There are many shades in the danger of adventures and gales, and it is only now and then that there appears on the face of facts a sinister violence of intention – that indefinable something which forces it upon the mind and the heart of a man, that this complication of accidents or these elemental furies are coming at him with a purpose of malice, with a strength beyond control, with an unbridled cruelty that means to tear out of him his hope and his fear, the pain of his fatigue and his longing for rest: which means to smash, to destroy, to annihilate all he had seen, known, loved, enjoyed, or hated; all that is priceless and necessary – the sunshine, the memories, the future, – which means to sweep the whole precious world utterly away from his sight by the simple and appalling act of taking his life.

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

In the preceding chapters, I have examined how authors writing at the turn of the twentieth century utilized the representational capacities of romance and melodrama to narrate empirically observable realities on scales that seemed incompatible with the forms of daily lived experience articulated in realist novels. Here I argue that Joseph Conrad pursued a related strategy by repurposing horror (a genre steeped, as we will see, in both “fantastic” and horrific depictions of the colonies) and substituting its imaginary terrors with actual atrocities. Perhaps nowhere in literature is “horror” more famously intoned than in Kurtz’s dying words in *Heart of Darkness* (1899); I read this word as indicative of a broader technique in Conrad’s novels, in which horror functions both as a form of narrative containment and as realism’s uncanny double. Whereas realism is characterized by rationality, observational accuracy, and, above all, a sense of proportion, horror invokes the failure of reason, the loss of proportion, and a bewildering sense of scalar uncertainty. Conrad’s colonial narratives, I argue, turn derangements of scale into a potent mode of critique: by distorting realism beyond recognition, they produce estrangements that
capture the irrational violence of colonial projects all the more clearly, giving us a vision of Anthropocene horror.

This chapter reframes problems of scale in terms of the challenges of representing a system of empire whose high-water mark can be set at the point when fantasies of continuous economic and territorial growth collided with the unyielding fact that further growth had already become materially and ecologically unsustainable. This was the critical moment when the logic of scalability – the conceptual foundation upon which colonial projects were planned, developed, exported, and expanded – exposed a fatal contradiction; a moment when the collapse of nonrenewable resources, along with local human and nonhuman populations, foreshadowed a much larger trend of ecological and humanitarian disasters unfolding on a planetary scale.

To extrapolate the magnitude of this ongoing global crisis from discrete instances and events, occurring in places far removed from daily life in Europe, was to exacerbate the realist challenges of depicting the colonies directly: not as distant backdrops, but as intensely present settings. While the traces of empire might appear everywhere in the shape and texture of the everyday, its massive, and massively distributed structural forces were radically displaced from an individual’s understanding. Fredric Jameson describes this as crisis of representation, in which the “limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are not even conceptualizable for most people.”1 The same might be said of realist novels of the Victorian period. For although their substance and indeed their narrative architecture depended directly on abstracted sources of colonial wealth, their mimetic effects conversely depended on subordinating and concealing the places from which, and methods by which, wealth was extracted. “Realism’s logic,” as Walter Cohen argues, “entails the relegation of empire to the margins,” since for most Western authors its material details and the character of its lived experience were “unrepresentable and hence deeply, if negatively, formative.”2 This creates a paradox in which, as Elaine Freedgood observes, passing “mention of empire and its consequences can be found in virtually any Victorian novel set in Britain,” yet there “is virtually no elaboration of what was going on ‘out there’ in the colonies that might be affecting, or more accurately underwriting, the domestic worlds of novels.”3 When, for example, we are told in Daniel Deronda (1876) that “it had not occurred” to Gwendolyn Harleth “to inquire into the conditions of colonial property and banking, on which, as she had had many opportunities of knowing, the family fortune was dependent,”
both the personality and the social status of Eliot’s protagonist are tied explicitly to financial speculation in places that lie beyond Gwendolyn’s speculation, and about which she chooses to remain willfully ignorant.4 This ignorance is reported as a defect of character, but in truth it is a necessary aporia, one that has to be maintained to effectuate the realistic style that Eliot’s novel sets out to achieve. As Ghosh argues, it is precisely this “concealment of its scaffolding” – in this case, the acquisition and maintenance of colonial fortunes – that “makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel.”5 For this reason, the plots of realist novels tend to stay focused on home even when their characters go abroad.6 Since daily life in the colonies was so radically different to daily life in the metropole, representing both locations in the same novel threatened to break the stylistic integrity accorded by unity of place. Moreover, transplanting a European protagonist to the colonies served to inflect a character’s subjective experience from an outsider’s perspective, making an individual’s limited outlook seem all the more myopic and alien.

