Lost (and Returned) in Africa: A Juxtaposition of Joseph Conrad’s Mr Kurtz and Caryl Phillips’ Nash Williams

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1. Introduction

Tales of exploration and journeys into the unknown are familiar themes in literature, and are often used as allegories for the classical search for identity and purpose in life. The Western world’s construct of Africa as exotic indicates a need to project the dark qualities of the mind onto something palpable, which can be conquered or destroyed. Literary journeys into the unknown can thus be seen as studies of the mind. Joseph Conrad’s character Mr Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1902, and Caryl Phillips’ character Nash Williams in *Crossing the River*, published in 1993, both journey to Africa on a mission, but unforeseeable events lead to a different outcome than they had originally expected. They arrive in Africa as representatives of the benevolent intentions of the West, with intentions to enlighten the savages, to construct a method to help them save themselves from a miserable, ignorant existence – this being “the white man’s burden.”

Mr Kurtz is an intellectual of a European background, known for his way with words. He works for a European company trading in ivory, but he is also on a mission to write a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs on how to best handle the native population living around the Congo River. Nash Williams on the other hand is a black ex-slave from America, reared as a son to his white master and educated at college, whose aim is to convert the heathens of Liberia to Christianity. Thematically, both *Heart of Darkness* and *Crossing the River* address the issue of the ‘other’, the unknown qualities of other races and other cultures, the Western world’s construct of what separates us from them. Because the other is regarded as the opposite of the West, this construct is used to justify the colonization of Africa, among other things.

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the attitudes and assumptions made about Africa in both novels from a postcolonialist perspective, as well as juxtaposing Mr Kurtz and Nash Williams, characters who on the surface share similar destinies, but with quite dissimilar natures, as we shall see when examining them more closely. I will use the binary division between the East and the West as described by Edward Said as a critical model. Orientalism, according to Said, defines the East as the opposite of the West; while the West is enlightened, the East is ignorant, etc. Thus, the line of reasoning is that the East should be submissive to the superior West. However, the idea of the East as the ‘other’ actually says more about how the West perceives itself than it does about the people living in the East. By attributing all the unwanted qualities to the East, the West forms its identity (McLeod 40-41).
Both Mr Kurtz and Nash lose contact with the civilized world, causing two men to embark on expeditions to Africa to search for them. American slave owner Edward Williams’ quest to uncover the fate of his former slave Nash echoes that of the legendary Charles Marlow, an adventurous Englishman sent up the Congo River to assess the condition of Mr Kurtz, who is rumoured to be sick and possibly also mad. Bénédicte Ledent has called Crossing the River a “Conradian tale” (Ledent 57), and Caryl Phillips has undoubtedly had Conrad’s novel on imperialism and colonization, written some ninety years earlier, in the back of his mind when he wrote his account of an ex-slave trying to retrieve his identity in the free Republic of Liberia. Although Said’s theory deals with the Orient, it can be argued that it applies to Africa south of the Sahara Desert as well, because the concept of the ‘other’ is contingent upon the belief that anything unknown is dangerous, and is therefore a potential threat. At first glance, Conrad’s account of Marlow’s experiences in Africa seems to reproduce the stereotypical image of the African population as a savage people. For example, Marlow compares the fireman, a native working aboard the steamboat on which they are traveling up the Congo River, to a dog: “He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler … to look at him was as edifying as as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs.” (Conrad 52).

Phillips on the other hand describes Nash, the black ex-slave, as an intelligent and multifaceted individual. He is bright and has good intentions; but he has lost his identity and accepts his master’s notions. Here, Edward appears to be the benefactor, a slave master of the progressive persuasion: he treats Nash as his son, makes sure he gets an education and finally helps him to cross the Atlantic Ocean to pursue work as a missionary. But what are Edward’s true motives? Is he really as altruistic as he first appears? To complicate matters more, there is the difficult question of culture and race. When Nash arrives in Liberia, he is not one of the Africans. His physical appearance might be similar to theirs, but he has been brought up a Westerner, which makes him an outsider. He is returning to the land of his forefathers, but his mission is to change the people, convert them to Christianity. Given these circumstances, I will also examine how Phillips deals with the issue of diaspora and identity.

2. Lost in the Notions of Imperialism: Mr Kurtz in Heart of Darkness

The mysterious Mr Kurtz of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is positioned at the Inner Station, which is the station furthest up the Congo River, deep into the jungle. He is doing very well, so well in fact that he has accumulated more ivory for the Company than any other
agent (Conrad 27). But, in Kurtz’s opinion, gathering ivory should not be their only objective: “Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.” (Conrad 47). In addition, he has been commissioned by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to write a report for them (Conrad 71). Hence, Mr Kurtz comes to Africa with a distinct outlook on the lives of the natives, and how to shape it to suit the Western mind. Though Mr Kurtz is not a missionary, like Nash, his wish is to spread enlightenment, shine a light into the deepest, darkest places of the world, as suggested by his painting depicting a blindfolded woman holding a torch against a dark background (Conrad 36).

