Joseph Conrad: Transnational Identity in the Fictions of Empire[1]

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Joseph Conrad was a writer who crossed national boundaries both in his personal life and in his writing, particularly in his early Malay tales and in *Heart of Darkness* (1901), but also in his fictions set in England and Europe. A Pole, who later learned to speak French, and then English, Conrad was a much-travelled merchant seaman before he settled on a career as a writer. In his life as a mariner Conrad traversed the globe, encountering a variety of peoples and cultures, not just when he went ashore in those distant lands, but also as he worked alongside sailors from all sorts of backgrounds. Malay, Chinese, African, American, Filipino, Australian, German, Swedish, French: all of these nationalities and more feature at one point or another in Conrad's fictions and essays. And it was these encounters and experiences that shaped Conrad's world outlook when, in his thirties, he settled in England and became, ultimately, one of the most influential writers of fiction in English of his generation.

Unlike many of his fellow authors, Conrad's portrayal of other races stems from the deep personal experiences that he desired to render with as much authenticity as possible. As he says in his famous Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897):

> A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the

> facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential — their one illuminating and convincing quality — the very truth of their existence.[2]

It is this will-to-authenticity that sometimes leads Conrad to over-write, to laden his sentences with adjectives—a style which F. R. Leavis called 'adjectival insistence'.[3] Yet this striving for the truth of the universe and its population means that in Conrad we find an author who delves beneath external appearances, beneath skin colour and racial difference to reveal the very human impulses and frailties that bind humanity together.

As a result, Conrad's work is not bound by considerations of national identities or loyalties, but represents a remarkable ability to portray the inter-cultural relations at play within Europe and within its empires. Whilst these relationships are inevitably affected by the economic imperatives of imperialism, Conrad is one of the first writers to see imperialism in terms of the human cost, and also one of the first to give voice to the humanitarian concerns related to imperialism that were starting to be articulated at the end of the nineteenth century. And it is in part this facility to critique the imperial project and to present this critique in experimental narrative forms that signals Conrad as an early exponent of modernism. In this way, through Conrad and his imperial tales, transnationalism constitutes part of a nexus of ideas that coalesce around the emergent modernist novel.

In 1975 Chinua Achebe delivered his now famous speech at the University of Massachusetts in which he labelled Conrad 'a bloody racist' because of his portrayal of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* (1901).[4] This was the first time that the issue of race in the text had been directly confronted, inaugurating a debate that continues to influence the reception of *Heart of Darkness* to this day. Achebe's attack was a timely and much-needed intervention, causing Conrad scholars to consider the possibility that *Heart of Darkness* was a more problematic text than they had previously acknowledged. In the intervening years much

has been written to defend Conrad against Achebe's charge of racism. At the same time many, especially in America, have opted not to teach the text in the university classroom. This is not the place to rehearse old arguments for and against Conrad in the context of Achebe's charge because that is well-trodden territory. What this article will do is to use Achebe's accusation as a means of engaging in a discussion about Conrad as a transnational author, one who is not necessarily Euro-centric, and as an author whose wide experience of other peoples and other cultures was unusual at the time that he was writing. In a sense the arguments presented here will be a rebuttal of Achebe's views, but at the same time the debate is stimulated by his perspective on Conrad's writing: essentially the argument here is that rather being a racist, Conrad was, for his time, strikingly sympathetic to other races and cultures.

Conrad wrote in the English language, but his fictions are conscious of many languages, of many competing cultural viewpoints, and of many conflicting voices. And this is precisely because Conrad occupied a unique position as a writer in English: a product of several different cultures and speaker of several languages, Conrad's multi-vocal narratives, and particularly the Malay fictions, reveal his consciousness of a world that is characterised by contradictions and competing voices. As he put it in a letter to the *New York Times* on 2 August 1901: 'The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous—so full of hope.'[5] The cultural and linguistic complexities of Conrad's writing spring from this 'courageous recognition', an awareness engendered by his own cultural hinterland. As Richard Ambrosini says, 'Conrad's works bear the traces of repeated attempts to respond creatively to a condition of linguistic and cultural marginality […]. "Transnationality" is thus the name of a quality that Conrad brought to English

literature.'[6] It is exactly this 'transnational quality' in Conrad's writing that this paper will explore.