However, this conspicuous absence does not persist in popular genres, where, as Edward Said and others have shown, the colonies flourished as exotic, unrestricted haunts of the European imagination.7 Colonial settings became especially prominent during the “romance revival” of the 1880s and 1890s, when the commercial success of works by H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, Grant Allen, and Rudyard Kipling occasioned fierce disputes over the artistic merit and ideological implications of foreign adventures.8 In his 1887 essay “Realism and Romance,” Andrew Lang famously weighed in against realism, offering a pretext of neutrality before claiming that “the great heart of the people” which “demands tales of swashing blows, of distressed maidens rescued,” cannot be satisfied by an anemic fare of “accurate minute descriptions of life as it is lived, with its most sordid forms carefully elaborated.”9 Lang’s essay stages a defense of romance via a feinted attack on realism, classifying the latter not the absence of generic conventions, but as a genre in its own right:

One only begins to object if it is asserted that this genre of fiction is the only permissible genre, that nothing else is of the nature of art. . . . Were I in a mood to disparage the modern Realists (whereas I have tried to show that their books are, in substance, about as good as possible, granting the genre), I might say that they not only use the microscope, and ply experiments, but ply them, too often, in corpore vili.10 (Lang’s italics)

Lang goes on to criticize “modern Realists” for “a sort of cruelty and coldness in their dealings with their own creations,” and for a mannered

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interiority possessing “an almost unholy knowledge of the nature of women.” As Jed Esty points out, these ostensibly aesthetic arguments mediate historically specific ideological positions: “whether to scale Britain’s imaginary toward the horizons of its expanding empire or to confine it within national borders.” In this historical context, Lang’s objection to realism’s cloistered interiority indicates a desire for spatial escalation, for “imagination to fire in a more heated and more worldly direction, globalizing and vitalizing the literary culture.” And while the “brute immediacy” of imperial romances have long been construed as “clunky, ham-fisted, and amateurish, more ideology than theory,” Nathan Hensley’s recent work has reassessed the ways in which their graphic, visceral aesthetic mediates the unrelenting, underrepresented colonial violence that undergirded the age of equipoise.

The same disputes that characterized late-Victorian “realism wars” frame what Jameson describes as the “generic discontinuities” that punctuate Conrad’s novels: moments in which his narratives slip between a “high-cultural” mode of realist interiority and the “mass-cultural discourse of a degraded romance,” resulting in unresolved tensions between ideologically charged strategies of containment and the unruly content they acquire through colonial contact. In what follows, I want to suggest that these discontinuities can be read as structural iterations of an aesthetic effect: that they instantiate, on the larger textual horizon of the novel, the unreconciled discontinuities between background and foreground, between the general and the specific, that Conrad produces when shifting scale within scenes.

In previous chapters we observed how authors used shifts of genre as aesthetic expedients for shifting scale, for slipping between remote spatio-temporal horizons and reframing them within a single narrative. That Conrad, too, recognized the strategic value of this technique is apparent in a letter he wrote to Wells, his close friend and neighbor, whom he praised as the “Realist of the Fantastic.” Congratulating Wells on the success of The War of the Worlds (1897), Conrad wrote, “if you want to know what impresses me it is to see how you contrive to give over humanity into the clutches of the Impossible and yet manage to keep it down (or up) to its humanity, to its flesh, blood, sorrow, folly. That is the achievement!” At first glance, these two novelists appear to have little in common, since Conrad’s fiction only rarely verges into the realms of the “impossible,” and his intricate impressionist style seems antithetical to Wells’s straightforward, didactic manner of storytelling. Yet Conrad’s praise should not be regarded as mere flattery, but as an acknowledgment of Wells’s capacity to generate new scalar perspectives by deliberately

