Border Poetics De-limited

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Imperial Tides
A Border Poetics Reading of *Heart of Darkness*

the high-water mark of the author's talent
—Edward Garnett on *Heart of Darkness* in *The Academy and Literature*, 6 December 1902

Je sais où nous allons, Saïd, et pourquoi nous y allons. Ce n'est pas pour aller quelque part, mais afin que ceux qui nous y envoient restent tranquilles, sur un rivage tranquille.
—Jean Genet, *Les Paravents*

This is a reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* using the procedures of border poetics. We examine two sections of this classic modernist text in search of juxtapositions of different kinds of border. We here take border poetics as focusing primarily on the connections between the borders in the presented world of the text and the borders which mark the text itself as a spatial form of presentation. We further differentiate between five planes onto which borders can be projected: topographical, symbolic, temporal, epistemological, and textual. Both of our examples are set at moments of border crossing in the text: the hindered crossing out of a tidal estuary in the opening pages of the text, which is also a successful crossing from the frame narrator's voice to that of Marlow; and Marlow's first impressions of Africa, leading up to his successful crossing of the border of sea on to land–though whether he actually crosses into Africa in a symbolic sense is certainly open to doubt. The first of these scenes is of special significance for the discussion of border poetics since it is situated at a textual border crossing; and its tidal motif has not gone unnoticed, being the subject of work by George Walton Williams and Peter Lindenbaum.[1] The second scene constitutes a major figure of the crossing between Europe and Africa which is central to the text. Readings in the same vein could also be done of other passages in the book, such as those involving Marlow's experiences in the sepulchral city, his first landing in Africa,

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1 See Lothe and Levenson for more textual and symbolic borders at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*.

his meeting with Kurtz, the borders of the forest, or his handling of various books and papers.[2] As part of our reading we will also be making reference to other texts, setting them in dialogue with Conrad's, such as travelogues from the late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, including Nadine Gordimer's essay "The Congo River" (1961).

The Offing

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* begins with a journey outwards. The narrator and his companions on board the *Nellie*, among them Marlow, are forced to wait for the tide to turn so that they can continue their journey. Marlow begins his yarn, recounting how he makes his way to Africa and up a great river into its interior; how he meets the dying ivory-trader Kurtz, notorious for his "unsound method" (61, 67); and how he returns to Europe with news of Kurtz' death. All through his story, the group of friends who make up the crew of the *Nellie* listen, seemingly unaware of their surroundings; for as he finishes, it transpires that they have overstayed their anchorage. "'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director, suddenly" (76).

From these observations alone we may conclude that there is a definite formal similarity between the represented space in Marlow's story and the space that representation takes up in the situation in which it is told. On the one hand we have a drawn-out journey up the African river to a narrative climax, followed by a cursory return to Europe; on the other, we have the tide running up to its fullest, followed by its ebbing away out to sea again.[3] The Director's

2   See also McIntire (especially 258) for an interesting analysis of the positioning of women in relationship to borders in *Heart of Darkness*.

3   Marlow makes a very similar connection between a topographical border and a border which wraps narrative (textual) and epistemological borders into one when describing his meeting with Kurtz: "It was the furthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience" (11). Williams observes other formal similarities, pointing to Marlow's description of his ebb-like return: "The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea" (67). This implicit comparison with the situation of the *Nellie* is further strengthened by an explicit use of a tidal metaphor: "and Kurtz's life was [...] ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time" (67). Like Lindenbaum (707, 710), Williams sees a homology between the turn of the tide and the moral transformation or ritual initation which the reader is invited to undergo (171).

comment implies that Marlow's audience has become so transported into his narrative world that they have lost sight of their maritime duties and of the world around them (the narrator writes "I raised my head" 76). The analogy between Marlow's journey and the space in which his story is told is so obvious that one may be forgiven for asking in what way Marlow's journey, or indeed the whole imperialist penetration of Africa depicted in the text, may be described metaphorically as a tide? The structure of the text on the levels of presented and presentation confirms the frame narrator's own observation that the "tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea" (8).

