

Water and Imperialism: The Oppressing and Silencing Power of Water in Joseph Conrad's Novellas

YU Zhijiu

Brandeis University, USA

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Abstract: Joseph Conrad, one of the greatest English novelists of his time and a former sailor, has produced numerous novels and novellas regarding sailors and their voyages. These cannot be separated by the element of the sea or river, as it is the vehicle that carries the ships. Ultimately, the depiction of the sea and river can be seen as a kind of embodiment of water. While the heroism and the colonialist ideas of these novels have been addressed countless times in the journal articles and academic book chapters, the element of water is almost never mentioned and even ignored. This aligns with the visibility of the people of color, who are either unseen or othered by the white sailors. This paper aims to fill in that gap by using Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *The Niggers of the 'Narcissus,'* and *Typhoon* to historicize and analyze the "political unconscious" manifested in the form of water to show the hostility and indifference colonialists at the time have of the colored people. Water such as ocean, river, or even typhoons and mist; the heterotopia it generates can be deemed as vehicles that are used to either generate Western-centric labor values or the unifying power for the white sailors that ignores the colored sailor/laborers and a silencing power for natives.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad; Water; Ocean; River; Colonialism; Heterotopia; Labor; Eco-fiction

Notes on the contributor: YU Zhijiu holds an MA degree in English at Brandeis University. His major research interests lie in the Asian Diaspora, Asian American studies and culture, comedy and humor, popular culture, performance, novels, films, and science fiction. His email address is zhijiuyu@outlook.com.

1. Introduction

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you see. That — and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you



shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand; and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. (Conrad, 1991: 5)

In this quote, Conrad claims a kind of universality for his works, which he believes, bring a kind of “truth” to the sailors’ lives on the ocean to his audience. However, this claim is problematic because Conrad is biased. He depicts maritime life from a Western standpoint due to his background as a French and British merchant marine. In a sense, what he can make his readers “see” is not the universal “truth” but one that is in line with western values. This kind of false universalism is also acknowledged by Edward Said and Fredric Jameson, who looked at Conrad’s novels from a historical stance. According to Said, Conrad is “the precursor of the Western views of the Third World,” who can only “see a world totally dominated by the Atlantic West, in which every opposition to the West only confirms the West’s wicked power” (Said, 1993: xvii – xviii). Although he is aware of the detrimental effect imperialism brings to its subjects, he is unable to diverge from it and thus is only able to further the imperialist narrative. This narrative is also echoed in Jameson’s depiction of Conrad as he sees “Literature as a socially symbolic act” (Jameson, 2015: 17). He believes that the topics and language of cultural texts are influenced by a kind of ideological or political “unconscious” of a given period and this “political unconsciousness” is manifested in literary symbols, which he calls a symbolic act (Jameson, 2015: 76). Through his implicit bias, the words Conrad uses to describe voyages and explorations are inherently biased by his limited, white point of view on the world and this limitation is embodied in water.

One part of Conrad’s imperialistic “political unconscious” resides in his depiction of the ocean. As a former seaman who has ample experience in sea voyages around the globe, Joseph Conrad’s works are often filled with images of water and the depiction of the ocean. In his novellas such as *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *The Niggers of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897), and *Typhoon* (1902), Large volumes have been spent describing environments related to water, such as ocean and rivers, or the life of sailors and coastal residents, all of which possess imperialist values behind the naturalistic depictions. Yet almost all of the maritime studies on Conrad’s works are either limited in analyzing the sea or just romantically criticizing the effects that Conradian texts have produced. They often generate an idealized image of the sailors and their actions while treating the ocean merely as a symbol that possesses immense transformative power on the sailors (Liang, 2021: 30–31). The only exception is Chang–ping Huang’s paper, which mentions the importance of water, but she still merely describes water as “suffocating” and “filled with danger” (Huang, 2013: 33). From these scholars’ perspectives, the ocean is a part of nature, an existence antagonistic to human beings, a platform that allows the sailors to manifest their heroism through rebellion and perseverance. In the literary sense, this narrative is effective as it draws an emphasis on the struggles of the sailor in a romanticized way. This angle of analysis is, to a certain degree, problematic as it fails to ground these voyages under historical contexts. As the majority of Conrad’s novels are composed at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s, a time when western colonialism was still at its height, they also reflect heavily on the imperialistic ventures of the western powers at sea. The sea at the time, while majestic and full of natural power, was also used as a means to facilitate transportation, trade, and even war. Thus, it is not sensible to look at sailors as mere fictional romantic characters in a way that isolates them from historical reality as they too are consciously or unconsciously playing a role within the historical framework.

