English 205

Mid-Semester Essay

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The Final Frontier Gets a Name: The Landscape and Geography of Colonialism

Landscape and geography are two inherently interconnected, yet distinct entities which are powerful tools in a postcolonial understanding of history, and the texts found within it, namely in this examination Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Martian*, adapted from Andy Weir's novel of the same name. Landscape is the world as it exists, a world which colonialism seeks to conquer and exploit through geography, force, and language.

The language and context of how land is described, especially in *Heart of Darkness*, provides a key insight into the operations of a colonist. In it, Marlow is often at a loss for words, true descriptive words, for what he encounters, and falls back on the language that is enforced upon the land by him and the other foreigners. Words such as "enemies" to describe the native peoples, and a sort of personification of the land, fit with "bowels" that are being torn out by the colonists (Conrad, 12-24). There is also the prevalence of "savagery", applied primarily to the native peoples of the land he is in, but also to his own people. He contends, in a moment of reflection, that the whole business of colonialism is one of savagery; even the Roman soldier, he imagines, would "feel the savagery, the utter savagery" when posted in England, faced with "all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles" (Conrad, 4). "Wilderness", too, is the word applied by most to a land that hasn't been touched by so-called civilization, and Marlow relies on it heavily. He doesn't know the native words for things, for

places; the words are as foreign to him as he is to the very place itself. As Anne McClintock states in “Unspeakable Secrets”, “every attempt to describe the landscape, to draw it near, reveals only the failure of language to find out its essence, to penetrate its innermost heart” (McClintock, 43). The very words which could enlighten him are “savage” because they are different from English. The landscape itself is judged as such, and he suggests that the waters are snakelike, full of mystery and fear because they are not the “civilized” waters of England, “with a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal” (Conrad, 39). He applies his colonial experiences, his biases, to the place he finds himself in. He relies on comparison, direct or indirect, to the places and things he knows, to his comforts, and judges what he finds on a scale of that same comfort. He doesn’t look too deep, and thus sees only the darkness.

Language, however, is not only a trait of colonial ignorance, but a chief tool of colonial control. The colonial powers can use their language to enforce their will upon the people and places that they meet. They ignore what is present, make new labels, and cast aside history for the sake of their own progress. The colonists take their new maps and slice apart the landscape, ignoring existing boundaries to create their own fantasy, their own places that they can preside over; places like Nigeria and the Congo. This isn’t just a past occurrence, though. While it’s seen in *Heart of Darkness*, it’s also seen in modern sci-fi narratives such as *The Martian* -and the very real, very modern scientific ideations that it is a tribute to. Human, and specifically Western, traditions are flung up into the stars to make them known, understandable, *ownable*. The same imperial theory that applied to colonies of old applies to space, now, too. Naming is taming. In declaring that the United States has a HAB -in other words a habitable zone- in the Acidalia Planitia region of Mars, there is a sense of ownership. Indeed, from this hab Watney farms, and is

reminded in a message from the University of Chicago that "once you grow crops somewhere, you've officially colonized it" (Scott). However, that's not the only way that the space program is intent on exerting colonialism on Mars. The naming of the mapping of Mars is a key part of what allows Mark Watney to plan his cunning escape. The names, imposed on the grandiose landscapes, allow him to know where he is in relation to the Pathfinder lander, and to the Ares 4 lander. Indeed, NASA mission director Vincent Kapoor takes a map of the region and draws a line onto it, thus confirming his suspicion that Watney is going to try to communicate with them. Cartography allowed Watney and the NASA team on an entirely other planet to coordinate their ideas, and complete a successful operation. Geography, and the cartography which creates that knowledge, is critical to the functioning of any large-scale operation, be it saving an astronaut, planning a trip to Disney World, or, indeed, launching a colonial occupation.

One of the key aspects of "the Continent" of Africa which draws Marlow into traveling was the mystery of the incomplete maps that he sees, but also the discoveries drawn onto them. He is enthralled by the "mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled" (Conrad, 5). Mapping makes things *knowable* even to those who have never seen them. And as with before, knowing something makes it all that more easy to obtain it. Marlow sees the river, and is thus compelled to go to it, signing onto a company involved with the ivory trade along its banks. He follows it, and while he and his superiors have little positive regard for those who live in the land, they are greatly intrigued by those colonists who gather information about it. Indeed, after Kurtz's death, the company is desperate to get ahold of his notes, because they figure with all his so-called exploration, he would have surely gleaned one of the most comprehensive colonial datasets of the surrounding area. Indeed, the very idea of these *areas* is in itself geographic, with colonial powers meeting to arbitrarily decide what chunks of

land *belong* to which European country, and indeed where the boundaries of new African countries should be made. The map, which is supposed to be an impartial tool of fact, is corrupted to become a method of control. The creation of territory is an aggressive act. Real geography is that of reality, of forests and rivers, but the colonial will see this overwritten with an arbitrary image of nations, borders, and extortion. Nigeria, the Congo, and all the other newly minted countries were the result of a colonial buffet, with land and rulers as the courses. In *The Martian*, the Hab denotes an American landscape on Mars in "international waters", "waters" which Watney crosses as he wishes, very much in the colonial spirit.

However, knowing -and even owning- the land is not enough for colonists. There is an overarching, and overwhelming, attitude that the lands as they exist are hostile to colonial interests, and must be tamed. Naming is a first step, persecuting and subjugating the population another, but colonialism is not content except with the wanton destruction and reshaping of the land itself to their goals. *The Martian* opens with Watney and his team examining the minerals of the planet, searching for valuable resources which humanity can later plunder when they colonize the planet. While such Martian prospects are difficult, given the extreme harshness, that deterrent is unfortunately not quite present for colonial interests on Earth. The colonial interest in the land does not just lie with extractive enterprises, however. There seems to be a need to conquer the very land itself, and with it its people. Perhaps it is a mark of pride, perhaps it is part of the colonial playbook, perhaps it is just the sport of those given power in this "new land". Whatever the case, the defiling of the landscape seems to be a common thread. One of the first sights that Marlow is greeted with when coming along the African coast is "a man-of-war anchored… [and] shelling the bush… [incomprehensibly] firing into a continent" (Conrad, 10). Soon upon traveling inland, he arrives at the company's first station, and sees the "enemies"

-native people enslaved by laws entirely foreign to them, and told in a language foreign to them- are being made to do tasks which brutally destroy the land. There is truly no goal to these tasks except to make the people suffer. One of these tasks was the blasting of a cliff near a railway project. Marlow notes that “the cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on” (Conrad, 11). Track, pipes, and dying humans were scattered about unattended, but the powers-that-be insisted that the cliff be blasted, holes be dug, and all other manner of atrocities be wrought upon the land and its people. It’s violence for violence’s sake, control for the feeling of control. The land was seen as a canvas for the colonists to declare their presence, and they did it in the only way they knew how.

Ultimately, landscapes are the peaceful vistas of the native people, the places that they call home, of which their ancestors nurtured, and from which their stories pass. Geography, however, is easily contorted into a chief tool of colonialism. It is a way to know a land in a clinical sense, and with that knowledge slice it apart into chunks for consumption. It rewrites reality into a twisted fantasy of power plays, destruction, extraction, and death.

Works Cited

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