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mixing realism with other genres. What Conrad claimed to have most respected in Wells’s writing was how it managed to maintain human experience and to keep it in view regardless of how insignificant or aggrandized (“down (or up)”) it could seem when juxtaposed with inhuman scales of space and time. Preserving the limited sensory perspectives of the individual amid “fantastic,” planetary-sized conceits, Wells managed to miniaturize the “flesh, blood, sorrow, folly” of “humanity” at large. Conrad famously wrote that his task likewise depended on expanding the limited, embodied senses of his readers to imagine events on a global scale: it “is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.” It is no coincidence that he extolled Wells’s method in precisely these terms: “One can always see a lot in your work – there is always a ‘beyond’ to your books.” Conrad’s interest in scaling up an individual’s sensorium to planetary perspectives is critical for grasping the deranging effects of his novels, which throw the world out of proportion so that new realities can come, belatedly, into focus.

**Scale Models: The Aesthetic of the Microcosm**

All novels are, to a greater or lesser extent, encapsulations of wider social and material worlds. Their strategies of closure and containment, which limit their actions to bounded times and locations within the text, nevertheless imply the external “beyond” from which texts gather their content, themes, and materials. For Conrad, though, the figure of world itself – as nature, as raw matter, as weather, as planet – inhabits the novel alongside human characters, contending with them for the space of description and the time of plot. This, as we saw in Chapter 1, endows the world itself with the force of an actant. Introducing such powerful agencies into the novel, as Ghosh observes, threatens to distort the schema of the novel as an “individual moral adventure” by overwhelming the causal potential of the individual subject, and to call forth instead the compensatory figure of “the collective.” However, Conrad resolves this problem by turning not to the figure “men in the aggregate” (except, as we will see, in his descriptions of nonwhite laborers) but to an aesthetic of the microcosm, in which a succession of miniature worlds stands in place of, and points referentially to, an absent totality that lies beyond narration.

Consider, for example, a curious episode that occurs near the middle of *Lord Jim* (1900). It happens when Conrad’s recurring narrator Marlow enters Jim’s story in person by attending an inquest into an incident on the pilgrim ship *Patna*, in the wake of the event that is often considered the
novel’s turning point. We learn that the European crew of the Patna, a vessel charged with carrying 800 Indonesian Muslims across the Indian Ocean to Mecca, abandoned the ship after it struck a sunken wreck in the night and began taking on water. The passengers were consigned to their doom. The subsequent rescue of the Patna has ignited an international scandal, and the reprehensible behavior of the crew descends into farce when each of her officers, except for Jim, skips town before the trial begins. Jim alone refuses to evade responsibility for a second time. Choosing instead to remain as a scapegoat, he accepts shame and censure for his cowardice. Jim is humiliated and discharged, a young man without prospects or purpose, and it is at this point that the elder mariner takes it upon himself to act as the arbiter of Jim’s uncertain future.

Marlow is approached by a roguish entrepreneur named Chester who proposes a scheme to rehabilitate Jim by establishing him as “supreme boss over the coolies” on a tiny, remote, uninhabited guano island—“As good as a goldmine.” Chester admits that the island has no anchorage, no supply of fresh water, “damn rocks and hurricanes” (116). And even though, he concedes, “no insurance company would take the risk” of backing the venture, he presses Marlow to “Look at it as it is. There’s guano there, Queensland sugar planters would fight for . . . think of all that lovely stuff lying waste under the sun – stuff that would send the sugar-cane shooting sky-high. The making of Queensland!” (116). Marlow rejects this proposal out of hand, ultimately steering Jim to the fictional colony of “Patusan” in the East Indies, whose name, evocative of Patna, symbolizes an opportunity for Jim’s redemption. Yet the reader can momentarily imagine, as Marlow does, how this alter-plot might have played out. Marlow sees a sudden, horrifying “vision of Jim perched on a shadowless rock, up to his knees in guano, with the screams of sea-birds in his ears, the incandescent ball of the sun above his head; the empty sky and the empty ocean all a-quiver, simmering together in the heat as far as the eye could reach” (120).

