Cultural appropriation Kurtz’s and Marlow’s language use in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

In discussing Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness*, it seems obvious that Kurtz attempted to gain power over the natives. It seems equally obvious that Marlow is a figure of the modern artist who uses his interpretations of the native African population to further his own art and to explore his own self. However, it is my aim in this analysis to assert that these two aspects of the novel are linked; that Marlow uses his position as an artist to gain power over the natives and that Kurtz’s power is based on a cultural appropriation of language that is similar to Marlow’s. In doing so, I suggest that both types of imperial power are equally damaging to the natives.

When Marlow first approaches Kurtz’s abode among the Africans, he takes note of the posts around the house, which he takes to be decorative ornaments. Upon getting closer, he realizes his mistake, discovering that they are actually human heads. He comments on this, saying: “These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing” (Conrad 74). This display is the first evidence that readers receive of Kurtz’s cultural appropriation, and Marlow is right in describing it as symbolic. Critic Marianna Torgovnick tells us that in African cultures, in taking the head of your enemy, you were also taking their power (Torgovnick 148). Purloining the African tradition of capturing an enemy’s head is a cultural appropriation. Because this act signifies a gain of power in African culture, and because Kurtz could use that signification to expand his influence over the living Africans, the display of human heads becomes a powerful symbol for the use of cultural appropriation to gain personal power.

This is especially poignant because in the African view, the power gained from the acquisition of an enemy head was considered to be communal power. According to Torgovnick, “Kurtz, clearly, viewed the collecting of heads from the point of view of individual, not communal power” (Togovnick 148). This relates to Kurtz’s appropriation of the African language for individual power. Normally, language is an emblem of communal power. A group of people can use its language to put forth its voice. Kurtz does not use language in this way; he uses it instead to enhance his individual power. This can be easily compared to Marlow’s use of storytelling in the novel. Although he does not use the language of the Africans, he appropriates their cultures and their stories in order to create his own work of art and to develop his own sense of self. In doing this, he effectively silences any native voice that could come into the story. Through more specific examples of Kurtz and Marlow’s cultural appropriation, we can get a better understanding of how the actions of one reflect the actions of the other. However, this image of shriveled heads on pikes and all of its cultural significance provides a concrete visualization for the relationship between appropriation and power.

One major similarity between the actions of Kurtz and Marlow is that both rely heavily on the power of language in order to achieve their goals. In the case of Marlow, he is very aware that language is one of the colonialist’s most powerful weapons (Icoz 256). Because Marlow is a figure for the colonizer, he can be related to the actual colonizers who traveled to Africa during this period.

In colonial Africa, the colonizers made efforts to learn and document different African languages. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian explains that this was necessary because control of languages gave the colonizers a type of symbolic power over the Africans (Fabian 170). Having the ability to use their languages and to decide which of those languages were of value gave the European colonizers control over African culture. In fact, language was so important that it became a commodity: leaders paid colonialists for recording different African dialects (Fabian 173). In a world where commerce is king, the fact that language was assigned a monetary value is a significant indication of its importance.

Fabian describes the process of recording African languages as one that gradually shifted from simple appropriation to an attempt to exert power and control (Fabian 173). While the colonizers started out by merely recording the African languages, they eventually began exploiting their knowledge of those languages to gain both symbolic and practical power over the native populations. For example, some of the African languages were appropriated for what Fabian calls “literary functions” (Fabian 173). He is referring to the phenomenon in which colonizers would circulate literature in African languages to the African people. In doing this, they could use their knowledge of the language to perpetuate the types of European ideologies that they supported (Fabian 175). Therefore, in controlling the language, they were also controlling beliefs.

This idea reflects both Marlow and Kurtz. For Kurtz, the parallel is direct: he learned the African language and then used his eloquence and his knowledge of that language to influence the beliefs of the Africans and gain power for himself. For Marlow, the parallel comes from his appropriation of the African story. As literary critic Nursel Icoz states, “Language has become an absurd and incongruous organ of colonialism, controlling and shaping the alien reality of Africa until it conforms to a familiar pattern” (Icoz 257). This is the primary way in which Marlow’s use of language becomes a dangerous appropriation of African culture. Because it is his voice, not the voice of a native African, that provides the world with an image of Africa, he can influence the way in which people perceive Africa. Because he has the power of the English language (something that seems to have been denied to the Africans) he can have an influence over the European perceptions of Africans; the Africans themselves, without knowledge of English, cannot speak against Marlow’s depiction. Therefore, Marlow can mold the way that people view Africans to fit his agenda: an agenda that posits the superiority of Europeans. In this way, knowledge of language is what allows Marlow to effectively appropriate the African image to serve his own ends.