Crossing National Boundaries

Conrad's first book, *Almayer's Folly*, was published in 1895, and was followed up by a kind of prequel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, in 1896. Both stories were set on the Malay Archipelago and feature major characters from both a European culture and from Malay, Arab and Chinese cultures. This means that from the very inception of his career, Conrad was crossing national and ethnic boundaries in his work. Earlier writers of adventure fiction like Rider Haggard, G. A. Henty and W. H. G. Kingston had written about the empire as a playground for the white male adventurer, paying little heed to the real cultural, social, political and religious issues raised by the invasion of the annexed lands. In such fiction native voices were rarely heard, except as antagonists of the European invader: voices, that is, that were to be silenced by the threat of a gun or a sword with the purpose of securing political stability in the Empire. Prior to Conrad, critiques of the effects of imperialism, both on the native peoples and on the Europeans themselves were rarely undertaken.[7]

It is a curious irony, for example, that Rider Haggard was more familiar with, more immersed in African culture than Conrad ever was with Malay culture. Yet Haggard, despite his deep respect for and knowledge of Africans, chose in most of his fictions to reduce them to stereotypes and ciphers for European anxieties about 'the other'. Haggard used his experience of Africa and its peoples to write 'potboilers' and to gloss over the complex problems of imperialism that he had witnessed. Occasionally, as in *Nada the Lily* (1892), Haggard demonstrated a deep understanding of the complexity and richness of African culture and history. But, more generally, he remained true to the formula for adventure-romance, which privileged European values and

customs, and assumed the superiority of white humanity. Tales like those of Haggard did not seek Conradian truth and fidelity: instead they revelled in swashbuckling adventure in which native peoples were simply collateral damage in the struggle to establish and perpetuate the British Empire. Concerning his 1887 tale *Allan Quatermain*, one of his more bloodthirsty offerings, a young Winston Churchill wrote to Haggard: 'Thank you so much for sending me *Allan Quatermain* [...]; it was so good of you. I like "A.Q." better than *King Solomon's Mines*; it is more amusing. I hope you will write a great many more books. I remain, Yours truly, Winston S. Churchill.'[8] Young minds like Churchill's were heavily influenced by African fantasias like *Allan Quatermain* (1887); however, times and opinions were changing, and not everyone was content to blithely accept the fanciful and even fantastical image of Africa and Africans that Haggard was peddling. In August 1887, writing under the pseudonym "Gavin Ogilvy" for the *British Weekly*, J. M. Barrie delivered this condemnation: '*Allan Quatermain* tells the adventures of three worthless old men, who go to Africa and slay their thousands of human beings. (They are responsible for the deaths of not less than 50,000.) It would have been a nobler part to stay at home and hire themselves out to butchers....'.[9] Such revulsion against the simple loyalties and racial assumptions of the imperial romance was preparing the way for Conrad's radically new way of presenting the empire and its peoples.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century cracks were beginning to show in the very foundations of imperialism and the whole enterprise seemed to threaten to reveal the darkness at the heart of the imperial mission. Writers like H. G. Wells, in *The War of the Worlds* (1897), had begun to consider the moral implications of the violent acquisition of lands belonging to others, and he imaginatively, and gruesomely, fictionalised what he saw as the potential consequences. Robert Louis Stevenson was another who was determined to tackle some of the issues that began to emerge as the century reached its end. In 1894, the year of his untimely death, Stevenson completed his own imperial tale, *The Ebb-Tide*, a story that

tackled head-on the dissolution, degeneracy and misplaced sense of entitlement that he had witnessed among Europeans in his travels in the South Pacific. The book opens with a fairly damning image of Westerners on a southern beach:

> Throughout the island world of the Pacific, scattered men of many European races, and from almost every grade of society, carry activity and disseminate disease. Some prosper, some vegetate … and there are still others, less pliable, less capable, less fortunate, perhaps less base, who continue, even in these isles of plenty, to lack bread.
>
> At the far end of the town of Papeete, three such men were seated on the beach under a *purao*-tree.[10]

The text presents the Europeans as degenerate parasites, whose sole reason for being in the East is self-serving, and thus part of Stevenson's purpose is to detail the deleterious effects of Western interventions in and exploitation of the South Seas. Another of his tales, *The Beach of Falesá* (1894), also picks up on this theme, fictionalising European interference, mismanagement and corruption in native Polynesian trade and culture. These tales anticipate Conrad's sceptical fictions of empire, where Europeans are seen not as Haggard's morally unimpeachable, Anglo-Saxon heroes bringing enlightenment to barbarous and benighted native peoples, but rather as ruthless, greedy, morally bankrupt adventurers with no conscience when it comes to the treatment of native Malays or Africans. In fact, many critics have noted how Stevenson's South Sea tales actually prepared the way for Conrad's tales of imperial misadventure. Douglas Mack, for instance says:

> Arguably, Stevenson not only anticipates aspects of Conrad's critique of imperialism in *The Beach of Falesá*, but he actually goes beyond *Heart of*

> *Darkness* in some ways, not least in his openness to the possibility that there was a real value in the pre-Imperial cultures of peoples that the European Empires tend to dismiss as 'savages.'[11]

Mack is correct in arguing that Stevenson gives greater voice to native peoples than Conrad does in *Heart of Darkness*. However, like Achebe, Mack misses the point: Conrad's intention in that book was not about raising his readers' consciousness of African culture. In fact, he was determined to expose the chaos and mismanagement of Belgian imperial governance in the Congo, and to reveal to the world the inhumanity and neglect that characterised the regime. When he wrote *The Ebb Tide*, Stevenson was immersed in Polynesian culture and politics—he had already lived there for some years. Conrad's experience of Africa, by contrast, was as the skipper of the *Roi des Belges* in an ill-fated trip up the Congo in which he nearly died of malaria and dysentery, but, unlike Stevenson, he was not a seasoned observer of the native culture. Nevertheless, Conrad's response, revealed through Marlow, to the peoples of Africa is that this was their domain: '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'.[12] One may argue that Marlow 'others' the Africans, but threaded through this description is a respect and admiration for these men, and the uncomfortable implication that Marlow and his shipmates were intruders, rather like Wells's Martians in *The War of the Worlds*.

Elsewhere, as a transnational writer, Conrad had already made his sympathies with native peoples very clear, especially in instances where he had close knowledge of particular races. Conrad had spent months among Malays during his seafaring days and was amply acquainted with their culture, though not in the same immersive way that Stevenson knew Polynesian

culture and politics through his long term residency, or as Haggard knew the peoples of Africa. Conrad was aware of significant gaps in his knowledge of Malays and researched and consulted widely and meticulously amongst reference books in order that his portrayal of Malays was as accurate and as authentic as possible—notably he comments on consulting James Brooke, the White Rajah of Sarawak.[13] However, Hugh Clifford, erstwhile Governor in Kalimantan and author of many stories of Malay life, felt that Conrad had failed to capture the true Malay character. In an otherwise appreciative review of Conrad for *The Singapore Free Press* on 1 September 1898, Clifford complained: 'Mr Conrad's Malays are only creatures of Mr Conrad, very vividly described, very powerfully drawn, but not Malays.'[14] Clifford's own writing about Malaya was, in James Clifford's sense, 'salvage' ethnography, inscribing in the text soon-to-be lost cultures and cultural practices.[15] Thus, in 1927 Clifford averred: 'Today my tales are to be valued, not only as historical, but as archaeological studies.'[16] Aware that the Malaysia that he knew so well was disappearing, due to colonial rule, Clifford lovingly and meticulously preserved what he could through his fiction.