While Chester’s scheme to colonize a guano island may seem at first a trivial episode in the novel, on closer inspection this speck of rock in the sea becomes a microcosm that encapsulates the narrative trajectories, writ small, of many of Conrad’s novels: a young European man promised adventure and career gets caught up in the big business of empire, becomes disillusioned by its rapacity and futility, and is left stranded in a ruined wasteland. Indeed, it is precisely the diminished scale of this alter-plot that makes it a deeply ironic commentary on the scalability of empire, since even this miniaturized ironic version of what Rob Nixon calls “colonial
buccaneering” manages to entangle a vast network of global economic forces.  

Chester plans to sell the guano he mines to Australian colonizers, who will in turn use it to produce sugarcane (a nonnative, cloned species) on plantations harvested by South Sea Islanders who have themselves been imported to Queensland as indentured laborers.  

While Chester claims that this will be “The making of Queensland!,” his plans actually amount to the making of a mini-colony, populated by “forty coolies” and one (well-armed) white man. Moreover, Chester’s imagined colony, founded on a desolate rock in a remote part of the ocean, would effectively destroy a bird colony – a sanctuary that has, one imagines, been under avian occupation for centuries or even millennia. Chester promises that his proposal will be “the making” of Jim, but it is profoundly ironic that the scheme depends on the extraction and instrumentalization of waste: the business of mining bird waste that is simply “lying waste under the sun” involves conscripting a man still reeling from the “wasted opportunity” to prove his “recklessly heroic aspirations” and who “every instant ... was penetrating deeper into the impossible world of romantic achievements” (61).  

While Jim’s prospective future as lord of a guano island is intended to look like a humiliating, decidedly unromantic assignment, this episode appears less ignominious when we remember that guano was an increasingly vital strategic resource during the nineteenth century, as significant as gold (Almayer’s Folly, 1895), silver (Nostromo, 1904), or ivory (Heart of Darkness, 1899) – far more significant, in fact. As Mark Larabee points out, this episode in Lord Jim “serves a crucial structural role in the novel, despite its brevity,” since it focalizes “the intersection of globalization and environmental concerns” by “rendering visible both ecosystem changes and shifts in resource networks.”  

But one could also say that its power to focalize such massive forces in this way is an effect of its brevity – because it never actually occurs, apart from in Marlow’s imagination, it does not require the extensive narration of content that would pull it toward everyday concerns, toward the mode of realism.  

This microcosmic glance at an island world opens onto the widest of scales of empire. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the business of empire in the late nineteenth century ran on guano, the richest natural source of nitrogen and phosphorus compounds that had ever been discovered. Guano fertilized the crops that fed growing populations, while phosphate rock enriched by guano deposits supplied the active ingredient in gunpowder and high explosives.  

Global demand for guano surged alongside exponential increases in population growth and mechanized warfare at the end of the
century, and in 1900 alone the industrial powers of the global North consumed 340,000 metric tons of it. Guano thus charts a course across the imperial global network through a series of scalar leaps, in which one kind of resource is used to produce another, thousands of miles away, only for that product to be shipped thousands of miles back to the other side of the planet.

Conrad’s novels aesthetically reflect the historically specific sense of a shrinking world recorded in phrases like “the Scramble for Africa,” and the urgency of the imperialist surge that occurred from 1880 to 1914. During this period the expanding horizons of Europe’s economic and political projects made a new globalized reality a fact of daily life not just for individual Europeans but also for people across the planet. Globalization became a process of “incorporation,” both in the sense that the resources, ideas, property, and populations of the colonies were absorbed into the political bodies of European nations, but also in the manner in which colonial administration was outsourced to chartered monopolies. Anna Tsing argues that the success of these colonial corporations depended on “scalability” – on the capacity to implement uniform practices and minimize variables as their operations grew larger and larger. The term “scalability,” claims Tsing, “had its original home not in technology but in business. Scalability in business is the ability of a firm to expand without changing the nature of what it does.” The logic of scalability “came into being with the European colonial plantation,” an agricultural model in which maximizing profits meant transforming the diversity of local environments into “landscape machines” – systematically ordered plots of territory for growing plant monocultures on an industrial scale. While the immediate purpose of guano mining was to produce agricultural surplus, this also required a surplus of human laborers whose physical energy could be indirectly converted into food.