Moreover, the effect of the ocean on colored bodies is almost never mentioned in these studies. Just like

Conrad, who rarely gives a voice to his characters of color, scholars also tend to forget that the agency European sailors have does not necessarily transfer to their counterparts of color, as the African and Chinese laborers in these novels are always regarded as barbaric, lazy or illogical (Said, 1993: xi). Although just like what Yizhong Ning and Xiujuan Lan mentioned, “*Heart of Darkness* is set against the background of European colonial expansion in Africa and involves politics. It ... expose[s] readers to varying degrees of ethical concerns and influence, such as doubting the ideas Western civilization ... or they would label the work as ‘racist’ and ‘sexist’” (Ning & Lan, 2022: 150), the aim of this essay is not to determine whether Conrad is a racist or not. I want to further Frederic Jameson’s call to historicize literary works by comparing and contrasting the aesthetic and literal representations of the ocean with the historical or the physical depictions of it. The paper not only discusses how water constructs a naturalized narrative of imperialist discourse in Conrad’s novels but also deeply analyzes how this narrative strengthens the exclusion and suppression mechanism of non-white groups through symbolism and spatial construction. Water is not only a collective term for specific phenomena such as seas, rivers, storms, and fog, but it is also a carrier of culture and ideology. Here, I aim to use *Heart of Darkness*, *The Niggers of the ‘Narcissus,’* and *Typhoon* to analyze the “political unconscious” manifested in the form of water: how can ‘water’ in Conrad’s novels can be historicized to show people’s hostility and apathy against colored bodies at that period of time. Water manifested in the form of an ocean or river can generate a space or a heterotopia of work based on Western-centric labor values. Any form of rebellion or labor of the sailors of color is either condemned or unacknowledged. Under this framework, other bodies of water, such as storms and fog, can function both as a unifying power for the sailors and a silencing power for natives.

2. The Falsehood of Reading Water as Progression and Unification

Water in Conrad in novellas for the colonist seamen and the natives means very different things as the previous regard it as a place full of treasures, and the latter suffer colonialization and human trafficking. Before delving into how waters are manifested as either the creator of the heterotopia of labor or the ultimate silencing power of the colored body in these three novels, it is first important to look at their historical backgrounds. According to Richard Curie, Conrad’s bosom friend during his life and a supporter of his works after his death, most of Conrad’s stories are derived from his own experience. In an unpublished pamphlet defending Conrad’s writing, he claims, “... it must never be forgotten that Conrad’s main idea was invariably to present an accurate, if poeticized, slice of life as he had experienced it” (Curle, 2008: 133). This is echoed in Conrad’s own words in the Preface of *The Niggers of the ‘Narcissus,’* in which Conrad defined art, or at least his own art (including fiction), as “a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the universe, by bringing light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.” (Conrad, 1991: 3) This means that most of Conrad’s fiction that features the maritime career is or at least strives to be a realistic depiction of his own lived experiences as a sailor from 1878 to 1893, a period of imperial expansion and globalization performed by the European powers.