Most of what we readers know of the world of the tides in *Heart of Darkness* is from the outer edges of the text, where most of the novella's frame narrative is located. The story of Marlow's act of narration is situated in a particular maritime chronotope in which space and time are regulated by the flow and the ebb of the tide. There is a double movement in this reference to a tide; a crossing of both topographical and temporal borders. The story is told while waiting to catch the "ebb of the tide", an event which is recorded as a matter of time, but which also moves water and boats within a space. The tide, as a figure of the border, brings with it notions of repetivity, inversion, mixing, but also discrepancy. The tide will take you "out" of the Thames estuary into the open sea; however, the tide also wipes away a boundary made by the last high or low water mark, and in the process leaves a new trace upon both land and water. The trace introduces an inconsistency into tidal repetition; the point of high and low tide can never be absolutely fixed. The tide, the shifting boundary between land and sea, moves back and forth, creating a border zone marked out by the points of high and low tide, but this zone itself has shifting boundaries. The tide's repetivity is affected by the logic of the trace; it always creates difference in sameness. In saying that Marlow's imperial journey is a tidal wave, one must take account of this continual possibility of singularity and discrepancy. While there is a strong mimesis between the tidal movement and Marlow's journey, his listeners have lost grip of this mimesis; the story has deflected them from catching the ebb.

The tidal chronotope is part of a larger space, the space of the shore, coast, or coastline. Where exactly the *Nellie* is situated is unclear from the text, though it is clear that it is anchored somewhere outside Gravesend, a town

on the Thames about halfway between the London city boundaries and the open sea at Sheerness. While the open sea is not visible from Gravesend, the town does not lie far from the last bend in the river before that reach of the river, which does open out onto the sea. Thus while the "air was dark above Gravesend", this does not contradict the text's statement that the "Sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway" (7). And indeed, the text does make clear that seen from the ship, the "Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly" (8). This lighthouse, erected in 1849, lay off Canvey Island, a promontory of Essex, centrally placed on this final "sea-reach".[4] Thus we must conclude that the boat is situated in an in-between space where England joins onto the sea, at the mouth of the Thames. The Director of Companies, the captain of the boat, is described as situated on this in-between, both physically, at this very moment, and in terms of his identity: "It was difficult to realise his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom" (7).

Indeed, the whole opening section of *Heart of Darkness* is suffused with figures of the border between land and sea. We have already mentioned the lighthouse, a potent symbol of national security. The Essex marshes, a murky in-between, half-land, half-sea, are also mentioned; and the estuary, where the captain's work may be, is defined by its being the place where saltwater and freshwater mix. These topographical borders set up a series of symbolic oppositions such as those between light and darkness and between civilization and savagery. However, the figure of the tidal estuary also makes clear that these oppositions must meet in a point of mixing, in an overlap subject to a radical chiasmatic figuration, whereby the terms of these oppositions are inverted; famously, indeed, when Marlow makes his historical excursus to Roman Times, revealing the British imperial metropolis as a one-time colonial hell. Marlow's story of course also metaphorically places a heart of darkness beyond the luminous space of the horizon; more concretely, at the end of

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4   The text's reference to the Essex marshes (8) is highly unspecific, since such could be found right along most of the Essex' shoreline, from the outer boundary of London to far beyond the mouth of the Thames. Information on the Chapman lighthouse may be found on Mike Millichamp's *Lighthouse E-clips* website. Cf. also Lindenbaum and Williams.

the text, this space is "barred by a black bank of clouds" (76)–the alliteration emphasizing this barrier.

The luminous space is the outer border of the "offing", a nautical term used here and then again at the end of the text (76), meaning "the stretch of sea visible from the shore or from an anchorage" (Shorter OED). Like the tide, the offing indicates the multiplication of the border, the dissemination of an imaginary singular, clear-cut national border into several borders: the borders of the shore, the edge of the water (always moving in and out), the safe waters for anchorage, and the horizon (the place where the offing ends, in effect a composite horizon parallel to the shoreline). Additionally, the offing is both a topographical border and an epistemological border, since it maps directly onto the limitations of the human sensory apparatus. The offing, the marshes and the lighthouse are all implicated in the dominant light/dark symbolism of the text, and also, both explicitly and by extension, in the underlying symbolism of clarity and obscurity, transparency and opacity, knowledge and ignorance, insight and blindness. These are oppositions present both in textual motifs, but also in the Impressionistic style of the text (Watt 169-80).