One could argue that the very fact that Marlow attempts to interpret his experience in Africa will inevitably skew the perception of Africa. Bannister and Solomon assert that anytime an outsider attempts to interpret the “cultural landscape” of a particular place, they always bring their own biases into the interpretation whether they intend to or not (Bannister and Solomon 149). In other words, a person’s cultural identity and ideology will always influence how they perceive their experiences. Thus, Marlow’s cultural biases impact the depiction of Africa in his story. Bannister and Solomon claim that any type of cultural research performed by an outsider will always be inaccurate because the researcher can only record what they *thought* they saw (Bannister and Solomon 150). In other words, even recording the basic facts about a culture is affected by cultural bias.

The question then becomes, *why* is this so dangerous? I have already established that Marlow’s cultural biases in his depiction of Africans affect the way that Europeans view Africa and its people. However, some evidence suggests that these images could actually have a negative impact on how the African people see *themselves*. Bannister and Solomon claim that biased interpretations, such as Marlow’s, can alter the way the people of a particular culture view themselves (Bannister and Solomon 150). Because cultural artifacts such as language are an important part of who people are (Cahoone 262), this suggests that manipulating language and cultural interpretations could be detrimental to the African people. This means that when Marlow, and other artists like him, disseminate their images of Africans as savage and inferior, it starts a precedent in which European culture is valued over more “primitive” cultures. This paradigm spreads, and in time the African people only value their culture as Europeans value it: i.e., as a measure for savagery.

All of these things suggest that there is a disconnect between words and reality. Marlow points to this when he says, “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad 21). In this quotation, Marlow suggests that the words used to discuss colonialism (such as “work,” “business” or “trade”) only serve to hide what is really happening (Torgovnick 152). The image that people in Europe have of colonialism is not reflected in Marlow’s experience of Africa. In reality he sees “Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair” (Conrad 31). The true image that he sees of colonialism is not one of improvement and assistance; it is one of cruelty and exploitation.

However, Marlow himself is guilty of this kind of misrepresentation. When discussing the “conquest of the earth,” he says that “what redeems it is the idea only…an unselfish belief in the idea” (Conrad 21). The idea he refers to is the notion that colonialism benefits the natives just as much as it benefits the colonizers because it provides progress and civilization. Marlow states that he is a true believer in this idea. However, during his story he says “Can’t say I saw any road or upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead…may be considered a permanent improvement” (Conrad 35). This quotation is significant in two ways. First, it gives evidence that the “idea” that imperialism is justified, because of the improvements it provides, is false: the Europeans are only taking, and not giving anything back. In addition, it points to Marlow’s own hypocrisy; he claims to have sympathy for the Africans when he deplores their exploitation, but in this passage he indifferently views the body of a dead African, even referring to his death as an “improvement.” Thus, we can see that Marlow’s lofty words in defense of Africans do not truly reflect his opinions. All of these misrepresentations are part of his harmful appropriation of African culture.

As with Marlow’s language appropriation, Kurtz’s use of language is also based on misrepresentation. Icoz points out the importance of this distortion, stating that the disconnect between “Kurtz’s words and reality reflects a general tendency in Western thought” (Icoz 251). In other words, Icoz is pointing to the general phenomenon in European thought in which the realities of imperialism are not reflected in the conversation about imperialism. People wanted to believe in the high ideals of colonialism, and their discourse on imperialism reflects this desire.

In this way, Kurtz’s use of language in *Heart of Darkness* can be seen as a reflection of the dominant ideology that pervaded Western thought. In the novel, any character who interacts with Kurtz indicates that there was something mesmerizing about his speech. Marlow references this phenomenon when he says: “of all of his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (Conrad 63). In this quotation, Marlow defines the way in which Kurtz’s powerful speech relates to the dominance of Western ideology: people are so overwhelmed by Kurtz’s speech that they turn a blind eye to the atrocities that he commits (Icoz 258). Marlow oscillates between revering Kurtz’s eloquence and shuddering at the way in which that speech perverts the realities of colonialism.

Samir Elbarbary indicates that the danger of Kurtz’s eloquence is that his listeners “cannot muster words for debate with him” (Elbarbary 116). Much like the dominant Western ideology, Kurtz’s speech is so powerful that it cannot be countered. This is significant because it reflects the negative effect that language has on the African people: they have no way to oppose the ideas that colonizers like Kurtz and Marlow disseminate. Because of the power inherent in the language use of tyrants like Kurtz or artists like Marlow, any opposing voices are overpowered.