However, this ideology does not seem to be in effect at the first Company station on the Congo River, where the natives are brought to work on a railroad until they die either of exhaustion, starvation, sickness or despair (Conrad 24), chained together with collars around their necks like prisoners. They are called criminals (Conrad 22). Meanwhile, the few whites present at the scene are impeccably dressed (Conrad 25), and probably carry guns or rifles. Here, the typical binary power relationship between black and white; heathen and Christian; Africa and Europe is evident. From a postcolonialist perspective, it is obvious that the ideology of the West, regarding Africans as ‘other’, is used to justify such treatment. Before arriving at the station, Marlow’s first stop on his quest for Kurtz, his ship encounters a man-o-war firing randomly into the jungle. The justification for this act is that it is shooting at enemy, meaning the natives (Conrad 20).

Marlow is appalled by what he sees at the first Company station: “I’ve seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men – men, I tell you” (Conrad 23). He remarks ironically that he too is “a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.” (Conrad 23), which shows Marlow’s scornful, scrutinizing nature. Some of the natives at the first Company station are described as a mass of black creatures, hardly regarded as humans, e.g: “One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence” (Conrad 25). However, the emphasis is not on how different they are from the Europeans, but rather on how inhumanely they are treated by the so called civilized people. They have been brought from a number of other places along the coast, but are not acclimatizing properly, so when they are not able to work anymore they are left to their fate in a grove (Conrad 24).
According to Peter Barry, the colonialist ideology has resulted in literature describing blacks, and any other races that are not Caucasian, as controlled by their emotions and instincts rather than the rational mind, an assumed characteristic of the white race (Barry 187). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s perception does seem tainted with this narrow mindset. There is a distinct difference between Marlow’s description of a white man, e.g. his fleshy companion on the two-hundred-mile trek to the Central station, and his description of a black man, e.g. the helmsman. The fleshy companion is not described in detail, but we do find out that he has a habit of fainting when it gets too hot, which upsets Marlow because it causes him a lot of trouble. When asked by Marlow why he even came to Africa, when he is obviously not capable of handling the climate, the scornful reply is: “To make money, of course. What do you think?” (Conrad 29) Thus, this fleshy, white man prone to fainting conveys a sense of the typical European man: rational and greedy. The reader gets to understand that this is perfectly normal; every reasonable mind knows that you cannot give up the idea of money just because of some emotion or bodily function acting up.

The black helmsman, on the other hand, is a primitive fool controlled by his emotions, says Marlow: “He was the most unstable kind of fool I had ever seen. He steered with no end of a swagger while you were by; but if he lost sight of you, he became instantly the prey of an abject funk, and would let that cripple of a steamboat get the upper hand of him in a minute.” (Conrad 63). Rino Zhuwarara also argues that Marlow does indeed seem to have a stereotypical idea about blacks:

Even Marlow, whose point of view is central in the novel, and who seems to be morally awake and conscious of the moral travesties which abound, cannot help but betray his own prejudice against blacks. Those who assist the white buccaneers are regarded by Marlow as “reclaimed” or “improved specimens” or “poor devils” … instead of being seen as part of the human family, the black man is projected as being much nearer the animal world. (Zhuwarara 230)

However, later on in the narrative we find that Marlow actually does regard the helmsman as a kind of partner, although he does not realize it before it is too late (Conrad 73). The helmsman is killed in an attack from the natives, and Marlow is surprised to find that he misses him, even though some might think that he was of “no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara” (Conrad 73). His death has a significant effect on Marlow; he cannot decide whether it was worth it to retrieve Kurtz (Conrad 73). This is an example of how
Marlow’s perception of *one* of the natives changes. Most of the time though, we are subjected to Marlow’s ironic and profound realization that Europe’s presence in Africa is not for the benefit of the African population. He does not hold the Company agents in high esteem; they are greedy Europeans only there for the ivory:

> There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. (Conrad 35)

*Heart of Darkness* is thus a late nineteenth-century critical account of the effects of imperialism, and of the darkness that resides within the white man, ready to burst forth as soon as he is away from civilization, as we will see later on, but I am inclined to agree with Zhuwarara – the blacks are depicted in a derogatory way that reinforces the stereotypical image.

Moreover, the friendship between Marlow and the helmsman is the only interracial relationship in *Heart of Darkness*, except for Mr Kurtz and a striking native woman who makes an appearance towards the end when Mr Kurtz has been taken aboard the steamboat (Conrad 87-88). Kurtz already has a fiancé back in Europe: “She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk … This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me” (Conrad 106). Kurtz’s European “intended” appears a pale shadow compared to the colorful, strong-willed native African woman. Marlow compares the city Kurtz’s fiancé lives in to a sepulchre (Conrad 102) and her house is a sarcophagus (Conrad 106). The juxtaposition of Kurtz’s fiancé and Kurtz’s African lover demonstrates how the European society is weakening, failing from the inside, while Africa, not yet as developed but with greater hope of going in another direction, appears as mystically majestic, which actually reproduces the notion of the other as exotic.

Marlow’s renaming of Brussels as a “whited sepulchre” is mentioned by Olof Lagercrantz, who sees this as an allegory to the place of the living dead, meaning that the faulty ideology of Europe is destined to lead towards disaster (Lagercrantz 26). Mr Kurtz’s choice to get involved with the African woman, according to Rino Zhuwarara, demonstrates his lack of restraint. She represents the untamed, sinful and alluring features of Africa, which
Kurtz cannot resist, but as soon as he gives in to his desire for her, he becomes morally corrupt (Zhuwarara 233). It is thus possible to interpret the African woman in two different ways; she is either the symbol of a strong, capable Africa, or a demonic temptress out to corrupt weak-willed men. This type of ambiguity can be found throughout the novel, represented by Marlow’s ever-changing interpretation of Kurtz.