> In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space [...] (7)

> A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. (7)

> [...] the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric hung from the wooded rises inland and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. (8)

Moving towards the offing is a movement into the unknown: "in the offing" means "nearly at hand, in prospect, likely to appear or happen in the near future" (Shorter OED). The offing is that part of the sea which can be seen from land or the place from which one can see land from out on sea: something visible that offers promise for the future. It is implicitly a place of adventure, suggesting that ambiguous point when one sees what is possible while also understanding the limits of that possibility: the border itself. In the offing, we see a juxtaposition of the bordered and the limitless; borders are erased and yet live on, as when the sea-reach of the Thames is described as "like the beginning of an interminable waterway" (7). This topographical image of a river that does not end at its mouth is repeated several times by the frame narrator.[5] The interminable is also present on the textual plane, when the nar-

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5   Cf. "a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (8); "the tranquil water-

rator at the beginning of Marlow's story describes it as a story of "inconclusive experiences" (11). These are all examples of what Michael Levenson has called the "figures of *extension*" (154) in *Heart of Darkness*.[6]

The ambiguity between borders and the limitless is related to the ambiguous temporality of the tide. The tide signifies a time, as we have seen, of turning and reversal, and also of coming to rest, or to a rest in the musical sense, a pause. The novella begins at one such zero point: "The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest" (7). The repetion inherent in tidal motion lends itself to a perspective reaching back into an endless past: "We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever but in the august light of abiding memories" (8). It is then the narrator (whom we may well feel is less sophisticated in his view of history than Marlow) introduces the theme of imperialism into the text by invoking the national significance of the traffic on the Thames.[7] This is a form of tide moving in and out, bearing on it—we may imagine–men who like Marlow "follow the sea":

> And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, "followed the sea" with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. (8)

Marlow however, disturbs this regular, repetitive rhythm; his riff of a tale causes the sailors to overstay their rest. This discrepancy, a slippage of a temporal border, together with his more blatant inversions of imperial topoi, signals

way leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (76); "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unkown earth!" (8). These images of the ocean are inverted in Marlow's description of the African river, "with its head at sea [...] and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (12), and in the image of French ships with guns "firing into a continent" (17), with nothing happening. Ultimately, these images are versions of what Marlow in retrospect calls "the threshold of an eternal darkness" (72).

6 For Levenson these figures signify a general inversion: "To travel to the edge is to find oneself at the heart, and to approach the center is to stand on the threshold" (156).
7 Jakob Lothe has stressed this contrast between frame narrator and Marlow, and commented on the unusual use of an unreliable first narrator (43).

an awareness of historical singularity in the face of the frame narrator's more naturalized model of time.[8]

The topographical ambiguity of the bordered and the limitless in Conrad's text is also related to a central ambiguity in the notion of the border often mentioned in border theory. The border, as both a dividing line and a point of crossing, is the experience of a suspended relation. To use Derrida's paradoxical figure of the border, this is a "participation without belonging" (*participation sans appartenance*), the possibility of experience without actually crossing.[9] For example, the mouth of the great river, the site of the interpenetration of inside and outside, becomes a mixing not only of salt and fresh water, but also of adventure and memory.