One of the best examples of the brutality of imperialism can be found in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. When Conrad arrived in Congo or The Congo Free State in 1890, its land was under the rulership of Leopold II of Belgium, who was notorious for his greed and cruelty. In a report conducted by Roger Casement, a humanitarian



activist who worked as a diplomat in the British Foreign Office, and published in 1904, it was found that “the European influence has been extremely detrimental on the indigenous people” (Murfin, 2011: 114). According to Casement, the trading system of the Congo people is severely disrupted by the Congo administration. Its population, men, women, and children alike, were “‘summoned on the instance’ to perform services... under threats of imprisonments and beating” (Murfin, 2011: 114) while also constantly facing the chance of mutilation as the King required soldiers “to send hands of their victims to the Congo administration as ‘proof of death’” (Murfin, 2011: 116). All of these brutalities are done in the name of progression. In a 1906 letter to *The Times* of London, Leopold II justified all the atrocities under his regime by attributing laziness to the natives:

“General Wahis (the Commander of the Army Division of Brussels) is of the opinion that the Congo natives are not longing for a change of rulers. We have brought them into contact with civilization; we are beginning to educate them, we have preserved them from the abuse of alcohol, we have vaccinated them, we are making them superhuman efforts to overcome the sleeping sickness, and we are creating numerous and rapid ways of communication... .”(Murfin, 2011: 110)

Such calls for “civilization” or the “education” of the native’s lives in the name of progression can also be seen in Conrad’s depiction of water in *Heart of Darkness*. This can be found in the people’s exploration of waterways for the purpose of conquest and expansion. From the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist Marlow appears on a cruise ship on the sea-reach of the Thames. The river is praised for its extensiveness as it has the capability of “spread[ing] out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost end of the world” and “[bearing] all the ships whose names are jewels flashing in the night of the time, from the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasures” (Conrad, 2011: 18–19). Like the other seamen, Marlow has an almost obsessive yearning for the sea. He believes that the essence of the sea is its mystery and that it is the sailor’s “Destiny” to explore it (Conrad, 2011: 19). The spirit of exploring the unknown makes him want to set foot in all parts of the world, and the only thing that could satisfy him was the waterway because international travel at that time was carried out through ships. This kind of fascination with water is also manifested in Marlow’s choice of destination as he states that the reason why he chose Congo is because of its “mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake coiled.” He sees the possibility for him to explore the place in a steamboat and is not able to “shake off” his fascination for the river (Conrad, 2011: 22). This kind of obsession with water, or more specifically with rivers, has a deep connotation of imperialism and colonialism as the ideas of exploration are based on the idea of global domination. This is also clear in the previous description of the Thames, which despite its beauty, is valued for its ability to connect Britain to the rest of the world. Sailors “followed the sea” because they are able to bring treasures back home. These treasures, of course, are the result of the pillaging and exploitation of both natural and human resources abroad (as demonstrated in the case of King Leopold II of Belgium). It is via water that these sailors explore and conquer the world; it is their passageway to new frontiers that holds the endless possibility of the unknown and riches. Although Marlow does not directly express a need to exploit the resources in Congo, his desire for exploration ultimately stems from the imperialist need to conquer the so-called wild and untamed. He is deeply influenced by the narrative of colonialism, and that explains his fascination with the map throughout his life.

Although large paragraphs solely dedicated to the description of water are no longer present when Marlow arrives in Congo, it is impossible for the readers to ignore its presence as the primary means of travel in Congo is also done by water vessels. A good example can be seen in the ivory trade as it is carried out by “a fleet of canoes” (Conrad, 2011: 47). Moreover, Marlow’s journey is primarily set out on the steamboat. Thus, in a sense, the water here symbolizes a kind of mobility as, without it, the transportation of both man and ivory would be impossible. On the other hand, the land symbolizes stagnation as nothing is accomplished there. When the steamboat breaks down, it delays Marlow’s adventure by three months. This is best summarized in Marlow’s comment that on the stream the “current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf” (Conrad, 2011: 54). The land and forest here embody a kind of stillness, decay, and madness, and in contrast the water suggests progression. However, this kind of progression is exclusive to the colonizers, and as to the natives, it has only brought about the sailors who have to offer nothing but suffering, starvation, and enslavement. Like what Said comments on the Marlow’s journey up the river, it is “Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa” (Said, 1993: 23).

