

Venturing Out of the Heart of Darkness

By Rehema C. Barber



Ken Gonzales-Day. *Untitled II (Antico [Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi], Bust of a Young Man and Francis Harwood, Bust of a Man, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)*, 2010
Courtesy of the Artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

The conquest of the earth ... taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing ... What redeems it, is the idea only.
—Marlow from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*¹

And if, apparently, you succeed in keeping yourselves unsullied, it is because others dirty themselves in your place...it is you who are the real criminals: for without you, without your blind indifference, such men could never carry out deeds that damn you as much as they shame those men. —Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur Le Colonialisme*²

Over a hundred years old, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a classic novel that examines the perils and triumphs of European exploration of Africa, the so-called "Dark Continent." It is a novel that speaks to the heart of man; and how the desire to achieve economic and social success is a journey that not all come out of unscathed, nor without stain.

While reading this book, I became conscious of the fact that in this foreign place, Conrad never gives the native peoples a voice. It reminded me of the theorist Frantz Fanon who asserted the importance of language in his seminal text, *Black Skin White Masks*. He states "to speak means to be in a position to ... assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization."³ The narrator within the *Heart of Darkness* never

¹ Conrad, Joseph, and Robert Kimbrough. "II." *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 1988. 10. Print.

² Césaire, Aimé. *Discours sur Le Colonialisme*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956. 14-15.

³ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967. Print.

gives his “savage” guides a voice, only garbled utterances. Even as Marlow speaks about the land and its inhabitants, we are shown a fleeting moment of cognition and kinship. There is this brief realization of a thread of commonality between the two cultures, which is quickly brushed aside.⁴ Not only is the language illegitimized, but the people are described as monstrous and possibly inhuman.⁵ Nigerian author Chinua Achebe’s critique of this highly acclaimed colonialist text brings to light the desire for the colonialist or—for the purposes of my argument—those currently in power, to control the language and therefore the interpretation of what is or is not being stated, examined or observed. While it may not have been Conrad’s intent, his portrayal of native people and emphasis on the language sounding like gibberish, illustrates prevailing attitudes of 19th century Europe that labeled African intellectuality as inferior. This kind of mythologization of Africans and Africa via the dismissal of African language and thus its culture has had a long-lasting psychological impact.⁶ *Venturing Out of the Heart of Darkness* is an exhibition that seeks to give people of African descent a view of their voices that have been discounted previously. The works in the exhibition examine the legacy of mythology, psychological notion, economy and language that were used during the colonization of Africa, and how they are currently still major factors in the way black culture is viewed in America and beyond.

The mythologization, psychological manipulation and subsequent infantilization of Africans led Europeans to believe that Africans didn’t understand the extent and therefore the economic potential of Africa.⁷ As a result, European ideology rationalized that it was necessary to take their land and its resources by any means necessary. The main protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow asserts that the pursuit of power and economic gain is a symbiotic relationship, which calls for “brute force.”⁸ The moral dilemma of conquest is thus a necessary evil, justified as a part of the natural order of global affairs and economic conquest. Here we see how violent action is not only acknowledged, but a sanctioned part of enhancing Europe’s economy. If we examine the facts of a colonized Congo, the Belgian king, Leopold II had a bloody and terrifying history of concealing a brutal regime that he sanctioned as a part of his desire to enrich himself from rubber harvesting and ivory poaching.⁹ The Belgian King was not the only monarch that sanctioned violence in the quest for riches and prosperity. The colonization of Angola and Mozambique by Portuguese explorers lead to over 250 years of military action between the native peoples and colonizers.¹⁰

⁴ “The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were...No they were not inhuman...that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman...They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough...” From Conrad, Joseph, and Robert Kimbrough. "II." *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 1988. 37-38. Print.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mungazi, Dickson A. *The Mind of Black Africa*. Westport: Praeger Publishers. 1996. Print.

⁷ Ibid, 147.

⁸ See footnote 1.

⁹ Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. Print.

¹⁰ Mungazi, Dickson A. *The Mind of Black Africa*. Westport: Praeger Publishers. 1996.10. Print.

