In their influential book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin explored, among other issues, the ways in which postcolonial voices have responded to the literary canon of the colonial centre. In particular, they elucidated the counter-discursive strategies used by postcolonial writers to challenge the dominant Eurocentric discourse. In his dual role as academic and creative writer, the Guyanese-born author David Dabydeen has consciously employed what Helen Tiffin has called “canonical counter-discourse”, which involves “writing back” to canonical texts which have contributed to the shaping of Eurocentric ideologies (1987, 22).

Because of its representation of African landscape and African people as “primitive”, threatening, inscrutable, and essentially “other” to the European who is assumed to be “civilized”, Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) has long been a favourite target of postcolonial writers. While Chinua Achebe has famously critiqued Conrad’s depiction of Africa and Africans as overtly racist (1977), Dabydeen is interested in the psychological implications of *Heart of Darkness*, arguing that this novel “ceased being an exploration of a different geography and landscape, and became a Freudian exploration of the energies that people exchange. In other words, Africa ceases to be a geographical entity and becomes the territory of the human subconscious” (Birbalsingh interview 1997, 185). This essay investigates Dabydeen’s “writing back” to *Heart of Darkness* in his novels *The Intended* (1991) and *Our Lady of Demerara* (2004). In Dabydeen’s loosely autobiographical coming-of-age novel *The Intended*, the unnamed first-person narrator recounts his memories of his childhood in Guyana during the 1960s and his teen years in south London during the 1970s. Reversing Marlow’s gaze on a colonized territory (the Congo) in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator of *The Intended* is essentially journeying into what Margery Fee has described as the “heart of whiteness” (1993, 121). As Jean Popeau observes: “If Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* interrogates European values at one of its ‘outposts of progress’ in Africa, David Dabydeen’s novel investigates the colonial centre, seeking its darkness within its very borders” (1997, 108-109). Countering Marlow’s descriptions of the African “natives” enacting “weird” rites in the jungle, driven by “monstrous passions” and “brutal instincts”
(Conrad 1899, 234), the narrator of *The Intended* presents London as a city replete with decidedly unwholesome influences:

All of us growing up in London were swamped with images of sex which had no bearing on morality, or indeed any kind of value at all, apart from the commercial... The billboards we passed on our way carried provocative photographs of fleshy lips sucking at a cigarette, or teenage girls in black tights sprawled on the bonnet of the latest motor car. (19)

The teenage narrator and his friends are seduced, in varying degrees, by the debauched environment of their insalubrious neighbourhood, though the narrator himself, with his taste for canonical literature and a “respectable” girlfriend named Janet, is contrasted with his friends, Shaz and Patel, who become involved in pornography and prostitution. Shaz takes the narrator to the centre of London’s sex industry, full of sex shops, massage parlours, pornographic cinemas, and “large billboards of women offering their naked flesh to us” (125), and on another occasion to a prostitute (129-32). When the narrator finally questions Shaz about the direction in which he is going, Shaz insists that sex is “a business like any other” (133). Here we can draw parallels between the commodification of the female body in *The Intended* and the grotesque exploitation of African bodily labour for profit in *Heart of Darkness*. Investment in the flesh trade in *The Intended* is thus implicitly compared with investment in the ivory trade in *Heart of Darkness*, both being highly lucrative businesses which are destructive to victims and perpetrators alike. From this perspective, the imperial centre is the real “heart of darkness” in both texts.

In addition to challenging the dominant Eurocentric discourse by reversing both the physical placement and the narrative perspective between colonizer and colonized, *The Intended* makes direct and explicit references to *Heart of Darkness*, most obviously in the passages in which the narrator is studying Conrad’s novel for his A-level Literature exam. However, as Mark McWatt points out, “the counter-discursive critique of the novel... does not come from the academically brilliant narrator, but rather from his friend Joseph, an illiterate black rasta youth” (1997, 112). Joseph refuses his friend’s facile explanation that the spectacle of Conrad’s blacks dying under the trees is “part of the theme of suffering and redemption which lies at the core of the novel’s concern” (Dabydeen 1991, 72), and his alternative interpretation is worth quoting at some length:

“No, it ain’t , is about colours. You been saying is a novel ‘bout the fall of man, but is really ‘bout a dream. Beneath the surface is the dream. The white light of England and the Thames is the white sun over the Congo that can’t mix with the green of the bush and the black skin of the people. All the colours struggling to curve against each other like rainbow, but instead the white light want to blot out the black and the green and reduce the world to one blinding colour...
The white man want clear everything away, clear away the green bush and the blacks and turn the whole place into ivory which you can't plant or smoke or eat. Ivory is the heart of the white man.” (72-73)

The fact that this visionary reading of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is available to the illiterate Joseph and not to the narrator is, according to Mark McWatt, “a further counter-discursive ploy, countering the assumed marginality of the black, illiterate ‘other’” (113). Margery Fee further argues that:

Marlow’s gradual realization that Kurtz is, in fact, far from a model, works for the narrator [of *The Intended*] in reverse. Joseph, whom the young narrator often sees as unhinged, impractical, and incoherent is shown by the older narrator to have much better developed political, poetic, and critical insights than the young narrator had himself. (1993, 120-121)

Other comparisons are suggested between the idealistic but powerless Joseph in *The Intended* and the powerful but morally compromised Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Each is obsessed with a project which ultimately becomes self-destructive – Joseph’s project being his attempt to make a film about *Heart of Darkness* on the streets of London. This project leads to a vision of nothingness, in which he glimpses horror similar to that of Kurtz in Conrad’s work:

He explained fitfully to Shaz and I why he had abandoned the Conrad project. By piecing his rambling explanations together it became clear that he had developed an interest in nothingness, colourlessness, the sightlessness of air, wind, the pure space between trees rather than leaves clinging on to branches as if in terror of being blown away, or roots clutching frantically, digging down into the earth. (97)

Later, Joseph expresses horror at the moral filth he sees around him when he becomes a cameraman for Patel, shooting pornographic films: “Nasty, a lot of nastiness they’re up to, that Shaz and Patel… Fed up with filth. Sex. Sex. Filth” (165). These words become his own equivalent of Kurtz’s “The horror”, and he ends his life by setting himself afire.

In addition to its engagement with horror, *The Intended* offers comedy in the form of a sleazy fairground ride which parodies Marlow’s journey up the Congo River. As a summer job, the narrator and his friend Shaz operate the “World Cruise” ride at the Battersea Fun Fair, where small boats take the riders on an artificial mini-river through a dark tunnel whose walls have been painted with scenes from various countries, in alphabetical order from “Austria to Zanzibar” (Dabydeen 1991, 57). These scenes are crudely stereotypical, with the depiction of Timbuktu, for instance, consisting of “a desert, some scorched trees, and five naked black men squatting or throwing spears after a zebra...A black woman with full breasts and gleaming thighs carried a pot on her head” (59). Thus the novel effectively satirizes Orientalist stereotypes of the postcolonial world.
In addition, the very title of Dabydeen’s novel is a reference to Kurtz’s fiancée – his “intended” in *Heart of Darkness* – and in both texts the word “intended” has multiple meanings. It is suggested that Kurtz’s actions in the Congo are not what he had originally intended, and likewise, in Dabydeen’s novel the narrator’s intentions are undercut in a number of ways. In the end he achieves his goal of winning a place at Oxford, but if he intends his narrative as a straightforward Bildungsroman of upward mobility for the migrant, its structure works to undermine this conventional approach. In particular, the migrant’s journey toward success and achievement is frequently disrupted by memories of his childhood in Guyana, by his failure to achieve a successful and lasting relationship with Janet (his own “intended”), and above all by his conflicting feelings about his background and identity which are never resolved. Similarly, if the young narrator intends to distance himself from his south London teenage friends, whom he sees as unwholesome influences, it is evident that the older narrator has come to value their support, their contribution to his development and their place in his life as he remembers those years from a more mature perspective.