Mr Kurtz comes from colonialist Europe to explore the Dark Continent, to claim it, under the pretence of “humanizing, improving and instructing” (Conrad 47). He is looking to make money from the ivory, but at the same time it is possible that he really does want to help the natives - help them become more like him and his fellow Europeans, that is. In actuality, what happens is that the craving for power and wealth, as well as his desire for the African woman, alters his mission; instead of help he brings terror to the population of the Congo. Kurtz can be seen as the living embodiment of the failing ideology behind Europe’s colonization of Africa; in the jungle, his alter ego, with qualities that are opposed to benefaction and nobility, takes over – it seems Mr Kurtz has “gone native”. When Marlow arrives at the Inner Station, the station which Kurtz is in command of, he sees poles with human heads as ornaments placed around the house (Conrad 75, 82), which Marlow interprets as a sign that there is something missing in Kurtz – he is not able to control his desires: “They … showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts…” (Conrad 83), which implies that he has become one of the natives, controlled by emotions and instincts rather than the rational mind.

The first person Marlow meets at the Inner Station is “the Russian”, an adventurer who has heard Kurtz speak of love (Conrad 79), who is devoted to him, and has “managed to nurse Kurtz through two illnesses (he alluded to it as you would to some risky feat)” (Conrad 80). When Marlow hears how Kurtz threatened the Russian for some ivory, and how the natives treat Kurtz like a god, he comes to the conclusion that Kurtz has gone mad (Conrad 81). However, if Kurtz symbolically represents Europe, his behavior more generally mirrors the dark side of civilization, the unwanted qualities projected onto other societies, in accordance with Said’s theory on Orientalism. Kurtz rules the area around the Inner station as a tyrant, executing “rebels” (Conrad 84) and puts their heads on stakes, probably as a warning to the others. Kurtz is exceptionally driven, robbing the country of ivory, as an agent for the Company at first, but when his alter ego has taken over, he wants to keep it all to himself: “This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk … I want no more than justice” (Conrad 106). Kurtz has had to renounce many of his good qualities, such as compassion, to be able to accumulate all that
ivory and achieve his position among the natives, at the risk of becoming less of a human being. He is aware of the high price he has paid for power. Lagercrantz also remarks on Kurtz’ greed, palpable in the way Marlow describes him the first time he sees him (Lagercrantz 113). His mouth opens, which Marlow associates with voracity: “… as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him” (Conrad 85-86). The intellectual Kurtz has turned into a kind of monster roaming the jungle.

The report he has written for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs appears a travesty of Europe’s idealizing notions about colonialism:

… it was a beautiful piece of writing … He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, “must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity,” … “By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,” etc. etc. (Conrad 72)

On the last page of the report, Kurtz has scribbled: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (Conrad 72). Here we have the theory, eloquent but inherently wrong, and the method, cruel and primitive, clearly showing the hypocrisy of Europe’s presence in Africa. How can violence and greed lead to peace and happiness? Marlow is fascinated with Kurtz’s way with words, but claims that “Mr Kurtz was no idol of mine” (Conrad 84) – Marlow can see through the falsehood.

Both Marlow and Mr Kurtz are complex, multifaceted characters, difficult to understand. Conrad’s novel begins with an anonymous narrator telling the reader about Marlow and the other seamen aboard the Nellie, a cruising yawl on the Thames, where Marlow tells his narrative about his adventure in the Congo, which is thus framed within the anonymous narrator’s story. The anonymous narrator recounts Marlow’s tale for the reader, forming an illusion where the reader feels like a passenger on the Nellie, listening to Marlow first hand, because Marlow’s narrative is told in first person. It is thus easy to forget that the narrative is told out of the memory of the anonymous narrator. Linda Costanzo Cahir has suggested that this narrative technique creates a distance between Marlow’s experiences and what is conveyed to the reader, subtly controlling the experience of “listening” to Marlow, much like a film camera (Cahir 184). It enhances the complexity of Kurtz because although Marlow might come to understand him, the anonymous narrator probably does not, and yet Marlow’s tale is told through him as a medium. Because of the anonymous narrator, Marlow’s attitude cannot be mistaken for the author’s, despite the fact that his narrative is told
in first person and he is a homodiegetic narrator. Consequently, Conrad’s criticism of Europe’s imperialist forces seems less direct. Lagercrantz mentions that “Marlow is a mask Conrad holds in front of his face” (Lagercrantz 16, my translation). This narrative technique creates a distance in perspective, but at the same time lets the reader see Kurtz and Africa through the eyes of Marlow, making his experiences seem as real to the reader as they do to Marlow.

Once Marlow and his crew have made contact with Mr Kurtz, they find that he is indeed very sick and cannot walk on his own. He is carried on a stretcher to the steamboat, where he is installed in a cabin for the night. The manager goes to talk to him, gets accused of being greedy, and comes out again declaring Kurtz’s methods unsound. Marlow, who suddenly finds himself siding with Kurtz in the company of the cold, calculating manager, voices his opinion: “Nevertheless I think Mr Kurtz is a remarkable man”, but the manager’s reply is simply: “He was” (Conrad 89). In the beginning of the narrative, Marlow does not know much about Kurtz, nor does he care about him (Conrad 32), but in his conversation with a young aristocrat whom he does not sympathize with, the brickmaker of the Central station, he finds that there is a power struggle going on between the agents, hungry for ivory, and Mr Kurtz, who is of a progressive persuasion. Suddenly, Marlow has chosen to side with Kurtz (Conrad 36-37).