Examining the violent and psychologically traumatizing events that occurred during colonization in relationship to today's social climate, it becomes necessary to consider the role that Empire has had and still has upon descendants of the African Diaspora. The disparate economic states of people of color versus their white counterparts is a fact that is hard to ignore. During the "Great Recession," the unemployment rate of blacks ranged from 8 to 16% versus a rate of 4 to 9% of their white counterparts.¹¹ The violent outbreak of gun violence among black teenage youth and perpetrated against black males is yet another fact of daily life that cannot be disregarded. Whether it's that the media is covering cases of violent oppression of blacks more frequently than before, or that these incidents are actually occurring with more regularity, death by gun is becoming an all too recurrent scene in black communities across the nation. It's ironic that the same weapon that assisted with the fracturing and conquering of a continent and its people is still being used in a similar vein.

Moreover, the media is playing another role when it comes to portrayals of black culture on television and film. Recently, an Oakland reporter did a news report about a new type of ailment called, "Hood Disease" which has been plaguing local inner city youth and communities.¹² Looking at the symptoms of this condition, they are easily recognizable as signs of PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Why are media outlets labeling it "Hood Disease," rather than PTSD? Moreover, why is a condition that is known to affect veterans and military service members, who have spent extended time-periods in battle-zones, affecting inner-city communities?



Bethany Collins, *As Black As This Board* (White Noise series), 2014
Courtesy of the Artist

¹¹ *The African-American Labor Force in the Recovery*. DOL Special Reports -. United States Department of Labor, 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 27 Nov. 2014. <http://www.dol.gov/_Sec/media/reports/blacklaborforce/>.

¹² Tokuda, Wendy. *Inner-City Oakland Youth Suffering From Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. CBS San Francisco. 16 May 2014. Web. 10 June 2014. <<http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/05/16/hood-disease-inner-city-oakland-youth-suffering-from-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd-crime-violence-shooting-homicide-murder/>>.

Conversely, there is a propensity of feel-good films that feature a sanitized characterization of blackness that implies a more insidious ideal is at play. In films like the *Green Mile*, the *Legend of Baggar Vance*, and *Bruce Almighty* a new characterization of blackness has emerged. This character is called the Magical Negro.¹³ Sociologist Matthew Hughey asserts that:

The Magical Negro (MN) has become a stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation.¹⁴



Heather Hart and André Singleton, *The New Numinous Negro*, 2014-2015
Courtesy of the Artists

Hughey's examination of the role of the MN has led him to coin a term, cinethetic racism, to describe how the media has managed to create a sanitized, yet stereotypical trope of blackness that has gone under the radar of detection.¹⁵ While written in 2009, the article was cited as part of the clinical research for a recent study published in the journal, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* which examines the superhumanization of blacks by whites. The results are quite curious. Whites view blacks as more likely to have superhuman strength, magical powers and other superhuman qualities.¹⁶ What's even more telling is that the process of superhumanization and thus subhumanization is implicit.¹⁷ It's

¹³ Hughey, Matthew W. "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films." *Social Problems* 56.3 (2009): 543-77. Print.

¹⁴ Ibid, 544.

¹⁵ Ibid, 551.

¹⁶ Waytz, Adam, Kelly Marie, and Sophie Trawalter. "A Superhumanization Bias in Whites' Perceptions of Blacks." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2014): 1-8. Sage Publications. Web. 17 Nov. 2014. <<http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/10/03/1948550614553642>>.

¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

easy to see why a 2008 Vogue magazine cover, which showed an open-mouthed LeBron James dribbling a basketball in one hand and gripping Gisele Bündchen with the other, was both powerful and disturbing. Overall, the value for exceptional physical prowess far exceeds the values placed upon black life and intelligence when it comes to traditional white value systems. This is most apparent in the sports arena where black athletes are the norm and are highly compensated for the physical nature of their profession. What is interesting to note, is how these athletes are economized by not only fans, but their teams. Moreover, within the collegiate sports arena the number of black athletes that were academically ineligible, yet still playing, has been shocking. The message is clear, as long as one is physically capable, your intellectual capacity doesn't really matter.