Alongside the problematic view that treat water as a symbol of progression, its unifying power should also be called into question. In Conrad’s depictions, the sea is a space that possesses immense destructive power under whose pressure sailors are able to come together (Liang, 2021: 30–31). However, as mentioned above, this kind of union is definitely not extended to people of color. In *The Niggers of the “Narcissus”*, it is obvious that the African sailor James is never a part of the ship. Due to his pretended sickness, vocalization of his pain, and complaints, James is dreaded by all other members of the ship. He is often regarded as the outsider, the devil who tempts his crewmates to do his bidding through his cunning, and the person who brings silence to a gathering. When he entered the room where conversations were held, “the circle broke up. The joy of laughter died on stiffened lips ...Not a word was spoken” (Conrad, 1991: 29). Thus, James is the one who infringes on the unity of the sailors rather than a part of it. This fragmentation among the crew is eventually solved when he dies and is thrown off-board and engulfed by the merciless water.

A similar type of alienation is further observed in *Typhoon*, in which there is a clear distinction between the Chinese Coolies and the European sailors, as the latter are each given a detailed individual description while the former are summarized as a type. Throughout the story, the coolies are not given names and are never given a voice before any decisions. When being asked whether they should evade the storms so as to make the Chinese coolies below the decks more comfortable, captain MacWhirr refuses because does not want to waste coal and time despite having “no experience of cataclysms” (Conrad, 1991: 145). During the typhoon he proclaims, “About as queer as your extraordinary notions of dodging the ship head to sea, for I don’t know how long, to make the Chinamen comfortable; whereas all we’ve got to do is to take them to Fu-Chau, being timed to get there before noon on Friday” (Conrad, 1991: 155). This is not surprising as Chinese at the time are stereotypically seen as the “yellow peril,” rather than the later “model minority” making them more of a burden than a common human being (Yu, 2024: 47). Despite their presence as workers, Chinese coolies are still been described as goods needed to be transported. Although the sailors do not actively torture them, the Chinese are just as alienated as the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*.



3. Ships as a Heterotopia for Labor and the Alienation of the Colored Bodies

The alienating and commodifying power water has on the colored bodies can be further observed in its capacity for space-creation as it separates the ship from land, generating a place where we can observe labor in its purest form. This is best explored in Fredric Jameson's analysis of Conrad's writing as, according to him, "For the sea is the empty space between the concrete places of work and life; but it is also, just as surely, itself a place of work and the very element by which an imperial capitalism draws its scattered beachheads and outposts together, through which it slowly realizes its sometimes violent, sometimes silent and corrosive, penetration of the outlying precapitalist zones of the globe" (Jameson, 2015: 213). This definition of the sea is especially accurate for Conrad's works, as its main characters are almost all sailors who are working in maritime trades. What the readers observe are the working bodies in action. However, Jameson's point also has its limitations, as after claiming the importance of the sea in Conrad's work, he does not draw further analysis on the topic as his approach to Conrad is more philosophical and abstract and thus not grounded on the ocean along. As I have mentioned above, I believe that the place of work in Conrad's book is not only the sea but also a combination of both the sea/river and the ship. The sea is the element that separates the ship from the land and all its ascribed rules on the people and thus makes it a kind of space in isolation. Although the existence of the ship does not depend on the sea/river (water); the space within does. If the ship is on land, it still exists, but the space inside is "dead" and not activated.

Thus, the ship only comes "alive" when it is sailing on the water, separating the sailors from the land. In this sense, the definition of the ship, while it is in relation with water, is extremely close to what Michel Foucault terms "heterotopia," or more specifically "heterotopias of deviation," (I will refer to it as heterotopia throughout the text) a place where "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault, 1986: 25). In essence it is a place that is connected to and mirrors the hegemony but operates on a different set of rules. (My classification of "ship" in Conrad's works as a heterotopia is not the same as Foucault's categorization of the "boat," as my focus is not on its fluidity and connectedness from place to place but rather how its inhabitants, the sailors, is different from the rest of the capitalist society because they are separated to the society by water). The Conradian ship is a heterotopia in that the only transferable credit onboard is not money but rather one's capacity to work. Sailors are not valued for their wealth, looks, or even eloquence because they are irrelevant in the face of natural disasters.