The “human scale” referred to in previous chapters thus takes on a much more insidious meaning in the context of the colonial plantation, where labor, as a quantifiable and interchangeable unit of production, became a scalable resource to which human beings were reduced. This instrumentalizing logic forms the basis of what Tsing calls the “Plantationocene,” a scalable model that would later be interchanged with industrial labor systems:

By the eighteenth century, Europeans thought that remaking the world as a plantation might be necessary to progress. They devised governance systems in which potential workers and natural resources were prepared
Alienated labor, in this account, thus became an integral component of the scalability of empire at both ends of the supply chain. We see its “within-project interchangeability” in the dehumanized labor force that Conrad, so often in racist terms, arranges in the background, but also in the interchangeability of Marlow as a protagonist who is redeployed between commissions and novels. Jim’s interchangeability, too, is at issue throughout the course of his assignments and misadventures, and it becomes Marlow’s task to discover and relate to us what, if any, meaning can be found in him as an individual.

This task is made more difficult by the fact that the objects and forces against which Conrad’s characters are compared become visible in their totality only on a planetary scale. When, for example, the SS Nan-Shan approaches the eponymous storm in *Typhoon* (1902), the steamer forges ahead, working against wind and tide and into the chaos. The narrator conjures an entropic metaphor of heat death, telling us that “the sun had a diminished diameter and an expiring brown, rayless glow, as if millions of centuries elapsing since the morning had brought it near its end.”

Cast into figurative deep time, first the ship and then the earth itself become micro-cosms swimming through the void of space: “The far-off blackness ahead of the ship was like another night seen through the starry night of the earth—the starless night of the immensities beyond the created universe, revealed in its appalling stillness through a low fissure in the glittering sphere of which the earth is the kernel.”

The cosmic magnitudes of Conrad’s spatiotemporal metaphors and similes in this scene carve out what Jameson calls “a new representational space” that draws its ideological content (the steamship as an allegory—a modern, fossil-fueled conduit circulating through the global network of capital) “inside out like a glove, awakening an alien space beyond it, founding a new and strange heaven and earth upon its inverted lining.”

And it is on this strange “alien space beyond” that recent criticism has focused attention. Taylor, for example, argues that “Youth” accesses “divergent geo-temporal scales and interlocking systems, modelling them from within,” providing what is, in effect, “a scale model of the Anthropocenic predicament.” In this respect, the most alarming aspect of Conrad’s scalar aesthetics is the way in which the shift to cosmic extremes ends up
recentering the human as a force of planetary destruction. Consider, for example, the derangements of scale that Marlow experiences in *Heart of Darkness*:

For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. . . . Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast . . . the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. (115)

Here, Marlow describes the endeavors of his fellow colonizers as a war against nature – against an antagonist whose gargantuan mass makes the domain of human activity seem utterly meaningless. Against “a continent,” the assault of a single vessel appears to have no effect. The “immensity of earth, sky, and water” renders the French man-of-war “incomprehensible,” and Marlow’s emphasis on “six-inch guns” (mentioned twice) confuses the cannons’ caliber with their physical size. This remote perspective is sustained on Marlow’s journey up the Congo, where he is overwhelmed by “Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high . . . It made you feel very small, very lost,” he says, “and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling” (138). Marlow visualizes his steamer creeping like an insect along the floor of an infinite jungle, hoping its inconspicuous size will allow him to pass without notice: “After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle crawled on – which was just what you wanted it to do” (138). From this distant point of view Marlow imagines a world so enormous that it appears impervious to human impact, so immense that it figuratively transforms weapons into toys, and human beings and their machines into a bestiary of insignificant creatures. This view, of course, belies the truth of an experience that Marlow will only slowly come to recognize: that the planet is being, and has already been, indelibly marked by human impact; and that these scars can be seen not at continental distances, but up close, on the frontiers of European conquest.