As he finds out more about this intriguing man, Marlow begins to look forward to meeting him and having the opportunity to talk with him: “The point was in [Kurtz] being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently … was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.” (Conrad 67-68). Although he is dismayed by what he learns about Kurtz at the Inner station, Marlow’s reluctance to disregard him as a mad man comes from the spiring conception that his own culture is exploiting the Africans to advance, much like Kurtz exploits his subjects for his own purposes. Marlow is compelled to believe that there is more to Kurtz than the selfish desire for power hidden beneath the eloquence. He cannot repudiate Kurtz, because it would mean that he would have to forsake his own culture.

Mr Kurtz’s career as well as his fantastic way of life is over, and he has not achieved the noble goals of “humanizing, improving, instructing” (Conrad 47) that he set out to do. It is no wonder he is reluctant to be returned to civilization. In the middle of the night, Marlow wakes up and finds Kurtz missing. Though he cannot walk, Mr Kurtz has crawled on all fours to get back to his subjects: the natives, who are chanting and dancing around bonfires in his honour.
More upsetting than his failing to achieve his goals, however, is realizing the madness of imperialistic Europe, the society of the living dead. This is perhaps why Kurtz is so desperate to stay in the Congo – his soul is fighting for survival, and in remaining in Africa he sees a future. This realization does not come until the end of his life as his greed, brutality and other unwanted qualities have been repressed. Before his revelation, Kurtz perceives himself as a pioneer with better intentions than the agents of the Company, which reflects Europe’s self-conceit.

Thus, Kurtz, symbolizing Europe, becomes aware of his own shortcomings near the end of his life, but he has already sought comfort in the African lifestyle at an earlier stage. This is represented in the relationship between Kurtz and the native African woman; he has learned her language (Conrad 88) which means that their communication takes place on her home ground, actually shifting the power from Kurtz to the native woman. In doing this, Kurtz unconsciously indicates an interest in learning more about the Africans, to learn from them - a preparation for the realization that his own culture is failing. When he tries to escape from the steamboat, Marlow cuts him off before he reaches the natives, which is the only chance to retrieve him because once he is surrounded by his subjects, it will be impossible to bring him back to the boat. Marlow persuades Mr Kurtz to come back to the steamer by telling him that he will be “utterly lost” if he persists in staying, and that his success in Europe is assured (Conrad 94). The last part, however, is a lie. Marlow conveys that he said this to avoid having to “throttle” him (Conrad 94), which is what he would have been compelled to do if Kurtz had screamed for help from the natives. The fact that Marlow wants to prevent Kurtz from speaking denotes a connection to Kurtz’s eloquence; without the fancy words to hide Kurtz’s true purpose; to gain power and wealth at any cost, Marlow, and the rest of the whites, would have to confront Europe’s brutal self-interest, which they are a part of. This is not something that is easy to comprehend, and Marlow is probably still struggling to grasp the implications of his Africa experience while telling his story aboard the Nellie.

Before the steamboat leaves for Europe, the Russian assigns Marlow to be responsible for Kurtz’s reputation, because they both know that “the white men” will try to slander him (Conrad 90), and he is too weak to speak for himself. Thus, Marlow ends up responsible for Kurtz’s reputation, his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (Conrad 72), and the remembrance of him. The memory of Kurtz as a man with at least some good intentions is important to Marlow because he recognizes that there did exist good intentions behind Europe’s presence in Africa; unfortunately they were outrivaled by imperialist notions. Similarly, Kurtz has both admirable and despicable qualities. Marlow
wants the world to remember that there was “an idea at the back of it” (Conrad 10), which separates the colonists from simple conquerors. This way, he avoids having to regard himself as a participant in a brutish takeover, as was the case with the Roman invasion of Britain in the first century (Conrad 8-10).

While the steamboat is leaving for Europe, Kurtz looks out at the natives “with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate” (Conrad 97) from his place on the couch. He is jealous of the Africans, because their ideology is not rotting from the inside like the Europeans’, and the people still have a chance at remaining innocent, with a greater chance of happiness. One can speculate that Kurtz wishes he could stay and be a part of their world, but he, as well as the European ideology, is sick and beyond salvation. The natives do not want him to leave, they are loyal subjects compelled to watch as their leader disappears. The African woman who is romantically involved with Kurtz tries to get aboard the steamboat before it leaves, but is denied entry (Conrad 87-88). Lagercrantz suggests that the natives consider Kurtz a father as well as a god, which makes the love that they have for him less baffling considering what he has subjected them to (Lagercrantz 132). On another level, it is possible to see the mourning Africans as a confirmation that Europe, represented by Kurtz, is truly ill with diseased thoughts of power.