However, it is also worth noting that the emphasis placed on labor does not immediately make the ships a heterotopia, as this quality is also observed in any capitalistic space. One of the key principles of Marxist theory is that the value of commodities is dependent on human labor as it is an integral part of its production process. By working (or selling labor) in a factory and producing goods or transporting those goods to the marketplace, laborers exchange their labor for money and are valued according to the amount of money they accumulate. However, this kind of process is temporarily disabled on the Conradian ship as its currency system is different from that of the capitalist society outside the heterotopia because it does not rely on the monetary system due to the water, which renders it useless. In a capitalist society, what determines people's success is their material wealth, regardless of how it is ascertained. Yet this rule does not apply to ships as the sailors are solely judged by

their labor output. This is best seen in the fact that payment of sailors is generally received after the ship arrives at its destination (Conrad, 1991: 124, 197), and they never use the money to trade with each other on board and do not even care about money in the face of crisis (Conrad, 1991: 184). On the ship, all they get in return is the praise of other sailors. Yet it is exactly what Conrad made the colored bodies seem to lack.

This kind of praise for the heroism of labor is best demonstrated in Conrad's depiction of the sailors' efforts to save the ship during a storm. In *Typhoon*, although the captain's bad decision has endangered the entire crew, he is nonetheless able to use his "calm voice" that "carr[ies] an infinity of thought" (Conrad, 1991: 163) to direct his crewmate through this raging deck-melting sea, which is ironic in a sense. They are able to both withstand the raging storm and eventually save the ship from the seemingly inevitable doom by remaining in their position. A similar unity can also be observed on board the *Narcissus*. While facing the storm, all of the men (except for James who is trapped in his room) heed the order of the captain and with their collective efforts are able to save James from drowning in his room as he "scream[s] and knock[s] ... with the hurry of a man prematurely shut up in a coffin" (Conrad, 1991: 51). Here, the water that is manifested in the form of a storm actually causes more labor and thus facilitates the narrative for a labor-centered value system. On the contrary, James is trapped in the room by water and unable to help. Although his trickery at the start might make him seem lazy, at this moment he is not unwilling to help but unable to. This demonstrates that the water itself also has a separating power within the heterotopia as it barricades the chance for James to redeem himself and thus lead him to inevitable doom.

Moreover, James's inability to help is also compared with the cook's action as Amidst all of the chaos the cook is able to serve coffee to all of the sailors.

It came in a pot, and they drank in turns. It was hot, and while it blistered the greedy palates, it seemed incredible. The men sighed out parting with the mug: 'How 'as he done it?' Some cried weakly: 'Bully for you, doctor!'

...

He had done it somehow. Afterwards Archie declared that the thing was 'meeraculous.' For many days we wondered, and it was the one ever-interesting subject of conversation to the end of the voyage.... He remained heroic. His saying — the saying of his life — became proverbial in the mouth of men as are the sayings of conquerors or sages. Later, whenever one of us was puzzled by a task and advised to relinquish it, he would express his determination to persevere and to succeed by the words: 'As long as she swims I will cook! I will get you coffee.' (Conrad, 1991: 63–64)

The cook's action is hailed as something "heroic" and "meeraculous," because of his unbudging determination to perform his duty (labor) even during a time of crisis. This quote is also systematically analyzed by Johan Adam Warodell, who praised the cook's capacity to work under pressure as he called the "gale at sea... a testament to the heroism of menial labor" and compared his action to "Jesus offering loaves and fish" (Warodell, 2020: 62). In the analysis of the same text above, Warodell acknowledges the fact that the act of serving coffee or cooking is a kind of labor, therefore, his choice to over-romanticize it is risky. First, he failed to realize that such heroism is against the grain, since labor is considered a menial commodity in capitalist society



instead of a praiseworthy virtue. According to Jameson, it is problematic to ascribe “the feudal ideology of honor [social value from a quite different mode of production]” to a capitalist society (Jameson, 2015: 217). If workers are willing to work for praise and honor instead of financial returns, or even romanticizing the process of labor, they are highly susceptible to exploitation no matter if they are of what ethnicity or race. Unlike what other scholars think that the ocean/ water is solely a formidable power that brings people together, I believe it also has the capacity to exploit and separate people from people as such romanticization of labor may be used to justify the alienation of the sailors of color.