For many years, critiques of *Heart of Darkness* emphasized the historical and cultural omissions that occurred as a result of the colonization of Africa. However, it is Empire's current influence over narratives about Africa and the descendants of the African Diaspora that must be reexamined. The legacy and pathology of a very violent system of oppression is still evident in the way blackness is commodified, how it is discussed, how it represented and how it is understood. The realization that this tale still has contemporary relevance is startling. How is it that modern-day black voices are still being distorted and infantilized? Why are 27% of African Americans living below the poverty line?¹⁸ Why is the economic success of blacks tied to the entertainment industries of sports, music and, at times, media? How can blacks escape the vicious cycle that controls their economic, linguistic and psychological destiny?

In an attempt to comprehend the impact of colonization on the development of an economized and psychological notion of blackness as a modern day monolith, the Harvey B. Gantt Center presents its audience with the exhibition *Venturing Out of the Heart of Darkness*. The exhibition will look at the economized notion of black culture and bodies; the language associated with or that is used to describe blackness; and the psychological and mythological factors still prevalent today, which shape the formation of black culture and therefore contemporary culture's understanding of it. At times, the works on display will stage interventions in space. At others, it will bear witness to forgotten histories. The narratives of the works on view overlap and intertwine. No one work is representative of the economics of blackness or the language used to characterize black culture. Together the works examine the pervasive nature of Empire's pathological influence over the construction of black culture. They reveal that while our past has been a somewhat simplified history, it is a complex narrative that has been deliberately fashioned.

In concert, the works and themes featured within *Venturing Out of the Heart of Darkness* illustrate the long-standing effects of colonialism on prevailing societal attitudes that define black culture in America and beyond. Moreover, the exhibition displays the cyclical nature of these factors and how they are clearly at work in our current society. It is my hope that this exhibition not only illuminates, but also begins the process of self-actualization that Fanon so desperately seeks from his black readers.¹⁹ The process of developing *Venturing Out of the Heart of Darkness* has helped me realize that this may be the first step for people of African descent—and all people—to move beyond the shadows of the past and

¹⁸ Tavernise, Sabrina. "Soaring Poverty Casts Spotlight on 'Lost Decade'." *New York Times* 13 Sept. 2011. The New York Times Company. Web. 24 Nov. 2014.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/us/14census.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

¹⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967. Print.

head towards a future that is shaped by our own minds and hands. In essence, we must all come to terms with the past influences upon our modern world and venture out of the darkness.

The exhibition features works by Leonardo Benzant; Zoe Charlton; Andrea Chung; Willie Cole; Bethany Collins; Nathaniel Donnett; Ken Gonzales-Day; Heather Hart & André Singleton; Sean M. Johnson; Shaun Leonardo; JC Lenocho; Serge Alain Nitegeka; Jason Patterson; Yinka Shonibare, MBE; Renee Stout; Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum; Wilmer Wilson IV; and Saya Woolfalk & Rachel Lears.



Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *Odile and Odette*, 2005
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai

About Rehema C. Barber

Rehema Barber is a curator, writer, arts administrator and the Visiting Coordinator for Figure One, an off-campus venue for the School of Art + Design of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Barber served as an adjunct-faculty member and lecturer for the University of Memphis and the Memphis College of Art previously. In 2008, she served as the Executive Director of the contemporary arts space, Power House Memphis. During her tenure, she curated *Everywhere, Nowhere, Somewhere*, which **The Commercial Appeal** selected as its exhibition of 2009 and lauded its exposure of Tam Tran to the Whitney Biennale curators. Prior to her arrival in Memphis, Barber was responsible for maintaining a collection of over 7,000 objects and curating exhibitions for the Amistad Center at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Barber has been a participant of The Japan Foundation's Japan-U.S. Art Curatorial Exchange Program, the Getty Museum's Leadership Institute: The Next Generation, the Henry Luce Foundation's Institute in Jewish Art at New York University, and a Romare Bearden Fellow at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Barber holds a B.A. from Roosevelt University, an M.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a certification in Elementary and Secondary Art Education from the University of Missouri, Saint Louis.