Conrad brings the “world scale” into focus by dwelling on Marlow’s boyhood “passion for maps,” his propensity to “look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose [him]self in all the glories of exploration.”35 The “blank spaces on the earth” instill in Marlow a longing for adventure (“When I grow up I will go there,” he says), but by the time he reaches adulthood those spaces have been claimed by imperial conquest,
and the maps “marked with all the colours of a rainbow” (110). Whereas the frontispiece maps in Thomas Hardy’s novels open a space of narrative possibility, in Conrad’s novels maps symbolize both the provocation of narrative possibility and its constraint – the “disappearance of earthly frontiers” and the “waning of geographical adventure.”

Though Marlow’s wanderlust is never fully extinguished, his romantic ambitions are deflated cartographically well before he experiences the gruesome reality of the colonies in person.

As Marlow zooms in from the global perspective of the map whose vibrant colors represent the shifting influence of European powers, he discovers that “the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (20). This understatement does not begin to capture the profound ugliness that Marlow encounters as he shifts perspective to the front lines of conquest, where ugliness has as much to do with destroying the planet as subjugating native populations. By documenting the brutality and waste of industrial practices in the colonies, Conrad’s novels give the lie to “efficiency – the devotion to efficiency” – as a moderating virtue that purportedly distinguishes the modern business of empire from the “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale” practiced by earlier European conquests (20). Efficiency, a byword for scalability, becomes simply a more powerful tool for “tear[ing] treasure out of the bowels of the land . . . with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (31).

By the end of the nineteenth century, a growing awareness of the unsustainability of the planet’s raw materials – not just rare resources but also staples like fresh water and arable land – had profound implications beyond the continuing prosperity of European empires. Material abundance was a justification for conquest on philanthropic grounds – to “civilize” the world beyond Europe by extending quality of life to all of humanity as a matter of natural right. Moreover, an abundance of natural resources was the essential condition that underwrote the freedoms and dignities entailed in the Enlightenment conception of the human itself.

The escalating extraction of raw materials, upon which the continuous growth of imperial projects depended, ultimately gave the lie to the scalability of empire. Most were nonrenewable, and none could be replenished at a pace to match rising rates of consumption. The value of resources like gold and silver derived from their rarity, rather than
their use-value, and as these materials became more and more scarce Europe’s race to acquire them only intensified. Guano, though hypothetically renewable, took centuries to accumulate and was therefore effectively finite – and its supply was on the verge of collapse by 1900.<sup>39</sup> The resource for which Conrad’s work is perhaps best known – elephant ivory – had already been so rapaciously exploited by the end of the nineteenth century that its trade consisted not in slaughtering what few living elephants remained but in ransacking ever more remote African villages for cached tusks and ivory objects. Marlow’s trading company, once flush in fresh ivory, seems to be struggling to sustain its profits. We are told that among the Company’s agents Mr. Kurtz alone “sends in as much ivory as all the others put together” (60); but that even the “remarkable quantity of ivory” he manages to plunder from the interior is now “mostly fossil” (108). The diminishing returns of the ivory trade are indexed textually as a conspicuous absence: while the word “ivory” recurs throughout *Heart of Darkness*, the word “elephant” appears exactly once, and Marlow never actually sees one.<sup>40</sup> This omission forms part of a larger strategy of abstraction, in which ivory becomes a symbolic, rather than a physical, object. Marlow’s description of the “precious trickle of ivory” that drains, as though naturally, from the Congo River figuratively transforms it from solid to liquid, emphasizing its status not as an organic substance but as a dwindling, fungible commodity (60). “Ivory’s near exhaustion,” writes Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “speaks to the book’s engagement with the nature of colonial extraction as a finite process with a constantly moving target . . . and raises unsettling questions about the imperial muddling of living and nonliving resources.”<sup>41</sup> As with Chester’s guano island, Kurtz’s ivory station represents a site of exposed unsustainability, in which an extremely slowly renewable resource is expunged as quickly as possible, in which the profit motive of meeting immediate market demands creates further scarcity, making speculative ventures still more lucrative. Both settings are deranged scale models of a nonscalable system; both are frontiers of an onrushing ecological collapse.