By contextualizing the scene of the cook serving coffee, it is easy to see that it follows directly after James’ rescue, showing a contrast between a hard-working individual and an incapacitated one. James is temporarily silenced by the water that almost drowned him, which stands in direct contrast to the vocalization of the cook’s capacity to work. After getting James out of the cabin filled with water, the crew describes him as “a cold black skin loosely stuffed with soft cotton wool” whose “arms and legs swung jointless and pliable”, and whose head “rolled about” (Conrad, 1991: 55). Instead of feeling joy for their successful rescue, they are filled with resentment and anger toward James because the person they saved does not possess the capacity of labor, which means he is useless. “We hated James Wait. We could not get rid of the monstrous suspicion that this astounding black-man was shamming sick, had been malingering heartless in the face of our toil, of our scorn, of our patients—and now was malingering in the face of hour devotion — in the face of death” (Conrad, 1991: 56). Although the narrative is centered on the word’s “suspicion” and “shamming,” it is clear that the fundamental cause of his hatred is derived from James’s unwillingness and incapacity to work. He does not belong to the ship because he does not follow the one and only rule: labor. Moreover, it is also crucial to take identity, or in this case, racial identity, into consideration since James is the only colored sailor on board. According to Rob Breton, “work functions alternatively to clarify the identity and to conceal it, to establish it and to negate it” (Breton, 2005: 100). Indeed, the sailors’ perception of James’s identity is strongly affected by his labor. He is despised because others suspect that he is faking his sickness (incapacity to work), and this kind of suspicion is partially derived from the fact that he is black: a skin color that was often falsely associated with the connotation of laziness and incivility during the colonial period and water as a natural power only exacerbated the conflict.

Moreover, it is also worth noting that identity or, more importantly, racial identity also plays a significant role in whether one’s work is recognized and acknowledged. One such example can be seen in the treatment of the coolie laborers in *Typhoon*. Although the term “coolie” itself signifies the laborer and they are hired for the same purpose, Conrad rarely devotes any paragraphs to talking about their contribution to the ship. This is best seen when they first appeared:

The fore-deck, packed with Chinamen, was full of sombre clothing, yellow faces, and pigtailed, sprinkled over with a good many naked shoulders, for there was no wind, and the heat was close. The coolies lounged, talked, smoked, or stared over the rail; some, drawing water over the side, sluiced each other; a few slept on hatches, while several small parties of six sat on their heels surrounding iron trays with plates of rice and tiny teacups; and every single Celestial of them was carrying with him all he had in the world—a wooden chest with a ringing lock and brass on the corners, containing the savings of his labours: some clothes of ceremony, sticks of incense, a little opium. maybe, bits of nameless rubbish of conventional value, and a small hoard of

silver dollars, toiled for in coal lighters, won in gambling—houses or in petty trading, grubbed out of earth, sweated out in mines, on railway lines, in deadly jungle, under heavy burdens—amassed patiently, guarded with care, cherished fiercely. (Conrad, 1991: 135–136)