David Dabydeen’s 2004 novel *Our Lady of Demerara* also has significant intertextual references to *Heart of Darkness*, in the form of a contemporary journey by a white man up the Demerara River in the jungles of Guyana, paralleling Marlow’s journey up the Congo River. This journey narrative, which constitutes the second part of the overall text, develops its themes largely through a focus on the “wild” jungle landscape, along with its symbolic and psychological implications from the perspective of the European man on a journey of discovery.

Given the history of colonial appropriation of land in the West Indies, followed by ongoing environmental destruction wrought by irresponsible governments, local businesses and multinational corporations, Edward Said has argued that “the land is recoverable at first only through imagination” (1994, 77). There are of course many different ways of imagining the natural environment, and Edouard Glissant has identified a literary discourse in which “landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character” (1989, 147). This applies to David Dabydeen’s characterization of the Guyanese jungle in *Our Lady of Demerara*. Like Conrad’s Marlow, Dabydeen’s alienated character Lance is attempting to trace the journey of someone who has gone before him, in this case a missionary priest who disappeared into the jungle many years previously. In addition to satisfying his curiosity, Lance is seeking spiritual redemption and escape from the alienating effects of metropolitan “civilization”. However, far from idealizing nature, *Our Lady of Demerara* presents it, like the garden in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), as a place of decay and decomposition as much as of regeneration. Like Conrad, Dabydeen personifies the jungle and emphasizes its “unruly” aspects, but unlike Conrad, he does not present it as a threatening presence. On the contrary, he shows the continuities between human desires, human activities and the processes of so-called “nature”, implying that we ignore these vital connections at our peril.
Clearly, Lance’s encounter with the Guyanese jungle in David Dabydeen’s *Our Lady of Demerara* is a postcolonial rewriting of Marlow’s encounter with the Congo jungle in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As Octavio Paz reminds us, “a landscape is not the more or less accurate description of what our eyes see… [but] always points to something beyond itself” (1973, 15). My focus here is not on the abstract ideas suggested by Paz (“a metaphysic, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos”), but rather on the implications of the highly subjective representations of the landscape in the two literary texts. Separated by approximately a century, Conrad’s Marlow and Dabydeen’s Lance are both alienated characters traveling up a major river in a vast jungle, encountering indigenous people living in what they see as a “wilderness” because it has not yet been cleared of natural growth.

It is worth noting that both Dabydeen and Conrad begin the journey narratives by referring to the long history of colonial exploration and conquest. Dabydeen’s Lance finds a history book in Demerara which told of Walter Raleigh’s expedition to the interior to search for the fabled city of gold and its great chieftain El Dorado: “He was the first of countless adventurers, most of whom had perished in the Amazonian jungle from disease or hostile native arrow. The jungle interior of the country was littered with the bones of foreigners” (77). Conrad’s Marlow places his narrative within an even longer historical perspective. Travelling down the Thames as he begins his tale, he reflects on the Romans who had colonized Britain many centuries earlier, experiencing “cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death, - death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here” (139). Thus, both journey narratives begin with reference to colonial fears of danger to the white man in the jungle. However, Dabydeen, unlike Conrad, later presents the white man as the ultimate source of danger, as Lance hears about the massacres of the Amerindians by Spaniards looking for treasure all along the Demerara River.

As many critics have pointed out, the landscape in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a source of fear to the colonial explorer because it is an embodiment of the unknown. As Anne McClintock puts it, “Nature has become anthropomorphized and invested with a malign intention, a calculated hostility” (1984, 42). Illustrations of this are abundant throughout the novel, beginning with Marlow’s first view of the Congo River on a map. It resembled, he says,

…an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird. (142)

The suggestion of menace in the African landscape continues in the description of “the formless coast bordered by a dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders” (152). There they travel in and out of rivers which he describes as “streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted
mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair” (152). Travelling up the Congo River, he is struck by

...the great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight...like a rotting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. (176)