Marlow is the only one who sees beyond Mr Kurtz’s drive and eloquence – he is not beguiled by him like the Russian, nor does he regard him as a rival in business, like the Company manager does. When the manager declares Kurtz’s methods unsound and tells Marlow that he is going to report it to the Company, Marlow is reminded of the brickmaker and cannot stand the thought of these ambitious, calculating and corrupted men: “It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief – positively for relief.” (Conrad 89). Kurtz dies before they reach their destination, but before he dies, Marlow listens to him and comes to understand him a bit more: “… both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it [The shade of the original Kurtz] had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, a sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power.” (Conrad 98)

The righteous, eloquent Mr Kurtz is a shell, filled with a so-called primitive longing for power and the knowledge that he has performed terrible acts, such as stealing from unsuspecting people, blackmailing friends, using and murdering innocent people, to get it. The grace of his words, for which he is known, does not match the crude egoism of his actions. In his rapport, he writes that the power the whites have over the natives should be used for the good of mankind, but in reality he is using it for his own purpose. Furthermore, as
Marlow conveys in the quote cited above, Mr Kurtz has become obsessed with the discovery of what it is like to be treated as if he were a deity, how to influence people and the possibilities that open up once you are that powerful. He has discovered the heart of darkness within himself, and drawn a parallel to men in general. Hence his last words: “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 100).

3. Returning “Home”: Nash Williams in *Crossing the River*

Caryl Phillips’ novel *Crossing the River* is comprised of four separate narratives dealing with the history of African enslavement and diaspora. It spans across centuries and continents in a disjointed fashion, but still manages to convey a comprehensive picture of how everyone, not only African Americans, is a part of the “common memory”, the trauma of the Middle Passage. The first chapter, “The Pagan Coast”, is the story of Nash Williams, an ex-slave relocating to Liberia as a missionary, who struggles to find his identity as a black man, raised a Westerner, in the land of his forefathers. In the second narrative, “West”, the reader is introduced to Martha, an African-American slave who is separated from her child when they are sold to different people at an auction. After many years have passed, Martha runs away from her master to go find her daughter in California, where life is rumoured to be bearable for the African-Americans. However, she is old and sick, and passes away in the chilly Colorado night, without reuniting with her daughter. In the third chapter, “Crossing the River”, we are made familiar with the journal of James Hamilton, master on the slave ship Duke of York, England. This is the perpetrator’s side of the story as Hamilton and his crew buys slaves along the coast of West Africa.

In the prologue of the novel there is the voice of a grieving father, the spirit of Africa perhaps, guilty of selling his children. Two boys and a girl are mentioned, which Hamilton also writes about in his journal. The last slaves he buys before the ship leaves Africa are “2 strong man-boys, and a proud girl” (Phillips 124). Although Hamilton’s narrative takes place in the eighteenth century, Nash’s and Martha’s take place in the nineteenth century. The last narrative, called “Somewhere in England”, takes place in the twentieth century and here we only get a glimpse of Travis, a black U.S. soldier stationed in England during World War II, through the eyes of Joyce, an Englishwoman who falls in love with him and has his baby. Travis dies on duty in Italy, and Joyce is forced to give up their son, who comes to see her twenty years later. The fragmented timeline enhances the disjunction of diaspora: Nash, Travis and Martha are in a way siblings, children of Africa, but they are scattered across the
world, with different fates but with the trauma of enslavement imbued into their souls. The three children mentioned by Hamilton cannot possibly be Nash, Travis and Martha, but they might as well be. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to concentrate on the first chapter; “The Pagan Coast”.

Nash Williams is an African-American born into slavery in nineteenth century America. His parents work among three hundred other slaves at the plantation of Edward Williams, a devout Christian who is not completely comfortable with owning slaves. Nash is chosen to live and study with Edward in his mansion (Phillips 21), and is taught the honorable values of Christianity: to be honest and selfless, to work hard and help those who are less fortunate. He considers himself very lucky to have been chosen by Edward (Phillips 21), whom he begins to regard as a father rather than a master. Edward becomes the most important person in Nash’s life – his best friend, father and a vessel of the word of God. The bond between them grows increasingly stronger, and might also have romantic undertones, which I will return to and elaborate on. However, Edward’s role as slave master does not fit with his Christian values, and so he decides to set the now grown-up Nash free to go to Liberia, Africa, as a missionary, with the help of the American Colonization Society (Phillips 13-14). This is considered to be a reward, reserved for the most accomplished slaves only (Phillips 9).

The narrative in “The Pagan Coast” is composed of five letters from Nash to Edward, but there are also three interspersed sections where an anonymous narrator tells the story of how Edward reacts to the news that Nash has disappeared, and recounts when Edward leaves for Liberia to try to find him. The letters from Nash are, naturally, written in first person, but since the supposed recipient is already aware of the background, there is no need for him to elaborate or explain ambiguous statements. While Edward’s story is written in third person, it is centered on the present, without much information about the past. The meaning is implicit in Nash’s letters and in the narrator’s account of Edward’s thoughts, which makes several interpretations possible. Hence, the meaning is built up on the shift in focus between characters, because the reader needs both accounts for a comprehensive picture. Nash’s first person account lets the reader come close to him, there is no hint of another person, i.e. a narrator, involved. Edward’s account on the other hand is told by a heterodiegetic narrator, whose own attitude is sometimes tangible: “Sadly [my italics], this letter was uncovered by Edward’s wife…” (Phillips 11). The reader is thus subjected to this narrator’s depiction of Edward, which does not allow for the same impression of intimacy. Therefore, it can be argued that the narrative form of Nash’s account causes the reader to be predisposed towards favoring Nash as opposed to Edward.
Liberia is the only country in Africa, except for Ethiopia, which has never been colonized by Europeans. The Republic of Liberia, “the land of the free”, was founded by ex-slaves who came from America in the nineteenth century (Liberia 1156). According to historian Bruce Allen Dorsey, the repatriation process was organized by abolitionists who formed the American Colonization Society (ACS), allegedly in the spirit of philanthropy. In actuality, the ACS saw repatriation as an opportunity to purge America from free slaves, to get rid of the “problem” of having to treat blacks as equals (Dorsey 79). However, the black settlers did not get along with the Africans of Liberia. They were Christians, trying to convert the indigenous people and force their lifestyle onto them. Soon there were class distinctions, the settlers being educated and wealthy in comparison to the Africans. Relationships between the two groups were possible, though unusual, because of their similar appearances (Liberia 1158).