Marlow begins the narrative of his African voyage by marking out this topographical mixing and crossing: "I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit" (11). But by the end of the text of course, after Marlow has told his yarn and reconstructed his experiences, the promise of the open, transparent offing and the radiant mists has become a barrier, and the infinite has become a dark, threatening place:

> The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky–seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (76)

8 Lindenbaum also notes this sense of Marlow's audience finding "themselves outside the usual realm of time [...], as is shown by their being unaware of the moment when the tide turns" (707). This fits well with his reading of the geography of the frame narrative as placing the audience in the role of "initiands" (710), this reading refering as it does to Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's theories on the role of liminal places in the ritual initation process. These places are precisely outside everyday, repetitive space and time. As the boat they are on turns with the tide, they also turn in the direction of the unknown (706). In an article emphasizing the political context of *Heart of Darkness*, Pericles Lewis, in line with our own argument, points to Marlow's "concern with the unique individual rather than with the broader movements of history" (235), standing in direct contrast to the frame narrator's "Whiggish interpretation of English history as running in an unabated upward movement from the Elizabethans to the Victorians, spurred on by commerce and conquest" (233).
9 Cf. Lindenbaum's notion of Kurtz being Marlow's deputy (and Marlow being the deputy of his audience): "Marlow can gain the benefit of Kurtz's experience and understand [...] without having to go over the edge of madness and death himself" (707).

This is the final sentence of the text. If borders are presented in topographical, temporal, symbolic, and epistemological forms in this text, the textual act of presentation also involves the borders of the text itself, in their various manifestations. They are indeed the subject of comment, both by the frame narrator and Marlow himself. As we have already established, there is a play between these two narrators which also involves the presented and presentational spaces constituted in and by the text. On a more detailed level, *Heart of Darkness* begins with a compositional strategy that creates a space upon which the first narrator can balance (or is suspended); he is, in a very specific way, placed on board a boat being pulled in different directions by the tide. Within two pages of the opening, Marlow begins to narrate: "And this also [...] has been one of the dark places of the earth" (9); but then the frame narrator breaks in to tell the reader that Marlow "still 'followed the sea'" (9) and was a spinner of yarns, going on then to explain how to read the meaning of his tale. And then three paragraphs later the frame narrator breaks in again: "we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (11).

The famous definition of the "yarns of seamen" provided by the frame narrator tells the reader what is in the offing. His brief comment suggests that the narrative which follows will have a direct simplicity, "the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut" (9).

> But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (9)

The diction of haze, glow, and halo, all figures of meaning as a matter of encircling boundaries, is equally as vague as the language about the tidal reaches of the Thames we examine above. The edginess of the frame narrator, his ironic and enigmatic language moves directly into the epistemological question of the role of the traveller and the teller in the production of knowledge about Africa, about the sea, even about Imperialism itself.

For as Johannes Fabian and Mary Louise Pratt have argued, what happens in much Nineteenth-Century travel writing about Africa (as well as other colonial adventures), is a recognition that the self is an irreplaceable agent in the production of knowledge, and that knowledge takes many different forms.

The interlocking forms of knowledge–aesthetic, geographical, ethnographic, ecological, botanical, and agricultural–in the service of imperialism made the traveller's experience a complex one. Such a traveller was often a monochromatic and self-effacing narrator whose factual presentation of information depopulated the landscape in an emptying-out complicit with imperial desires. As Pratt and also J. M. Coetzee have pointed out in their respective analyses of travelogues in Southern Africa, there is a long established trope about the region being evacuated of native inhabitants, designed primarily to legitimize European usurpation of "unused" and unusable lands (Coetzee 1-11, 36-62; Pratt 143-46). The gaze was firmly upon an other, as the human object of inquiry; but that other was separated off into a detached space, either in the text or in the landscape. In the process of gaining knowledge of others or other places, the writer had to cross cultural boundaries and then naturalize this process, often in a language of sentimental self-doubt (Fabian 23-51, 180-208; Pratt 150-58).