What is notable here is the disorder, the decay, the vastness and immense power of nature in the jungle, and the impotence of man to defend himself against it. The landscape is interpreted as a silent, threatening, and terrifyingly alien wilderness which Marlow sees as “impenetrable to human thought” and “pitiless to human weakness” (217). Anne McClintock has suggested that for Marlow, “the very magnitude and profusion of the forest becomes an emblem of the limits of understanding” (47). Interestingly, however, Heart of Darkness also hints at alternative responses to this same landscape. We are told, for example, that the young man dressed in motley whom they encounter at the station “surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through” (216). Unlike Marlow, he calmly accepts the presence of the natural environment instead of being overwhelmed by fear of the unfamiliar. Interestingly, too, Lance’s responses to the Guyanese jungle in Our Lady of Demerara are at times remarkably similar to those of Marlow in Heart of Darkness. Lance, too, personifies the jungle, though at first he invests it with a less sinister interpretation. By way of illustration, there is a series of passages from Our Lady of Demerara which are worth quoting at some length because of their unmistakable echoes of Heart of Darkness:

We swung left and turned into a creek. Huge trees greeted us, towering to a height of more than a hundred feet, from which hung festoons of creepers decorated with spectacular flowers. The smaller trees came as near to the bank as they dared, and then stopped, allowing a crowd of prickly shrubs to extend themselves into the ooze. We paddled past thickets of ferns and mangroves with their branches extending outwards and downwards like the legs of the spider without its bloated abdomen. (90)

After tying up the boat and wading through the muddy foreshore, Lance reports that he was “immediately jolted by the gloom and chill of the air” in the jungle (90).

My eyes grew accustomed to the masked and filtered light, and I was even more startled by the profusion of vines. They hung from all heights, some taking root as soon as they touched the ground... Strangest of all was the sight of a huge tree uprooted and dangling in mid-air... It lay suspended in a cradle of vines, some of which took root in its trunk like feeding tubes, and I thought of my father in his final days attached to drip-feeds. I was suddenly overcome by the frightfulness of the scene, the frenzy of life in the trees, the evidence of death
beneath my feet where the earth was soft with the dust of rotted leaves, rotted insects. (90-91)

Unlike Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Lance in *Our Lady of Demerara* is able to identify the substance of his fear evoked by the jungle. It is the fear of mortality, masked by the structures of so-called civilization but everywhere evident in the jungle with its profusion of natural forms emerging, living, reproducing, and dying. Lance also recognizes the obvious but often forgotten truth that human beings are part of this natural cycle. In the colonial and postcolonial contexts, the implication is that man’s attempts to “conquer” nature (including other human beings) is not only futile but ultimately self-destructive.

In *Heart of Darkness*, by contrast, it is suggested that so-called “civilized” man’s encounter with the natural world, including the indigenous peoples whom the Europeans labelled as “savage”, reawakened dangerous instincts. Indeed, Marlow suggests that the roots of Kurtz’s malady are in the jungle itself:

> I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. (234)

Dabydeen, far from portraying the wilderness as a force which connects man with his savage past, portrays the colonial conquerors as the real savages. There are various definitions of the word “savage”, including not only “untamed” and “uncivilized” but also fierce, ferocious or cruel. These definitions are in some ways contradictory because civilization itself can be fierce, ferocious or cruel. Dabydeen makes this point explicitly and powerfully in *Our Lady of Demerara* when Lance imagines the reactions of the missionary priest arriving in Guyana in 1914:

> He would have arrived in a country of vice and hatred. He would have quickly discovered its brutal history. The English had shipped over Africans as slaves and worked them to the bone in their plantations. Then, short of labour, the English had imported countless coolies from India... Above all, my Priest would have realized the real origin of evil, which lay in the clearing of spaces in the jungle, the draining and ploughing of the land for the growth of sugarcane. The planters had to suppress Christian conscience, take up whip and drive their slaves and coolies to work. The jungle was as unruly as it was vast, hundreds of thousands had to be sacrificed in the effort to tame it. Only a murderous heart and a mechanical will could bring success to such an enterprise. And the bush would muffle the sounds of the killings, making them more bearable. And the planters would be absolved of guilt for the news of the killing did not travel abroad. My
Priest...would have been appalled at the sight of Africans and Asians made mad by labour and quick to resort to violence against each other at the slightest call. He would have left Georgetown as soon as possible, seeking the sanctuary of a monastery up-river, far from the cesspit of human emotions. (82)

Thus the jungle is portrayed in Our Lady of Demerara as a retreat from the savagery of civilization, and the clearing of the jungle as a savage act, enabling further savage acts. This supports Edward Said’s description of imperialism as “an act of geographical violence” (77), linking violence to the natural environment with violence to human beings.

