vie, le passage à l’âge adulte, avait commencé. » (1991: 175) His coming adolescence is preceded by the discovering of the subconscious ‘primitive’ within himself. As Taylor suggest, he liberates himself from his Western straitjacket and finds liberation in the way of living of the savannah. Africa spiritually widened his view on the world, by reconciling him with a more natural lifestyle, disposed of Western artificiality.

The enlightening effect of Africa can also be found in the insights Onitsha inspires in Maou’s mind. Anticipating to her stay in Africa, Maou believes she will find the reason of her life in Onitsha. (1991: 31) As time proceeds, she finally finds out what Onitsha has learned her:

Tout à coup elle comprenait ce qu’elle avait appris en venant ici, à Onitsha, et qu’elle n’aurait jamais pu apprendre ailleurs. La lenteur, c’était cela, un mouvement très long et
régulier, pareil à l’eau du fleuve qui coulait vers la mer, pareil aux nuages, à la touffeur des après-midi, quand la lumière emplissait la maison et que les toits de tôles étaient comme la paroi d’un four. La vie s’arrêtait, le temps s’allongissait. Tout devenait imprécis, il n’y avait plus que l’eau qui descendait, ce tronc liquide avec ses multitudes de ramifications, ses sources, ses ruisseaux enfouis dans la forêt. (1991 : 167)

She finds a connection with nature. Its pace corresponds with the eternal flow of the river. Throughout the novel, the river stands for the bringer of life. Its sources, creeks, and ramifications are dispersed in the forest, as if the forest gives birth to life and leads its way. As with Fintan, Maou’s ‘Bildung’ is a nullification of her Western formation. At first, her arrival in Africa filled her with dismay. The colonial management deprived the Onitsha region from its pureness and beauty. As time passes however, Maou manages to make a distinction between the here-and-now; the actual state in which she finds the city, and the poetic image she identifies it with. In her study of geographical and mental displacement in Onitsha, Sophia Khalil analyzes Maou’s shifting conceptualization of Onitsha. She identifies Onitsha with the mysterious surrounding forest, by which she transcends reality and opens up a poetic dimension. As Khalil (2000: 67) suggests: « À travers cette identification, la ville d’Onitsha se métamorphose en réintégrant les valeurs d’un espace poétique. Il ne s’agit plus d’évoquer ici une géographie qui a une visée référentielle mais de développer plutôt l’image métaphorique d’un espace constructif. » Onitsha is an inspirational force that enlightens her vision on life by making her rediscover the poetic facet of nature. Therefore, I believe that Fintan and Maou are subjected to what Taylor believes to be a ‘reversed Bildung’ an intellectual cultivation that subverts the traditional ‘Bildung’ that aims at a cultural and artistic schooling. On the contrary, the cultural development of both characters is annulled in favor of a rather nature-inspired moral growth.
Geoffroy’s Exploration of Darkest Africa

Geoffroy, the father of the family, is transformed by his determination to discover the truth behind the legend of Meroë. This leads him to a journey through the dark inland of Central-Africa to find the “Lac de vie” of the legendary oracle of Aro Chuku. His expedition along the Niger resembles Marlow’s sailing on the Congo. Geoffroy and Marlow are both confronted with an increasingly sinister environment that metaphorically expresses the deepest obscurity of the human soul. Whereas Marlow witnesses the atrocities of the local tribes along the stream, Geoffroy ventures to enter Aro Chuku, the very center of West-African sorcery, where piles of skulls and altars covered with blood stand side by side (1991: 165). Geoffroy’s experience when he reaches the mysterious mbiam water at Aro Chuku reminds of Mr. Kurtz raving when he is discovered by Marlow: « Le ciel est immense, d’un bleu presque noir. Geoffroy sent le feu qui s’est rallumé au centre de son corps, et le froid de l’eau qui monte par vagues, qui le remplit. Il pense : tout est terminé. Il n’y a pas de paradis (1991 : 225). » The black sky represents the climax of darkness he has reached, while his utterances echo Mr. Kurtz’s exclamation “The horror ! The horror!” (2007 : 86). Whereas Maou and Fintan reconcile with their environment, Geoffroy concludes that there is no paradise. Years later, back in Southern France, Geoffroy finally sees the “truth” revealed in his mind. Right before he dies, he sees in a dream-like vision, the true descendant of the Queen of Meroë: Oya. As Borgomano suggests, this “truth” is only another, last imagination. The quest that obsesses Geoffroy until his final moments however, distances him from his family and his responsibility as a father. Just like Mr. Kurtz, Geoffroy is turned entirely into his own world. Both seem to lose their soul in a Faustian manner as they become increasingly absorbed by their quest.

Whether the transformation of the Westerner results in a moral degeneration or a harmonization with nature, it endorses once again the dual rendering of Africa. Zhuwarara (2004: 227) refers to
the Nietzschean opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: “[Conrad] transforms Africa into an active, symbolic persona possessing those anarchic Dionysian energies which are forever locked in combat against the Apollonian principles underpinning Western civilization.”