One of the most important aspects to notice from the passage above is the overemphasis on the belongings rather than the people. This is unfavorable to the Chinese. As mentioned above, the emphasis on monetary wealth is looked down upon in this heterotopia of labor. In *Typhoon*, one of the reasons why the coolies are deemed irrational is because of their unwillingness to let go of their belongings during the storm. Rather than being active agents who are capable of solving problems like the white sailor who shrugged off the importance of money by saying, “I don’t care...” (Conrad, 1991: 184), the Chinese are described as people who are hungry for fortune and panicked stragglers who can only fight under the lure of scattered silver dollars. Yet the narrator intentionally ignores the fact that this little wealth they have is procured through labor. To the arrogant sailors, they are no better or even worse than the goods on board, as they are not the ones creating labor at the time. The Chinese are reduced to nothing more than “heads and shoulders, naked soles...tumbling backs, legs, pigtails, faces” and “clawing hands” (Conrad, 1991: 172, 186) because they lack the agency Conrad ascribes to white sailors such as the cook. Although, like what my predecessor said, water can serve as an antagonistic power against the sailors, it also symbolizes a kind of racial segregation that barricades the mingling of the races. In the typhoon, the water blocked the African American sailor. I locked them into the cabin, which made him nearly drown, and in the other book, rather than asking the Chinese laborers to help with the trouble brought by the storm. The captain merely observes them as goods that can be laid about. Like James’s experience, they are also rendered passive and silent by the storm.

As mentioned in the previous section, water plays an important role in separating land and ships. Yet, on the ship or the heterotopia, the situation is no better than on land as there is still a segregating power that creates a gap between the white and nonwhite laborers. This ideological notion is deeply entrenched in the white sailors’ minds even when they are all trapped in a heterotopia in the form of a ship, as they still regard the whites as barbaric and lacking agency. Rather than ameliorating the tension and creating a mutual understanding through the isolated environment, the two parties virtually have no contact.

4. The Silencing Power of the Water

On top of its alienating power that is manifested in the creation of the heterotopia of labor, the water in Conrad’s novellas is also capable of silencing the character of color by making them invisible or incomprehensible to both the European characters as well as the readers. Oftentimes, this is done through a limitation of sensory intake as the voices and appearances of the non-Europeans are blocked off by natural forces such as rivers, storms, and even fog. A good example can be observed in *Heart of Darkness*, as the water in it brings suffering and death to the native population of the Congo Basin. As mentioned in the first section, in the same way that the river can be regarded as a symbol of progression and wealth, it is also capable of bringing destruction to the African landscape and its native population. When Mallow arrives at the company station, he witnesses the maltreatment of the enslaved natives, whom people refer to as “criminals” or “creatures” (Conrad, 2011: 30,



32). It goes without saying that they are not regarded as humans, and their language is thus rendered incomprehensible. According to Melissa Free's studies on the soundscape of *Heart of Darkness*, the reason why the language of African subjects is regarded as mere noise is not that they are "inherently unknowable," but rather, "it is incomprehensible to the European who seeks to possess it through knowledge" (Free, 2015: 2). The "knowledge" in this context is similar to the notion of knowing in Said's comment on Balfour's (an orientalist's) speech on Egypt:

England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows; England knows that Egypt cannot have self-government; England confirms that by occupying Egypt; for the Egyptians, Egypt is what England has occupied and now governs; foreign occupation, therefore, becomes "the very basis" of contemporary Egyptian civilization; Egypt requires, indeed insists upon, British occupation. (Said, 2003: 35)

If we take the logic of Said's observation into consideration, African speech in the *Heart of Darkness* is not unknowable but rather ignored. The colonizers only want to understand them in an existing western framework, and knowledge that does not consolidate the western rulership is then regarded as useless and thus undeciphered. With this kind of narrative, the native body is thus systematically subdued into obedience, and their voice is suppressed and reduced to "incomprehensible" noises. Moreover, the river facilitates that process by further blocking the natives, who are not yet enslaved, from interaction with the white colonialists. When Marlow manages to fix the steamboat and embarks on the journey into the heart of Congo Basin to find Kurtz, he is often accompanied by a kind of silence, and during the time when the natives vaguely appear behind the trees, they are often accompanied with a kind of incomprehensibility. After seeing the looming bodies behind the forest, Marlow comments, "we could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign— and no memories" (Conrad, 2011: 51). In this context, the word "far" obviously has a connotation of time, but it could also be understood in terms of physical distance. Marlow is not able to understand the natives like Kurtz because he often traps himself in the steamboat and is separated from the non-enslaved Africans by the river. It protects the people on the steamship from the native people as it separates them both physically and mentally. They do not belong to the labor-intensive "civil world" and are thus regarded as the other.