In one of Nash’s letters to Edward, there are signs of a sexual relationship between the slave and his master: “… why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian paradise.” (Phillips 62). What purposes Nash is referring to is unclear; it could be that Nash is the object of Edward’s desire, indicating that there is more than friendship between them, or he could mean Edward’s intentions to rid himself of the “burden … of being a slave owner” (Phillips 13). Another ambiguous statement Nash makes is: “… I fail to see what hurt I ever inflicted upon you that you could justify such a cruel abandonment of your past intimate, namely myself.” (Phillips 60). Here, the use of the word “intimate” could indicate sexual intimacy, but it could just as well be used to demonstrate an affectionate family bond. In favor of the sexual intimacy theory, there are signs that Edward has had a sexual relationship with one of his other slaves, Madison, whom he relies on for help in his search for Nash later on in the plot. The description of how Edward watches Madison’s “dark, glistening, sweat-filmed skin” (Phillips 67), and Madison’s reply, “No”, to an unspoken question posed by Edward one night when they are alone (Phillips 68) suggest that there is, or has been, something more than friendship between them. Therefore, it seems possible that Nash has also shared this kind of intimacy with Edward.

When Edward’s attention shifted from Madison to the young Nash, the older slave was offended, disappointed and probably jealous of the junior (Phillips 45). Yet he is willing to help his former master search for Nash in Africa, which suggests that whatever kind of relationship they had before, it was not entirely against his will. The possibility of a perverted relationship between the slave master and his young slaves is also dealt with in an article by Maria Mårdberg and Helena Wahlström, who go one step further to suggest that Edward and
Nash’s relationship is incestuous, based on Nash seemingly regarding Edward as his father (Mårdberg and Wahlström 293-294). Thus, the relationship between Nash, the black slave, and Edward, the white master, is a complex and intriguing story.

When he first arrives in Africa, Nash is very optimistic and confident in his mission to convert the native Africans, relying entirely on the Christian values that he has internalized with the help of Edward. His attitude towards Africa, the idea that it is there waiting for him to change it to suit the Western mind, is similar to Mr Kurtz’s. Moreover, he considers it a privilege to be chosen for this endeavour, and writes letters informing Edward of successes and setbacks, asking him to send some tools and material to help Nash make his way in the new surroundings. But as time passes, Nash begins to question his loyalty to Edward and the ideals of the West, possibly perceiving a more primal connection to his African ancestry.

When Nash first moves to Liberia, he is sure he knows what makes him different from the natives. He is Mr Williams, treated as an equal by the white people, and finds it strange to think about the natives in Liberia as ancestors (Phillips 32-33). Later, the distinction between “civilized Christian” and “native” becomes blurred. He quits his attempts to convert the Africans, no longer sure of the religion and the culture he was brought up to respect.

There are several signs of his growing contempt for the philosophy of his previous life, for example his thoughts about how he was treated in the town of Monrovia after his marriage to a native woman has become known: “… it would appear that my present domestic arrangements have caused some offense to those who would hold on to America as a beacon of civilization, and an example of all that is to be admired. Are we not in Africa? This is what I constantly asked of the blacks. But it appeared they felt I merely sought to justify my native style of living.” (Phillips 40-41). In his final letter, written in 1842, Nash conveys that he now has three wives, and he is learning their language because he has realized that it would greatly improve communication with the other natives (Phillips 60). He presumes Edward’s reaction to be negative, that he will think living in Liberia has caused Nash to go native. His fears are reinforced by the fact that he has not been receiving as many and as regular letters from Edward as he had hoped for, with no explanation why.

In Nash’s final letter, he continues by assuring Edward that he has not become a heathen or a savage, he has simply come to the realization that in Liberia he, as all the other coloured men, is free to disregard the narrow and intrusive way of thinking that has become the norm in Europe and America (Phillips 61-62). According to Dorsey, Nash, and any other black American, was not considered a true man by the colonizationists until he made the decision to go to Liberia, because they thought it was the only available option for an
intelligent man – he should realize that he cannot stay in America with the whites (Dorsey 85). If fatherhood is an essential part of being a man, the slaves were not permitted to be men. In Nash’s case, the slave master, Edward, had the right to take him from his parents, which means that Nash’s father was powerless in the situation. In Liberia, he feels he does not need to care about whether the whites consider him man enough; he is a proud father and has his own lifestyle. Unfortunately, his “native” lifestyle causes him to be excluded from the white settler community, whose help could have made all the difference when he gets seriously ill. Because of the Christian ideology the black emigrants from America bring with them, Liberia is not the free country Nash imagines.