Marlow is part of a later imperial project and narrative stance–a project that the critic Daniel Defert describes as a process in which "Europe takes consciousness of itself [...] as a planetary process rather than (as) a region of the world" (quoted and translated in Pratt, 144). Or a process which, like the narrative process itself, is an unstable will to power or a will to intervene. Pratt has called this second form of travel narrative the breakdown of the information-producing subject. This voice is multivalent, confused, formed in self-doubt and self-parody. For example, early in the narrative Marlow interrupts the frame narrator's reverie on the meaning of the Thames River in national dreams of colonialism. The frame narrator states: "It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled–the great knights-errant of the sea" (7). Marlow responds, "Light came out of this river since–you say Knights? Yes, but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker–may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling!" (8). The temporal ambiguity Marlow continually sets into motion is here figured in a play of light as flashes which are contrasted to the rolling of the earth. The calm surface of the text is similarly disrupted by Marlow's undermining of the frame narrator's authority. Following this the frame narrator responds by re-establishing, however briefly, narrative self-control by framing Marlow in narrative commentary. In a sense, the reader is presented

with two voices shifting like tides. What is to become the dominant discourse (Marlow) contains within it a parodic counterpart. The multivalent narrative contains an element of imposture within the posture Marlow assumes as narrator.

Marlow draws a boundary around himself: "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally". The frame narrator comments that Marlow shows "in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear" (11). This discourse complicates the image of the narrative as a kernel which has somehow crossed its outer boundary; its meaning has been deposited in a glow on the outside, like some jetsam left behind by the tide. Before telling his story, Marlow gives a short synopsis:

> yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre 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. (11)

While this attempt at making meaning is placed on the boundary of his story, in an attempt to stabilize the disequilibria, Marlow moves into parody. He is moved into someone else's shoes: the Danish sea captain's shoes (13). From this point, Marlow takes over all the voices and, at least metaphorically, he has begun to chart his way into the African continent, placing it within a continually shifting boundary. As we will suggest in the next section, his act of mapping embodies not only a will to intervene, but also the (mis-)recognition of what is actually seen and what historical and political processes are underway.

The Surf

In this reading of the opening of *Heart of Darkness* focusing on the figures of the tides and the offing, we have followed the procedures of a border poetics. Using the five border planes—topographical, temporal, symbolic, epistemological and textual—we have shown how the borders around which this opening revolves can be expressed as projections from one plane onto another. Underlying this methodology is the notion that these five planes are complications of the two basic spaces of narrative: the space presented, and the space of the presentation itself. As a method of reading, our projections between different border planes can be characterized as allegorical. To a certain extent, however, these planes are incommensurable, and thus there will never be a perfect allegorical fit: there will always be slippage and overlap in the juxtaposition of border planes. Thus the border becomes a zone, consisting of a bundle of projected borders and discrepancies. This play between the border as a single line and the border as a zone of discrepancies will often produce the impression that many of the borders mentioned in the text—such as the tide marks and the offing in *Heart of Darkness*—are all variants of one primary border—in *Heart of Darkness*, the border between land and sea, and ultimately the border between Europe and Africa. The identification of such a primary border must however be contingent on our choice of perspective, i.e. on our choice of which of the planes we take as our starting point for analysis.

What makes a border poetics reading profitable lies partly in the confirmation of such structures, but more importantly in their complications. The discrepancies between different border planes are the traces of imperfections and residues in the allegorical economy; the jetsam, so to speak.

This is not just a formal argument, since borders play a major role both in the allegorical economies of reading and in the global economies of imperialism. The primary border of *The Heart of Darkness*, whether it be described as the border between Europe and Africa, between civilization and savagery, between metropolis and colony, or between white and black, is clearly played out as an extended border zone—and extended sea-reach—connecting the gloom of imperial London/Brussels with Kurtz's ivory station in the African interior. Shores and mists, along with many other images of borders and thresholds, are omnipresent in Conrad's text, turning up not only at the mouth of the Thames, but also along the whole length of the great African river navigated

by Marlow.[10] Here we will turn to one more variant of this multiple border crossing, placed on the outer topographical limits of the African continent. Founding our argument on the topographical and epistemological borders involved in this stage of Marlow's passage, we will examine the implications of our border poetic reading within a historicizing frame, especially those concerning the issue of race.