From this perspective, it is illuminating to compare the ways in which Our Lady of Demerara and Heart of Darkness portray the indigenous peoples living in the so-called “wild” landscape. Anne McClintock has pointed out that in Conrad’s novel:

It is revealing that at the very moment in which Marlow penetrates to the Inner Station, the landscape begins literally to howl... If the landscape has at last begun to reveal its “unspeakable secrets”, these are most clearly embodied in the Africans themselves... In his description of the Africans, there are no signs of orderly village life, no hints of routine, domestic communality. Marlow presents us instead with a glimpse into a delirious chaos, a frenzied disorder, a “black and incomprehensible frenzy”. (49-50)

This contrasts strikingly with Dabydeen’s depiction of the Arawak village in which he finds a peaceful and hard-working community:

The sound of sewing and hammering as men repaired their houses or boats drowned out the natural noises of the jungle. I saw women cooking, planting their kitchen gardens, sewing, beating clothes at the edge of the river. The children were in close attendance, forking the ground, mending fishing-nets, filling buckets in the river to replenish the tin drums which were the villagers’ reservoir of potable water. (104)

Clearly Dabydeen’s narrator idealizes the indigenous people while Conrad’s narrator demonizes them. However, from an ecological perspective, it is notable that in both texts they are shown to be living in harmony with the natural environment, unlike those who would harm and ultimately destroy the earth and its inhabitants for profit.

In conclusion, David Dabydeen has produced powerful postcolonial rewritings of Joseph Conrad’s classic novel Heart of Darkness (1899) in several of his fictional texts. His significantly titled first novel The Intended (1991) narrates a journey by a young Guyanese migrant into the “heart of whiteness” at the former imperial centre. Here he counters Conrad’s descriptions of “savagery” (by Europeans and “natives” alike) in the Congolese jungle of the 1890s with his own descriptions of debauchery in 1970s London, highlighting the exploitation of human bodies for
profit. As seen through the eyes of their respective narrators, the experiences of both Conrad’s Kurtz and Dabydeen’s Joseph culminate in a vision of existential horror, followed by death. However, in contrast to Kurtz, Joseph never loses his integrity, and he ultimately emerges as the most perceptive and imaginative character in The Intended, in spite of – or because of – his illiteracy and his general powerlessness in the social hierarchy. While The Intended parodies Marlow’s voyage of discovery in the form of the “World Cruise” ride at the Battersea Fun Fair, Our Lady of Demerara re-enacts it in the form of an extended narrative of a white British man’s journey up the Demerara River in Guyana. Both Heart of Darkness and Our Lady of Demerara focus on the narrator’s subjective rendering of the jungle landscape, with its symbolic and psychological implications. Each of these two novels also frames its journey narrative within a long historical perspective of imperialism, briefly imagining the scenes from the point of view of a person from the dominant group – a Roman soldier in Heart of Darkness and a missionary priest in Our Lady of Demerara. Conrad’s Marlow projects his fear of human “savagery” onto the Congolese jungle, imagining that Kurtz’s “primitive” instincts have been awakened not only by his lust for power and riches, but also by his participation in “wild” indigenous rites which are hinted at but never actually described. In Our Lady of Demerara, by contrast, Lance’s existential angst – his confrontation with “horror” – is generated by the powerful spectacle of the pitiless cycle of reproduction, growth, decay, and death in the jungle. Arriving at an intuitive understanding that human beings are an integral part of this cycle of generation and destruction, Lance – like the missionary priest before him – disappears into the jungle in which he is seeking moral redemption from the alienating aspects of so-called civilization. In these ways, Dabydeen effectively re-interprets the imperial “heart of darkness” from a postcolonial perspective.

Works Cited