Maou, Fintan and Geoffroy’s transformation proves that Le Clézio too opposes the Dionysian with the Apollonian. Africa represents a liberation from Western regulation which leads to an ambivalent rendering that opposes the desire for moral freedom with the dangers it brings along. The ‘African myth’ thus becomes a highly personal myth, which illustrates the subjectivity of perception and expression, incorporating individual desires and motives. Consequently, the ‘African myth’ does not in the first place reveal our perception of Africa. It rather gives us an insight in how the Westerner projects its own persona on the blank screen that still conceals ‘the Dark Continent’.
Conclusion

Throughout my quest to expose a continuity that covers nearly a century of fiction writing about Africa, I have learned that this continent, perhaps more than any other geographical entity, challenges our way of understanding until nothing is left but the subjectivity of sense-making. Significantly, the Westerner looks at the Dark Continent with a pre-established image of it in his or her mind. This image has been formed, as various scholars such as V. Y. Mudimbe and Robin Derricourt claim, from Greek Antiquity onwards. Since then, Europe has projected its escapist desires as well as its everlasting fears upon the vast exotic and mysterious world that hides behind the Sahara. This resulted in a strongly bivalent conceptualization of the Dark Continent. As the ‘Scramble for Africa’ took off in the late nineteenth century, Africa ceased to be a distant and unexplored territory. Nonetheless, the encounter between the Westerner and the African native did not end the European tendency to transform its reality into myth. First of all, the portrait of Africa got stained by European propagandist objectives. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the confrontation with the African “other” produced a dialectic that opposes the Western with African elements and results in a transformation of the (Western) subject. Africa has instigated a reconsideration of the value of nature and culture within human existence, until both blend into a hybrid and subjective revision of the self and the other.

After a short introduction of the literary and intellectual climate in which Conrad and Le Clézio conceived their novels, I have started my comparative research by focusing on the ethical reflection that lies at the surface of both works. Although Conrad and Le Clézio look at the colonial era from a different perspective, they present a rather similar connection between the abusive system and the psychological instability of the colonizer. The third chapter verified how the native’s
identity is constructed through ‘Africanist’ discourse and mythmaking. It explained how the West bestows an identity on the unknown ‘other’ Africa still appears to be. I have paid particular attention to the role of history in Onitsha, as it exemplifies Le Clézio’s postcolonial awareness of the (Western) construction of (African) identity. The intertwining of the legend of the Queen of Meroë with the lives and experiences of his protagonists, symbolizes the continuing tendency to rely on familiar, imagined realities when dealing with the ‘unknown’. The constructedness of reality reveals the subjectivity of perception that lies at its basis. Therefore, it was interesting to consider the role of the senses in the description of the setting. Various critics have discussed the impressionist character of Conrad’s writing, as his portrayal of reality is defined by an accurate rendering of the subjectivity of sensorial perception. However, Le Clézio’s writing is characterized by a similar persistent attention to the senses. The various characters’ experience of the environment reflects an intensity that ultimately results in “vertigo”. Again, nature and myth play a crucial role in this matter. When feeling out of place in an alien environment, the Westerner turns to nature and pre-established myths in order to get a grip on reality, as if these are the only two elements that can provide a familiar perspective on Africa. Therefore, I have focused on the role myth and nature play within the representation of Africa as opposed to the representation of the West. Africa, in all its pureness and authenticity, seems to be superior to the artificial West. Still, the Dark Continent, in all its magnitude, has maintained its sinister resonance in Western minds. This results in the ambivalent attitude that characterizes the Western conceptualization of Africa. The rediscovery of the natural instincts of mankind provokes a twofold reaction. On the one hand this can be acclaimed by Western idealist voices in the tradition of Rousseau. On the other hand, Africa’s supposed lack of (Western) order and law has nourished fatalist or, in Derricourt’s words “Afropessimist” (2011: x) beliefs. My analysis of how these two stances are incorporated in a Manichaeist vision on Africa has demonstrated however that both extremes come together in the ‘African myth’. They form a complex entanglement that endorses the hybridity and subjectivity that
underpin Western image building of Africa. In the final chapter, I have analyzed how Africa inspires a transformation of the Western individual in both novels that again reflects the ambivalent character of the continent. The confrontation with the African environment stimulates a revision of the world. At the same time, there is the risk of losing a sense of moral and mental stability, as Mr. Kurtz and Geoffroy illustrate.

The remaining question is what unites these different aspects. At first sight, it seems tempting to formulate an answer in terms of multiple dichotomies that, although not entirely corresponding with one another, form a juxtaposition of elements that underpin the ‘African myth’. The West seems to be geographically and morally opposed to Africa, influencing a nature-culture divide that subsequently develops into other dichotomies such as male versus female or good versus bad. This would lead however, to a premature conclusion that ignores the inherent critical lesson that both authors present through their novels, namely the human incapacity to record as well as communicate ‘truth’. The mystical and impressive image of Africa serves as ideal backdrop to reveal the subjectivity of human understanding. Offering a liberation from the (Western) cultural mechanism that unconsciously colors reality and establishes our way of seeing the world, Africa inspires a new perspective that enables the Westerner to reconsider not only Africa, but the world as a whole and the self as an individual as well. Both *Heart of Darkness* and *Onitsha* depict this process of meaning making and come to the conclusion that the interpretation as well as reproduction of reality is a highly subjective and personal endeavor. As these two novels portray a reality themselves, namely colonial Africa, they serve as perfect demonstrations of the construction of ‘facts’ in the human mind. The ‘African myth’ they maintain by reconfirming the aforementioned longstanding dualities, becomes a symbol for a more universal myth, namely the possibility of achieving an objective image of reality. Africa, being the birthplace of humanity but also the ‘darkest’ and perhaps most mystical continent on earth, is a more than suitable setting to
teach us this lesson. As no other place on earth, Africa defies the capacities of our senses. As Marlow summarizes his experience of the “heart of darkness”:

It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts. It was somber enough too – and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (2007: 8)
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