Another element that protects them from the imminent attack is the fog, an alternative representation of water. When the manager on board asks Marlow whether the natives would attack, Marlow reassures him by revealing the metaphor of fog: uncertainty and oppression. The thick fog was one. "If they left the bank in their canoes, they would get lost in it, as we would be if we attempted to move" (Conrad, 2011: 58). This statement is proven to be true as the attack begins "two hours after the 'fog' lifted" (Conrad, 2011: 59). Moreover, what the fog has shielded might not just be physical attacks as it also blocks off the psychological trauma that is inflicted in the form of sensory intake. But the threat of battle and death doesn't disappear, as they are just oppressed by the fog; as the fog lifts, killing begins. Although some scholars have dismissed the effect of the fog as Conrad's coverup for his lack of imagination as he is believed to have not taken that particular waterway into Congo (White & Finston, 2010: 2), it is important to separate the author from the work itself, given that published literature can often acquire a life of its own. Moreover, Conrad himself also extended the importance of

sensory presentations in his works by claiming what he is trying to achieve is “to make you hear, make you feel— it is, before all, to make you see” (Conrad, 1991: 5). Thus, the lack of descriptions of the African landscapes alongside the river should not be treated as an omission. When taken into a colonial context, the fog is to the eye like the silence to the ear. It blocks off the true horror, or the reality of the Congo Basin. In a sense, the fog can be regarded as a kind of physical manifestation of colonial ignorance that denies any unfavorable messages to the colonial gaze.

Another more direct kind of acoustic ignorance of the people of color’s speech can also be observed in *Typhoon*, as the Chinese coolies in it are not given a voice. During the storms, there are virtually no sounds from them. The only time one of the coolies tries to speak, his voice is reduced to a kind of “incomprehensible guttural sound, that did not seem to belong to a human language,” an act that Jukes describes as “a brute [trying] to be eloquent” (Conrad, 1991: 118). What is noteworthy is the discrepancy between the sensory output of the white sailors and the non-white bodies. This kind of incomprehensibility of the Chinese speech is in direct contrast to the captain’s voice, which is described as “confident,” “sensible,” carrying “infinity of thought, resolution, and purpose,” and “bearing [a] strange effect of quietness” (Conrad, 1991: 163–64). Even amidst the storm, he is able to communicate with his crew with determination and effectiveness, which is impossible. Thus, it is not hard to see that the silencing power of the storm is not equal when dealing with European sailors and coolies, as it is only capable of blocking out the voices of the latter.

In a sense, Conrad’s water can be regarded as an unconscious reflection of the historical background of his time. Like what Conrad suggests, his writing intends to make people see the reality and “no more” (Conrad, 1991: 5). His writing is effective because “its politics and aesthetics are... imperialist” (Said, 1993: 24). By depicting the water in the colonial language that defies acknowledging the existence of the colored laborers, he is able to make his readers “see” the truth behind the glorified empiricist ventures. Colored laborers are not valued for their capacity for labor, and their speeches are then systematically silenced because they do not fit into the imperialist narrative. As much as its ability to bring forward a kind of western progression, unity, and civilization, the water can also induce the same amount of oppression and silence the people of color.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of water, the heterotopia it creates, and its silencing power, readers can observe the symbolism that manifests the imperialist power behind literary works. Although water is capable of facilitating trade via the ocean and waterways, it also brings immense detrimental consequences to the population of Congo and China. It creates a heterotopia on the ship but does not bring people together; it creates more segregation among them. Moreover, water is also capable of silencing people of color, as in the form of fog and storms that Conrad renders the African and Chinese incomprehensible. Thus, although water is often deemed as the force of life and unifying power in novels, it should not be ignored that it is not merely just symbolism but also possesses a power that reflects the historical context of its time.

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