Conrad was, characteristically, stung by Clifford's criticism and grumbled to William Blackwood in December 1898: 'Well I never did set up as an authority on Malaysia. I looked for a medium in which to express myself.'[17] His research, Conrad says, had been taken from 'undoubted sources—dull, wise books.'[18] A researcher today may be more sceptical about the reliability of 'dull, wise books', particularly books written by Europeans about other cultures in the nineteenth century. However, Conrad adds that his Malay stories have a basis in actual experience: 'In *Karain*, for instance, there's not a single action of my man (and a good many of his expressions) that cannot be backed by a traveller's tale—I mean a serious traveller's' (*Letters 2*: 130). Conrad was unaware at this point that Clifford was the reviewer, otherwise he may have reflected on his own pronouncements on Clifford's collection of short stories, *Studies in Brown Humanity* (1898) in a review earlier that year. Conrad had been fulsome in

his praise of Clifford's affection for, and rendering of the life of the Malays, but less than convinced of Clifford's faculties as a storyteller with artistic merit. He closes his review by advising Clifford to be satisfied with his success as a humane colonial governor:

> The Resident of Pahang has the devoted friendship of Ûmat, the punkah-puller, he has an individual faculty of vision, a large sympathy, and the scrupulous consciousness of the good and evil in his hands. He may well rest content with such gifts. One cannot expect to be, at the same time, a ruler of men and an irreproachable player on the flute.[19]

Conrad's concerns here are complex: on the one hand he demonstrates extreme respect for Clifford's humanity as a colonial governor; on the other, he doubts Clifford's capacity as a storyteller of real artistic merit. One has to wonder whether Clifford's review of Conrad was coloured by Conrad's own earlier dismissal of Clifford's writing. The tensions here between authenticity and artistry describe a fascinating dilemma: how does one maintain a cultural and human verisimilitude at the same time as attaining to the highest artistic practice? And it is perhaps the case that this conundrum is most pronounced when dealing with Western perceptions/depictions of the East. Conrad was fond of describing Oriental characters as 'inscrutable', a term that seems to inscribe his own struggles with cultural difference.

Nevertheless, Conrad had an overarching concern with what he termed 'fidelity', whether it related to the solidarity, mutual support and blind trust required by a ship's crew, or the more general sense of the need to recognise and indulge the traits and imperfections that bind

the whole of humanity together, what he liked to call those 'irreconcilable antagonisms' mentioned earlier. It was this sense of fidelity to humanity that underpinned Conrad's writing when he began his career as an author with *Almayer's Folly*, and that endured to his final days. Thus, Achebe may have been correct in arguing that Conrad ignored black voices in *Heart of Darkness*, but, as argued earlier, it would seem that Achebe overlooked, deliberately or otherwise, Conrad's purpose. Had he considered seriously some of Conrad's other imperial tales Achebe may have formed a very different opinion of Conrad's conception of other races. In the Preface to *Almayer's Folly* Conrad articulates his attitude to other peoples with unmistakable clarity. This passage is quoted at length for reasons that will become clear:

> I am informed that, in criticising that literature which preys on strange people and prowls in far-off countries, under the shade of palms, in the unsheltered glare of sunbeaten beaches, amongst the honest cannibals and the more sophisticated pioneers of our glorious virtues, a lady—distinguished in the world of letters—summed up her disapproval of it by saying that the tales it produced were 'decivilised'. And in that sentence not only the tales, but, I apprehend, the strange people and the far-off countries also are finally condemned in a verdict of contemptuous dislike.
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> A woman's judgement: intuitive, clever, expressed with felicitous charm—infallible. A judgement that has nothing to do with justice. The critic and the judge seems to think that in those distant lands all joy is a yell and a war dance, all pathos is a howl and a ghastly grin of filed teeth, and that the solution of all problems is found in the barrel of a revolver or on the point of an assegai. And yet it is not so. But the erring magistrate may plead in excuse the misleading nature of the evidence.

