“The Horror! The Horror!”: Witnessing the Environmental Trauma of Wastelanding through Narrative in *Heart of Darkness*

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“Wastelanding takes two primary forms: the assumption that non-white lands are valueless, or valuable only for what can be mined from beneath them, and the subsequent devastation of those very environs by polluting industries”

(Brynne Voyles 10).
Overview of Topic

Through a close reading of Conrad’s narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, I will explore postcolonial and ecological trauma.

Wastelanding shows that “racialized lands are made to seem uninhabited or unimportantly inhabited, represented as worthless, and then systematically stripped of their material and ideological worth” (Brynne Voyles 10-11).

I will mobilize Brynne Voyles’ work on wastelanding towards Conrad’s text to provide an alternate reading of this canonical work.

I will address the implications of this alternate reading through trauma in terms of the politics of witnessing, violence, Rob Nixon’s slow violence, and the responsibilities of “implicated subjects” by Michael Rothberg.

“But I couldn’t. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether...” (Conrad 100).
Mobilizing Wastelanding

The concept of wastelanding links past debates about where the focus should lie in the hierarchy of human vs ecological debate. The mobilization of wastelanding allows me to argue the interconnectedness of the negation of the people, the degradation of the land, and the reality of environmental trauma.
I will work to situate the historical text in a specific time and place under colonial rule and outline the effects of stripping the land of resources and people. I will introduce and mobilize Brynne Voyles term, wastelanding, to connect the historical 1880's Navajo Country to Conrad's Congo in 1899. The key move here is to link the conditions of wastelanding that occurred in America to the same treatment of the land, people, and animals of the Congo.

The postcolonial ecocritical aspects of the text and wastelanding allows for witnessing of events as equality devastating for the environment and the people in order to link all people in aiming for environmental justice and decolonization. I will apply Brynne Voyles key conceptual vocabulary to the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* in scholarly works concerning claims of racism in order to mobilize a key point in that “the “wasteland” is a racial and a spatial signifier that renders an environment and the bodies that inhabit it pollutable” (9).

Through revisiting Chinua Achebe's essay claiming *Heart of Darkness* as a racist text and Cedrie Watts’s support of Conrad’s fiction “in its power of its criticism of racial prejudice” (196), allows me to extend Brynne Voyles’ more recent argument surrounding racism and Willow’s extractivism and its effects on the land claim, and environmental justice to the alternate reading of the canonical text. It also allows me to explore the complex task of considering the ways each witness is implicated in the histories the novella explores.
Methodology Continued

Through a close reading of *Heart of Darkness*, I will demonstrate the environmental trauma that emerges from the narration in the canonical text. This reading will explore secondary sources in postcolonial ecocriticism, trauma theory, and theories of witnessing in order to address the correlation between racism and the ability of settlers or colonizers to negate those individuals already on the land as disposable and pollutable.

Key areas of analysis will include the language employed for the people, the treatment of fauna, the degradation of the land, and the waste left by the colonizer. Throughout the analysis I will apply trauma theories by scholars such as Kelly Oliver, and Michael Rothberg to support the effects on the narrators (Marlow and the agent) and the people and land of the Congo. And finally, the implicated subject will address where research into wastelanding in canonical texts can take future postcolonial ecocriticism discussions.
Given that this project works with a variety of texts to address postcolonial, ecocritical, trauma, and the witness this review looks briefly at the works that will inform each area.

Postcolonial texts include Chinua Achebe’s essay on *Heart of Darkness* and Cedric Watt’s paper in response to Achebe claims of racism in the text. Then Huggan and Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* and Anthony Carrigan’s *Nature, Ecocriticism, and the Postcolonial Novel* connect the postcolonial and ecocritical work.

To further connect the postcolonial affects on the people and ecology in Conrad’s text, I will mobilize Brynne V oyles term wastelanding based off of Valerie Kuletz’s wasteland discourse in *The Tainted Dessert* and through Anna Willow’s *Understanding Extractivism* and Robb Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

To address trauma, witnessing, and the implications of witnessing the postcolonial and environmental trauma of wastelanding in the narrative in Conrad’s canonical text, I will apply concepts by Felman and Laub, Kelly Oliver, and Michael Rothberg to my MRP.


Images from PowerPoint

Czegeny, Leslie. Photograph of Heart of Darkness Book cover. 10, April 2021. Author’s Personal Collection.
Drümmkopf. iPenCl 3168 Conrad, Joseph HEART OF DARKNESS, 2nd(’86), (Paul O’Prey [ed & intro]).
Rawpixel creative commons. Multi ethnicities of various people face portraits. https://www.rawpixel.com/image/433632/premium
-photo-image-mosaic-face-collage-mosaic-faces.