“Are You an Alienist?” Conrad’s Scientific Horror

The frequency of words like “supernatural,” “nightmares,” and “terror” in Conrad’s narratives provides a cue for how we might interpret his works’ investment in, and contribution to, a genre that we might retrospectively

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call “Anthropocene horror.” Hysteria, schizophrenia, and mental breakups brought on by traumas that cannot be rationalized or fully understood – these psychological derangements generally belong to the Gothic. Despite Kurtz’s notorious epitaph, *Heart of Darkness* is seldom read in terms of the Gothic tradition, and the critical consensus that positions it as a foundational protomodernist text tends to overlook the obvious importance of “horror” itself. This is a strange oversight, especially when one considers how widely the Gothic migrated across European cultural forms during the nineteenth century (from Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” to Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, from Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann” to Shelley’s *The Cenci*, from Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” to Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” – to give a very preliminary list). The Gothic’s novelistic expressions are just as diverse, though they bear a specific – and fraught – relationship to the rise of realism.

If, broadly speaking, realism is associated with the secularization or demystification of earlier forms, the Gothic novel persists as a revenant of the mysterious themes and content realism could not rationalize, and therefore failed to banish. Realism’s “rationality” insists on maintaining the decorum of scales or “ratios,” and we have seen in previous chapters how outsized phenomena can produce a shift into horror when characters stray too far from human scales. Cosmic terror – the overwhelming feeling of insignificance in the face of a universe blown out of proportion – can indeed be traced to the very origins of the Gothic novel. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) opens with the unexpected event that, one might say, threw down the gauntlet: on the day of Prince Conrad’s wedding, an “enormous helmet, an hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human being,” falls suddenly out of the sky, crushing the groom and heir to Otranto. This supernatural event forecloses realism from the outset; the novel is invaded by something external, whose deranged scale indicates that it does not properly belong in its world. Violation of size and proportion is a theme that assumes formal dimensions in *The Castle of Otranto*, but the novel’s incredible events make it difficult for a reader to suspend disbelief and to experience the work as anything more than fantasy.

A more potent form of terror required the reader to experience fictional events as though they were actually happening, and this involved borrowing the conventions of the realist novel. Shifting the formal antagonism – from an external assault on realism to a revolt from within – turned conventions that normally generated assurances of ontological stability against themselves. As Freud explains in his seminal essay on the uncanny, as
soon as a writer pretends to move in the world of common reality, “he
betrays us to a superstition we thought we had ‘surmounted’: he tricks us by
promising us everyday reality and then going beyond it. We react to his
fictions as if they had been our own experiences.” Instead of moving in
a world of fantasy, in which anything goes, the uncanny cultivates realistic
expectations of sober truth; when its eerie strangeness subsequently intrudes
on us, those “surmounted” superstitions return with a vengeance.

To potentiate the effects of the Gothic novel, writers began to ground
their conceits in more plausible epistemological terrain by replacing the
mysterious power of the supernatural with the awesome power of science.
This exchange parallels a technique we have observed in Wells, who wrote:
“By the end of the last century it had become difficult to squeeze even
a momentary belief out of magic any longer. It occurred to me that instead
of the usual interview with the devil or a magician, an ingenious use of
scientific patter might with advantage be substituted. . . . I simply brought
the fetish stuff up to date, and made it as near actual theory as possible.”
Beyond conferring the fantastic a degree of realistic plausibility, the
incorporation of science was especially important for the Gothic novel
because it made skepticism an intrinsic function of the work: scientific
knowledge demystified superstition even as the expansion of scientific
power filled the space once occupied by the supernatural. Among the
subgenre of Gothic novels that feature mad scientists and scientific experi-
ments gone wrong (e.g., Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Island
of Dr. Moreau), the pursuit of scientific power becomes a Faustian bargain,
a transgression that ends up summoning devils. In “Supernatural Horror
and Literature” (1927) H. P. Lovecraft locates horror’s new frontiers for
“the stimulation of wonder and fancy” in “such enlarged vistas and broken
barriers as modern science has given us with its intra-atomic chemistry,
advancing astrophysics, doctrines of relativity, and probings into biology
and human thought.” The magnifying powers of scientific observation,
for Lovecraft, offered a potent vehicle for exacerbating the deranging
effects achieved in earlier iterations of the supernatural Gothic.