> The picture of life, there as here, is drawn with the same elaboration of detail, coloured with the same tints. Only in the cruel serenity of the sky, under the merciless brilliance of the sun, the dazzled eye misses the delicate detail, sees only the strong outlines, while colours, in the steady light, seem cruel and without shadow. Nevertheless, it is the same picture. And there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away. […]
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> I am content to sympathise with common mortals, no matter where they live: in houses or in tents, in the street under a fog, or in the forests behind the dark line of mangroves that fringe the vast solitude of the sea. For, their land—like ours—lies under the inscrutable eyes of the Most High. Their hearts—like ours—must endure the load of the gifts from Heaven: the curse of facts and the blessing of illusions, the bitterness of our wisdom and the deceptive consolation of our folly.[20]

Here, at the very onset of his career, Conrad is conscious of his situation as a privileged European in an imperial Eastern setting; he is conscious of the tendency, or temptation, to 'other' the Malays about whom he has written; and he thus sets out a manifesto for how he has dealt with transnational issues, with the issue of common humanity 'no matter where they live'. The authorial voice in this Preface is not that of Achebe's racist: rather, it is the voice of a man who is widely travelled, a seasoned mariner who has come to embrace the strangeness of his encounters with the peoples of the empire. It is the voice of someone whose transnational experiences have confirmed his solidarity, his sense of comradeship with other peoples. Rather than consolidating prejudices, this Preface challenges racial bias and foregrounds our shared human experiences.

It is little wonder that Conrad had such sympathies with peoples whose lands had been invaded, annexed and exploited, and whose culture was under attack from a rampant and aggressive imperialism. Conrad's transnational roots are very solid indeed: his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was exiled to the north of Moscow for opposing the Russian invasion of Poland. Conrad and his mother accompanied Apollo into exile, but his mother succumbed to the harsh environment and died without returning to her native region. His father did not last many years beyond her, and he too died in exile. Thus Conrad's sympathies for oppressed peoples are deeply rooted in his own experiences, both personal and political, and it becomes clear in his fictions that he feels keenly the pain of the exile and the anger of the invaded. In his own life's experiences Conrad witnessed many of the tragedies that afflicted the people amongst whom he moved as a seaman.

Conrad's first language was Polish, and he learned to speak French when he ran away to sea at the age of 17. It was not until he was 21 and had joined the British Merchant Navy that he learned English—he was in a sense a trans-European, an unusual situation for a man of his era. For the rest of his life Conrad spoke English with a thick foreign accent, a fact that is parodied by H. G. Wells in his caricature of Conrad as the 'Roumanian' captain of the *Maud Mary* in *Tono-Bungay* (1909).[21] Wells's captain 'had learnt the sea in the Romanian navy, and English out of a book'. Wells mocks his Roumanian captain's diction: 'he would still at times pronounce the e's at the end of "there" and "here", and he was a naturalized Englishman'.[22] Proof that Conrad was the inspiration for this fictitious captain, comes from Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934) where Conrad is described as 'the strangest of creatures', who 'spoke English strangely', had 'learned to read English long before he spoke it and he had formed wrong sound impressions of many familiar words.'[23] Conrad, says Wells, had 'acquired an incurable tendency to pronounce the last *e* in these and those. He would say, "*Wat* shall we do with *thesa* things?"' (*Autobiography* 616). The similarities are

unmistakeable, and it is clear that Conrad is the model for Wells's (possibly) gentle, satirical caricature. The captain in *Tono-Bungay* dissects the English character in a comic diatribe: 'Eet is a glorified bourgeoisie […] Dat is why your art is so limited, youra fiction, youra philosophia, why you are all so inartisitic. You want nothing but profit!' (*Tono-Bungay* 322).