Charting the African coastline, writing a space that separates and connects land and sea, may be called one of the central colonizing tropes in Nineteenth-Century travel writing. On the 14th of August 1879, Henry M. Stanley, arrived at the mouth of the Congo River

> to ascend it, with the novel mission of sowing along its banks civilized settlements, to peacefully conquer and subdue it, to remould it in harmony with modern ideas into National States, within whose limits the European merchant shall go hand in hand with the dark African trader, and justice and law and order shall prevail, and murder and lawlessness and cruel barter of slaves shall for ever cease. (quoted in *Heart of Darkness*, Norton Critical Edition 142)

Like John Hanning Speke in his *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, published in 1863, both men sought to "open up" Africa to exploration and

10 *Shores*: Marlow begins by "crossing the channel" (13); later he arrives at "the mouth of the big river" (18); on approaching the first station, the steamer he is on "opened a reach" (18); he compares his route between that station and the Central Station to "the road between Deal and Gravesend" on the Thames (23); the Central Station has on the river side "a pretty border of smelly mud" (23); the Eldorado Expedition goes into the wilderness "as the sea closes over a diver" (35); the boat travels "along empty reaches, around still bends, between the high walls of [its] winding way" (36-7), through which the travelers feel themselves "cut off from the comprehension of [their] surroundings" (37); the shore is figured as a cultural boundary (37-8); close on Kurtz' station, the ship enters a narrow "reach" (40), and is surrounded by a fog like those of the Essex marshes; and through this fog they hear sounds from "on the river-bank, behind [its] blind whiteness" (41), and "The woods were unmoved like a mask–heavy like the closed door of a prison" (56). *Thresholds*: "the immense double doors" (13) in the street of the continental town, with its house with two women and a waiting-room–the women "guarding the door of Darkness" (14); the manager of the Central Station speaks inscrutably, sealing each utterance with "that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness" (25); the station itself is "that comedy of light at the door of darkness" (18, Ms.); at Kurtz' station, the ghastly remains of a fence stand around his house (52); and when Kurtz dies, it is "as though a veil had been rent" (68).

occupation. Johannes Fabian argues that the opening up of Africa depended upon "getting and being there": "Such was the power of the metaphor of the basin, a vessel waiting to be filled, that the notion of central Africa as an empty space that had only to be reached in order to be put on the map could [...] be sold to the European public" (17). For both Stanley and Speke, as for Conrad, the Congo basin was the beginning of the journey into Africa. By entering it, they were crossing a threshold, mapping a topographical border both literally and figuratively. As these examples make clear, to map was to open up; it was an embodied act and not just the epistemological passivity of the disembodied, "bird's eye view". The explorer's body is situated in its relationship to the border; and in this case, the border to Africa is formed in its crossing.

Franco Moretti argues that when negotiating a geographic or a national border, figurative language predominates (40-45). The examples here suggest this to be true: "the sowing of settlements", filling an empty basin, or the movement of goods and men from light to dark. These are metaphors not limited to *Heart of Darkness*. In the imperialist border crossing a physical border is crossed; uniting white greed and perceived black need. The ideological justifications are placed in tropes of exploration and then trade, but each begins with the crossing of a threshold into the unknown. However, it is not only the African continent which is made known by this act of crossing and mapping, but also its defining and delimiting border.

In a more recent example, from another African traveller, this metaphoric embellishment is also a staging of a threshold–and also a zone of mixing, not unlike that in the tidal reaches of the Thames. Nadine Gordimer in her essay entitled "The Congo River", published in 1961, begins "three hundred miles out to sea, off the west coast of Africa". Her initial figure is that of a concrete stain with metaphorical implications,

> a stain in the ocean [...] the mark of a presence the immensity of seas has not been able to swallow. Mariners saw it in the age of exploration, when each voyage held the fear that a ship might sail off the edge of the world. They knew it was the stain of land; mountains had coloured it, the rotting verdure of forests, perhaps, the grass of plains. A massive land, a continent, giving rise to and feeding a river great enough to make a dent in the sea. (*Essential Gesture* 157)

For Gordimer, "the continent parts, the river opens a way in. Many journeys have beginnings flat and unworthy, but not this one" (157). However, from her description the edge is also a way out; the border is crisscrossed by both

voyagers on the way in and a miasma reaching out of the continent, here figured as a personified agent. The continent overflows its borders into the sea, just as it opens up to travellers from the outside.