He still does not understand why he has not heard from Edward, why his former master/father/lover has abandoned him. He does not know that Edward’s wife, Amelia, has secretly kept one of her husband’s replies (Phillips 11), which means that Nash only has received one of the two letters Edward wrote to him. Amelia is a deeply miserable character who does not trust her husband. She does not understand why it is so important for him to enable the slaves to go to Africa and be free men (Phillips 14), and her actions, for example burning Nash’s letters to Edward (Phillips 56), suggest that she is aware of their close relationship, and that she cannot tolerate it. Amelia’s jealousy could be due to her husband lavishing attention on his slaves while acting indifferent towards her, which is mentioned in one of Edward’s reflections (Phillips 56), but it could also indicate that she knows there is a romantic connection between the men, which makes Amelia’s situation very awkward. After Nash has left for Africa, and Edward still will not change his ways, she loses her mind and ends up taking her own life (Phillips 56).

After having asked Edward repeatedly if he is upset with him, why he does not reply, Nash decides to stop writing as Edward’s silence is humiliating to him. He feels that he is being treated unfairly because he does not believe that he has done anything wrong (Phillips 60). The change in Nash comes from the realization that he will not be able to return to America, he will never see Edward again, and this is because Edward does not care enough about him. Edward refuses to send any material or tools, despite the fact that Nash has asked for help in all of his letters, and in eight years Nash has only received one letter in return. He has been living a very rough life in Liberia, but has tried to make the best of the situation and remain positive. In a letter from 1840 he tells Edward about how he works in the fields all day long, and how they barely have enough to eat (Phillips 39). There is no time for school or missionary activities, and now that his perspective on life is changing, and his Christian religion is transforming into something else, there is no reason for him to persist with the
work Edward taught him was so important. Nash’s faith in Edward is crumbling, and with it, the purpose of his teachings is becoming increasingly foreign to Nash.

Edward’s view is that for any man who wants to be respected in civilized society, acquiring the skills of reading and writing is essential. But most important is the acquisition of the Christian faith. However, although Edward perceives himself as a “master of the progressive persuasion” (Phillips 11), he used his slaves for his own purposes, and still does not consider the freed slaves as equals. He persists in his attempts to dominate them, as is evident when Madison opposes to Edward’s demand to be taken to Nash’s place in Liberia (Phillips 65). From his new perspective, Nash can see that his efforts to be good would never have been enough for Edward, or any other white man in America, to regard him as a righteous individual in his own right: “I believed fiercely in all that you related to me, and fervently hoped that one day I might be worthy of the name I bore, the learning I had been blessed with, and the kind attentions of a master with the teachings of the Lord fused into his soul.” (Phillips 63) From his last letter it is clear that he has reached the conclusion that in Liberia, the land of freedom, he does not need to adhere to Edward’s values, nor does he want to. He writes that Edward should stay in his own country (Phillips 63), which implies that he no longer needs Edward’s attention. Thus, by the time he dies from an illness, Nash Williams has disowned his faith in the Christian God as well as his former “father”, but, with his relatively newfound faith in himself as a father and his integrity intact, is content with living by the “sweat of his brow” (Phillips 61).

Edward does not react until he receives notice that Nash is missing, possibly dead. Against Nash’s will, he sets out for Africa to find out what has happened to Nash. In Edward’s defence, he does not actually receive the last letter until he is already there. If Nash experienced a reinforced sense of manhood in Africa, for Edward the complete opposite occurs. Upon arriving in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, Edward visits what he believes is a Gentlemen’s Club for white people. It turns out that it is the home of one of the ACS people, and Edward is invited in to gain acquaintance with some of the most notable whites in the area. However, when he returns the next day, a black servant informs him that it has been decided that he is not welcome at the club, nor as a member of the colonization society (Phillips 57). Somehow, they must have discovered Edward’s sexual inclinations; perhaps from Charles, a young man whom Edward hires to help him learn the whereabouts of Madison, who lives in Monrovia. There is an episode where Edward sits on the bed in his hotel room, asks Charles whether he has a girlfriend and eyes him up to the point where
Charles feels uncomfortable (Phillips 49). Edward’s sexual interest in young black men is made evident here.

Another possible explanation is that Madison has found out that his former master is in Monrovia, and decides to tell the ACS about Edward’s unchristian behavior. As I have stated before, Madison was jilted in favor of Nash, and still appears wounded. Although he helps his former master to find Nash, he does not seem to care for Edward as a lover. Homosexuality is not a quality of manhood, and the rejection by the ACS diminishes Edward – he becomes less of a man. In Africa, his manliness is no longer reinforced by the degrading of Nash’s male qualities. Instead Nash appears as the strong, courageous one. Claude Julien suggests that Edward’s rejection at the club comes from his wife’s suicide (Julien 92), but does not provide any textual support for his statement. If one accepts the theory about Edward’s homosexuality, however, this better explains the rejection by the ACS, because of the issue of manhood, which, as I have mentioned before, was a major component of the ACS’s existence.

Like Nash, who “crosses the river” and finds a new identity, aware of his heritage but also mindful of the Western world and its hypocrisy, Edward crosses a river of his own, both physically and mentally. But he, however, does not “arrive at the far bank” (or shore) of his mental journey, he is lost on the way. Edward’s journey to Africa is in a way the reverse journey of Nash – his impression is that it is filthy and primitive, filled with annoying obstacles. He ends up feeling alone and abandoned, much like Nash felt abandoned by his “father”, at the remains of Nash’s abode, singing to himself, pitied by the natives (Phillips 69-70). Edward went to Africa to find Nash, the lost son, but lost himself instead, or perhaps one can claim Edward was already lost. Despite the appearance of being a humble Christian, Edward is egocentric. For example he does not take responsibility for the fact that his wife’s suicide was the consequence of his devotion to his retainers: “That she had … chosen to flee his home, then her mind, then this mortal world at the instigation of her own hand, was a tragedy the responsibility for which could not reside at Edward’s doorstep.” (Phillips 56).