Ford Madox Ford opens his affectionate recollection, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1924), by emphasising Conrad's foreignness:

> He was small rather than large in height; very broad in the shoulder and long in the arm; dark in complexion with black hair and a clipped black beard. He had the gestures of a Frenchman who shrugs his shoulders frequently. When you had really secured his attention he would insert a monocle into his right eye and scrutinize your face from very near as a watchmaker looks into the works of a watch. He entered the room with his head held high, rather stiffly and with a haughty manner, moving his head once semi-circularly.[24]

Later Ford compounds this physical foreignness by describing how Conrad used his entire body to dramatic effect: 'He gesticulated with his hands and shoulders when he wished to be emphatic, but when he forgot himself in the excitement of talking he gesticulated with his whole body, throwing himself about in his chair, moving his chair closer to yours' (*Personal Remembrance* 34-5). Wells's make comic capital out of these kinds of behaviours on Conrad's part in describing his Roumanian:

> He had all those violent adjuncts to speech we Western Europeans have abandoned, shruggings of the shoulders, waving of the arms, thrusting out of the face, wonderful grimaces and twiddlings of the hands under your nose until you wanted to hit them away. (*Tono-Bungay* 322)

These accounts of Conrad's behaviour and speech all reveal very clearly that his contemporaries and peers regarded him as distinctly 'other'. Conrad was thus a foreigner in his own adopted country, and despite the extraordinary command of English in his writing, he will have felt keenly what it was like to be an alien in another culture. That sense of being an outsider is threaded through his work with an acute, and keenly rendered humanity that is made all the more poignant when coming from a writer who had experienced at first hand the sense of alienation and otherness of not quite belonging.

Physical and speaking issues aside, Conrad had crossed national boundaries in a number of ways that are clearly reflected in how he presents the voice of the oppressed and the subjugated. *Almayer's Folly* even opens with the authentic voice of a Malay character, Almayer's wife calling him to his supper with the summons 'Kaspar! Makan!' (*Almayer's Folly* 1). It is hard to think of any other English novel that opens with the words of a 'native', and as such this very deliberate use of Malay terms to inaugurate the narrative alerts us to the fact that Conrad will not be presenting us with another conventional novel of adventure in the empire. It is worth noting, too, that an author in the English language whose first published work opens with words spoken in another tongue is never likely to delimit his fictions with nationalistic considerations. *Almayer's Folly* is peppered with the inner thoughts of the Malay characters, their hopes and fears, their dreams and their disillusionments. As Jacques Berthoud has observed, Conrad dissociates himself from the

exotic romance ‘on the grounds of its exploitative insensitivity—of the unreality of its exoticism and the reductiveness of its treatment of human beings’ (*Almayer’s Folly* xiii). Instead, Conrad attempts to present to us the genuine voice of the Malay, and the subsequent narrative plunges us into the political conflicts that arise from the gulfs that exist, the cultural misunderstandings that can emerge from transnational encounters.

This kind of cultural insight is often provided by the interior monologues of both Kaspar Almayer’s wife, and one of the plotters in the story, Babalatchi, who reflects ruefully back on his life, in terms that convey Conrad’s deep understanding not just of the Malay life in the late-nineteenth century, but of the general human experience of ageing:

> The ruler was growing old, and Babalatchi, aware of an uneasy feeling at the pit of his stomach, put both hands there with a suddenly vivid and sad perception of the fact that he himself was growing old too; that the time of reckless daring was past for both of them, and that they had to seek refuge in prudent cunning. (*Almayer’s Folly* 86)

Giving native characters an inner life in a novel of empire during this period is almost unprecedented, apart, that is, from Stevenson, and in doing so Conrad is remaining true to the intentions in his Preface to the novel. Babalatchi comes across as no more nor less of a human being than his European counterparts. Furthermore, the language that is used signifies his Malay identity and thus demonstrates Conrad’s awareness of cultural differences both in speech and in priorities.