As we have seen, in the beginnings of these four border-crossing narratives, the coast is a moving boundary upon which each writer places figurative language: it is a space of presentation and a space to be presented. In Conrad's text, the coast is also a place on which to situate representations of the entire continent: "to travel to the edge is to find oneself at the heart" (72). Initially, Marlow's first sighting of the African continent connects the topographical border to an epistemological border in a way more marked even than those created with the help of metaphor and other figurative language: "I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma" (16). There is a close analogy between this statement and the image of Marlow's yarn as a kernel with an encircling shimmer of meaning.

However, the coast can also be crossed by the gaze and other senses, before being crossed by the body. Conrad moves Marlow toward the "featureless" African continent and along a "formless coast" (16) with much the same melodramatic fervour as previous explorers. But for Marlow the continent and the sea whisper an enigmatic feminized message: "smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering–Come and find out" (16). This personification is juxtaposed immediately with "The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning" (17). The African other comes out toward Marlow in the form of human individuals full of masculine vitality, a canoe "paddled by black fellows [...]–these chaps [...] had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast" (17). The sound of the sea and the action of the paddlers is naturalized: each has "its reason" and "a meaning" (17). Marlow has a momentary "contact with reality"; the energy of these men is as "natural and true as the surf along their coast. [...] They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts" (17). In this paragraph, the energetic border crossing of the paddlers is divided according to symbolic borders of chaos/order, nature/culture, feminine/masculine, doing/discovering and moving/sensing.

As Richard Ambriosini, in his book *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse*

helpfully suggests, "a positive sound or sight is often followed by a negative one" (93)–in this paragraph, and in numerous others in the text. The sounds and sights Marlow is presented with and those he presents his audience are promises of what will be in the "offing". Underlying the spatial and temporal differences constituted within this threshold there is in addition the asymmetrical element of race. Race is a symbolic border, here figured by the surf as dividing and potentially crossable. Race both marks a *différance*–a difference and deferral at the same time–and constructs a world of straightforward facts, of colonial and civil order.

Returning to the first part of the description, as Marlow watches the coast, he sees the "edge of a colossal jungle so dark green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, [running] straight, like a ruled line, far far away along a blue sea" (16). In his figure of the ruled line, he reveals in a Freudian slip his intention to map the white space of this continent. However, these white spaces are famously dark, and the blackness is featureless except when "greyish, whitish specks showed up", "settlements, some centuries old, and still no bigger than pinheads on the untouched expanse of their background". These coastal trading stations are "flung out there" (16), on "the uniform sombreness of the coast" (17). This first description of darkness fringed with white is not framed as geographic description, but as an encounter with the Other. The initial description is repeated:

> Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks–these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (17)

Here the coast of Africa is figured as the bodily borders of the African boatmen; contact, and the possibility of mixing is enabled by envisaging their bodies as masks, skins or faces, articulated onto the more authentic realm of the flesh, which can, so to speak, be seen through the entry points of the eyes. But no exchange takes place except from the imaginative perspective of the narrator.[11] Is Marlow seen in this act of looking? On the one hand, these men rowing are,

11 See pages 35-36 in *Heart of Darkness* for more examples of this watching and being watched from a perspective "hidden" by the narrator.

in Chinua Achebe's phrase, an example of things in their place (260-61), but in another way these men are appropriated by the narrator who gazes from the edge of the continent onto a landscape that offers no firm ground (place) for the "subject/narrator". What we suggest is that the movement of the boat toward the narrator opens up a gap or rupture in the coastline (and in the text) and gives the narrator a way to position his own alterity. On the way, bodily and continental borders, i.e. topographical borders on micro and macro scales, are placed in an allegorical economy.[12] Epistemological boundaries are juxtaposed with these topographical borders, creating overlaps (or over-lappings) in which the meaning of Marlow's narrative is situated.[13]

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12 See Rochère (especially 186-192) for a further exploration of the way in which Africa is figured as a body in *Heart of Darkness*.

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