Both Kurtz and Marlow use their linguistic supremacy as a means of empowering themselves. As Renn Neilson states, one of the reasons that this idea is so significant in the novel is that because they successfully use language to exert personal power, readers are reminded of the fact that their linguistic power could have been used in more positive ways (Neilson 41). Neilson is referring to the fact that colonizers, as their lofty ideals reflect, could have used their power to provide modern infrastructure and knowledge to the African population. In addition, artists such as Marlow could have used their presence in the discourse on Africa to promote more positive views of the African people. Kurtz could have used his dual position as both a leader in the African community and a principal member of the colonial management to bring some of the beneficial aspects of Western society to the African people. Marlow, as a gifted storyteller, could have used his authoritative voice to counter the dominant ideology on Africa instead of reinforcing it. However, both of these men chose to use their positions for personal advantage.

Many have argued that the type of appropriation of art and language reflected in Kurtz and Marlow is something positive; that the crossing of cultures is something to be celebrated rather than condemned (Torgovnick 40). However, others are concerned that in this relationship, the voices of the natives are overwhelmed by the more powerful voices of outsiders (Young and Haley 278). We see this in *Heart of Darkness* because the African characters are presented as archetypes and symbols, not as actual human beings (Coombe 78). If the crossing of cultures was really a positive influence, the African characters in the novel would have been given their own voices and their own psychology instead of being presented as props that serve only to enhance the identities and power of the white characters.

In conclusion, the language use and cultural appropriation of Kurtz and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* represents a link between cultural appropriation and a history of political powerlessness (Coombe 88). Kurtz represents this relationship because he exerts a very obvious kind of power over Africans, forcing them to submit to his authority. What is less obvious is that he elevates himself into this position of power by using their own language, thus engaging in cultural appropriation. Marlow, the more apparent perpetuator of cultural appropriation, also demonstrates the link between appropriation and powerlessness. His appropriation of African culture takes away the African voice, not only in the novel, but also in the real world by imposing a harmful and misleading interpretation of their culture. This reading of *Heart of Darkness* suggests that there is a relationship between the cultural appropriation of artists like Marlow and exertions of power by despots like Kurtz. In both situations, Europeans use African culture for their own selfish ends, to perpetuate an ideology of African inferiority. In doing so, they cause irreparable damage to the African people and their culture.

Works Cited

AbdelRahman, Fadwa. “Said and Achebe: Writers at the Crossroads of Culture.” *Alif: Journal of*

*Comparative Poetics* 25.1 (2005): 177-192. Web.

Bannister, Kelly, Maui Solomon, and Conrad G. Brunk. “Appropriation of Traditional

Knowledge: Ethics in the Context of Ethnobiology.” *The Ethics of Cultural*

*Appropriation*. Ed. James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk. Malden, MA: Blackwell

Publishing, 2009. 140-172. Print.

Cahoone, Lawrence E. *The Dilemma of Modernity: Philosophy, Culture, and Anti-Culture*.

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. Print.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996. Print.

Coombe, Rosemary J. “The Properties of Culture and the Possession of Identity: Postcolonial Struggle and the Legal Imagination.” *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. Ed. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 74-96. Print.

Elbarbary, Samir. “*Heart of Darkness* and Late-Victorian Fascination with the Primitive and the

Double.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 39.1 (1993): 113-128. Web.

Fabian, Johannes. “Missions and the Colonization of African Languages: Developments in the

Former Belgian Congo.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 17.2 (1983): 165-187. Web.

Icoz, Nursel. “Conrad and Ambiguity: Social Commitment and Ideology in *Heart of Darkness*

and *Nostromo*.” *Conradiana* 37.3 (2005): 245-274. Web.

Neilson, Renn G. “Conrad’s Heart of Darkness.” *Explicator* 45.3 (2002): 41-42. Web.

Ray, Sid. “Marlow(e)’s Africa: Postcolonial Queenship in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and

Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage*.” *Conradiana* 38.2 (2006): 143-161. Web.

Stronach, Ian. “Enlightenment and the ‘heart of darkness’: (neo)imperialism in the Congo, and

elsewhere.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19.6 (2006): 757-

768. Web.

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*. Chicago: The

University of Chicago Press, 1990. Print.

Young, James O and Susan Haley. “’Nothing Comes from Nowhere’: Reflections on Cultural

Appropriation as the Representation of Other Cultures.” *The Ethics of Cultural*

*Appropriation*. Ed. James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk. Malden, MA: Blackwell

Publishing, 2009. 268-289. Print.