Later in the story, Mrs Almayer, a Malay-Portuguese, comes to the sad realisation that her daughter will be leaving her to marry the Balinese prince, Dain Maroola. The sensitivity with which Conrad handles her grief reveals that he is thinking of her as a native of Malaya, as a woman, and, as a mother:

> Mrs. Almayer rose with a deep sigh, while two tears wandered slowly down her withered cheeks. She wiped them off quickly with a wisp of her grey hair as if ashamed of herself, but could not stifle another loud sigh, for her heart was heavy and she had suffered much, being unused to tender emotions. (*AF* 154)

Transported into a novel of, say, the gruelling life of a washerwoman in late-nineteenth-century London, these words would ring as true, and as universal to parenthood. Conrad's portrayal of Mrs. Almayer here is not a simple portrayal of a Malay woman, but of an everywoman who has suffered much, who loves her child, and who is experiencing the loss of that child. It calls to mind the sufferings of Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent* (1907), a woman who has lost the brother who was like a son to her and is also 'unused to tender emotions'. Winnie, like Mrs. Almayer, is one of the world's seemingly voiceless victims, who are 'rich in suffering, but indigent in words.'[25] In these two women East and West meet, proving that Hugh Clifford's accusation that Conrad's Malays 'are not Malays' was true, only not in the way that Clifford meant.

The reality of Mrs Almayer's life is that she was captured as a child by pirates and sold off to Almayer as his wife. Almayer regards her as a savage for tearing down the curtains in her house. Yet Conrad's point is that this behaviour is not representative of a savage nature, but of

her human desire to look after herself and her child by fashioning the curtains into dresses for them both. Just as in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Achebe refutes the common perception of African customs and rituals as barbaric by demonstrating the internal logic of even the most brutal of acts, so Conrad shows that Mrs Almayer's seemingly mindless destruction of the trappings of civilization has in fact a deeply personal, practical and *civilised* purpose: her dignity is no less important to her than it is to an English gentlewoman. She is not a savage, but a woman and a mother like any other.

Even Conrad's European fictions are littered with transnational allusions. *Under Western Eyes* (1911) contains a wealth of European identities, from Russian, to French, to English. *The Secret Agent* (1907), set in London, concerns characters with names that emphasise the transnational, cosmopolitan nature of what he called in *Heart of Darkness*, 'the biggest, and the greatest town on earth' (*Heart of Darkness* 7): Vladimir, Verloc, Ossipon, exotic names signifying a city steeped in transnational identities. In that tale of espionage and betrayal Eastern Europeans infiltrate British society, threatening to wreak havoc on an unsuspecting population. Even in South America, in *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad presents the fictional, unstable country of Costaguana as a cultural melting pot that enfolds Italians, the Nostromo of the title, English, Spanish and Americans, who all vie for control of the country's natural resource: silver. In fact, it is a challenge to think of many tales by Conrad that do not cross cultural and national boundaries in terms of characters, plot or content.

For example, the short story 'Amy Foster' (1901) concerns Yanko Goorall, a Polish man shipwrecked on the east coast of England who encounters suspicion and a kind of ignorant prejudice when he marries a local servant girl, the titular Amy. Goorall's fate is to die of a heart attack having become feverish and unable to communicate in English to his wife that he is dying of thirst. Conrad's theme here is the fundamental problem of intercultural communication, and how the gulf of understanding between one race and another can lead to

catastrophic circumstances. For many, 'Amy Foster' is a metaphor or even a vehicle for Conrad's own sense of cultural isolation in his adopted country of England. Yanko's fear of dying alone, isolated from his fellow human beings through a failure to communicate touches on a wealth of issues raised by transnational considerations in fiction, and on Conrad's own experience as an émigré; and it returns us to Conrad's own very humane concerns in his fiction to 'sympathise with common mortals', no matter where in the world they reside. What is striking about Conrad and transnationalism is that in this context he urges us to think not of difference, but of similarity, of what we have in common as human beings, rather than what separates us geographically and culturally.