There is no doubt Edward has love for Nash, and Madison, and has good intentions, but his confused actions are undeniably based on his own selfish desires. The decision to free his slaves and put them in contact with the ACS may seem charitable, but it stems from feelings of guilt and causes Nash to feel betrayed because he loves Edward and does not understand why he would so readily abandon him: “I fail to see what hurt I ever inflicted upon you that could justify such a cruel abandonment of your past intimate, namely myself” (Phillips 60). In the hotel room in Monrovia, Edward realizes how wrongly he had treated Nash, when he receives news that Nash is dead, and reads his last letter. He has a breakdown, but does not
seem to have come to any life-altering conclusions - he still looks to his own needs first. To remedy the guilt of abandoning Nash, Edward wants to take Nash’s children back to America for “a proper Christian life amongst civilized people” (Phillips 68).

Edward can thus be seen as symbolically representing the conscience of the Western world, trying to correct the “mistake” of the Atlantic slave trade by sending former slaves back to Africa. But it is misguided charity because it is really not in the best interest of the African Americans. In Nash’s case, returning to Africa results in sickness, poverty and abandonment. He was born and raised in America, which means that his only link to Africa is the tales his mother and father told him, if any. Furthermore, according to V.S. Naipul paraphrased by McLeod, for diasporan identities the idea of home grows separate from the actual place (McLeod 209), which means that if Nash’s parents told him about Africa, the image of it probably differed from reality. How can he be expected to feel at home in a foreign country? In the words of Johanna X. K. Garvey: “Thus far in Phillips’s narrative, neither a return eastward (nor a flight to the West) succeeds in establishing a true home for those enmeshed in the aftereffects of the Middle Passage.” (Garvey 262). There seems to be no place to call home for a nineteenth century ex-slave, except for the home they make for themselves, which, as we have seen, Nash Williams was close to establishing before he died, despite the poor conditions.

Hence, Edward, in conformity with Europe and America, is not the altruistic character he first appears to be, as Gail Low also remarks:

Edward is presented as a man who believes that he has benevolent and enlightened attitudes towards slavery … But the opposite judgement also holds true. His refinement and taste are a product of the proceeds of the slave trade, and his “well-livered domestic” slaves contribute to his elegant lifestyle. Edward’s support of “repatriation” is presented ironically as “the ideal opportunity to divest himself of the burden … of being a slave-owner” rather than as a project to grant ex-slaves men some measure of freedom from racism. (Low 133)

Gradually, we learn that behind all of his actions lie self-serving motives, which has been the case for all whites throughout the history of the Atlantic slave trade.
4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr Kurtz and Nash Williams’ fates are indeed structurally similar, but they are on opposite sides of the power struggle and do not have the same experience in Africa. Superficially, it can be said that they “go native”, but there are fundamental and complex issues concerning identity and ethics that are present in these novels, which are only revealed through close critical reading. Kurtz loses his identity in Africa, completely engrossed in the hunger for money and power; he is not who he thought he was. It is possible that his spiring conception of the hypocrisy of Europe’s presence in Africa accelerates his illness. Nash on the other hand already has a connection to the African lifestyle, although he might not consider it very important at first because he has been taught to regard the ideology of the Western world as superior. As an African-American, his sense of an African heritage is repressed so long as he is under Edward’s influence. His search for identity is not complete until he discards the metaphorical shackles Edward, a representative for the white man, put on him, and lives his life in Liberia as a truly free man.

Both Conrad and Phillips use white men to portray some part of the psyche of Europe. Mr Kurtz symbolically represents the brutish greed hidden behind eloquence that characterized imperialist Europe, whose notions of civilizing and improving colonized subjects can be said to have caused tremendous suffering all over the African continent and condemned millions of Africans, along with future generations, to always be searching for their identity. Edward Williams can be seen as symbolically representing the misguided conscience of Europe and America, trying to make amends by sending the former slaves back to Africa, as if putting the pieces back would make the picture whole again, however these individuals are not the same as they once were. The underlying egocentric intent of the Western world is ever-present, which the analysis of Edward shows. He may seem altruistic, but his desire for the male slaves and how he takes advantage of them shows the same lack of restraint as Marlow sees in Kurtz. For Edward, sending his ex-slaves to Africa is the perfect way to dispose of the problem he has created. But, as we have seen, it comes back to haunt him in the end.

Furthermore, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a scathing late nineteenth-century critical account of the imperialist forces behind Europe’s colonization of Africa, but does not succeed in depicting the Africans as a people worthy of respect. With the exception of Marlow’s friendship with the black helmsman, the majority of the blacks in the novel are described as being less than human beings. Phillip’s *Crossing the River*, in contrast to *Heart
of Darkness, clearly avoids stereotypes. Instead, it is an account of how humans, regardless of race or sex, have hurt each other through the slave trade. Conrad’s work reflects the attitude of the Victorian era where the perceived superiority of the white race was an axiom, while Phillip’s novel reflects a postcolonial critical perspective and the ability to look at the decisions made by earlier generations with a broader overview and sharper insight.
5. Works Cited


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