Conclusion

So much more could be said on Conrad's transnational sensibilities. There are a wealth of nationalities represented in his books and short stories that reflect Conrad's thorough immersion in the cultures that he encountered during his travels. His imagination is not limited by imaginary notions of geographical boundaries. Rather, his creative imagination ranges effortlessly from the South America of *Nostromo* to the London streets of *The Secret Agent* to the metropolises of Europe in *Under Western Eyes* (1912) to the African jungles of *Heart of Darkness* and to the forests of Malaya in *Almayer's Folly*. Conrad is thus a writer of truly transnational dimensions. Achebe had a point about some elements of racism in *Heart of Darkness*, but few, if any other writers of the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period had Conrad's enlightened view of other cultures. For Conrad, then, transnationalism liberated the writer from the constraints imposed by genre and narrow nationalistic pride. His travels, particularly in Africa and the far East, had a profound effect upon him, and as a consequence they had a profound effect upon the future direction of transnational fiction.

[1] In writing this I am aware of the similarities with and repetition of parts of articles and books that I have previously published. However, these ideas are coming together in new configurations and in a wholly new context.

[2] Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'/Typhoon* (London: Gresham Publishing Co., 1925), p. vii.

[3] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*: *George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. (New York: George W. Stewart, 1950), p.204.

[4] The lecture was later published and 'bloody racist' became 'thorough going racist'. See Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*'. *Massachusetts Review* 18, 1977.

[5] Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Volume 2: 1898–1902. Eds. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 348-9.

[6] Richard Ambrosini, 'Reconceptualizing Conrad as a Transnational Novelist: A Research Programme', *Studia Neophilologica*, (Italy 2012), p. 3.

[7] This is an issue that I deal with at length in *Joseph Conrad and Imperial Romance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). See in particular Chapters 2 and 3 pp. 16-50.

[8] D. S. Higgins, *Rider Haggard*: *The Great Storyteller*. (London: Cassell. 1981), p. 117.

[9] J. M. Barrie, '"Allan Quatermain" in *British Weekly II*, 5 August 1887, p. 218.

[10] Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and a Quartette*. (London: William Heinemann, 1905), p.7.

[11] Douglas Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 185.

[12] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. Robert Kimbrough ed. (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 17.

[13] See Conrad's letter, referenced below, concerning 'dull, wise books'.

[14] Hugh Clifford, 'The Trail of the Bookworm: Mr Joseph Conrad at Home and Abroad,' *Singapore Free Press*, 1 September 1898. However, Laurence Davies questions the value of accepting Clifford's opinion over

Conrad's: 'Clifford's main objection is to the informality of Conrad's 'Malays', but Clifford saw people under much more formal – often ceremonial circumstances.' Davies, private correspondence.

[15] James Clifford explains this further: 'Ethnography's disappearing object is … a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice: 'salvage' ethnography in its widest sense. The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text.' James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory' in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics and Politics of Ethnography*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus eds. (California: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 112-13.

[16] Hugh Clifford, *In Court and Kampung*. (Singapore: Graham Brash, 19890, p. 219.

[17] Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies eds. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume 2* 1898-1902. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 129-30. Letter dated 13 December 1898.

[18] Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume 2: 1898–1902*. Eds. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 130.

[19] Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*. (London: Dent, 1949), p. 60. For a fuller discussion of Conrad and Clifford, from which some of this material has been sourced see Linda Dryden, 'Conrad and Clifford: "An Irreproachable Player on the Flute" and "A Ruler of Men".' In *The Conradian*, Spring 1998, pp. 51-73.

[20] Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*: *The Story of an Eastern River*, ed. Jacques Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Preface.

[21] I have discussed the following passages from *Tono-Bungay* in *Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells*: *The Fin de Siecle Literary Scene*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See in particular pp. 82-3.

[22] H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay*: *A Novel*. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 321.

[23] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography Vol II*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p. 615.

[24] Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad*: *APersonal Remembrance*. (London: Duckworth & Co., 1924), p. 11.

[25] Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*. (London: Gresham Publishing Co., 1925), p. 298.