At the same time that horror began to substitute scientific knowledge for
the supernatural, it also catered to what Lovecraft calls the “parallel tide of
growing mysticism” that occurred throughout the nineteenth century in
reaction to the rising tide of empiricist “materialism.” As a fascination
with spiritualism and the occult spread widely across European popular
cultures, pseudoscientific works like H. P. Blavatsky’s The Secret Doctrine,
the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy (1888) adopted the “enlarged

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vistas” opened by scientific knowledge in its Theosophic mantras. “The Universe,” according to Blavatsky, was “worked and guided from within outwards. As Above so it is Below, as in heaven so on earth; and man – the microcosm and miniature copy of the macrocosm – is the living witness to this Universal Law and the mode of its action.” Blavatsky ascribes scientific knowledge (including evolution and a geological understanding of deep time) to the “wisdom of ages,” purportedly handed down from “Tibetan mahatmas.” These scriptures were no more than plagiarisms of works written by other European occultists. Nevertheless, Blavatsky’s theories demonstrate the significance of scalar thinking as a means of gaining spiritual transcendence: by attuning the human mind to the universe’s scalar reiterations, Blavatsky promised to unlock the hidden powers of both.

The notoriously Orientalist settings of many Gothic novels are motivated by the same impulse to locate the forces of magic and the occult beyond Europe. While early Gothic narratives in the line of The Castle of Otranto featured medieval ruins and Mediterranean settings, the geography of the genre expanded with William Beckford’s Vathek (1782), which relates the story of the Caliph of the race of the Abassides, who, breaking Arab taboos in his quest for supernatural powers, ventures into the “infernal empire” of the archdemon Eblis. Similar settings abound in Edgar Allan Poe’s Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840). For example, in “Silence: A Fable” (“Siope”), a demon speaks of “a dreary region in Libya, by the borders of the river Zäire,” bounded by “the dark, horrible, lofty forest.” Here, “the waters of the river,” the demon tells us, “have a saffron and sickly hue – and they flow not onwards to the sea, but palpitate forever and forever beneath the red eye of the sun with a tumultuous and convulsive motion”; “the rain fell; and, falling, it was rain, but, having fallen, it was blood.” These weird phenomena transfigure environmental processes into bodily horrors: the blood rain stains the eerie landscape, and the pulsating rhythm of the yellow river mimics the beats of a massive heart – a scene of Gaia vivisected. Poe’s description of the Congo River is pure fantasy, as it is intended to be, but such descriptions exemplify how colonial territories became literary “Dream-Lands” during the nineteenth century, providing “A wild weird clime that lieth, sublime, / Out of Space – Out of Time”; a lavish and lurid backdrop upon which Gothic conventions were projected.

Secret knowledge gathered from the periphery of empire, and the scalar expansions of scientific theory, then, supplied content for an emerging horror subgenre that attempted to integrate them. Patrick Brantlinger identifies this form as the “Imperial Gothic,” which “combines the
seemingly scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult.”55 Ironically, the anxiety that motivated the Imperial Gothic toward the end of the nineteenth century was that the horrors it had projected would somehow return to Europe from abroad. This anxiety was compounded by the pseudoscientific theory of atavism, which held that indigenous populations represented a “primitive” stage of social and biological development, whose purportedly barbaric manners and customs might reappear within “advanced” societies through a process of degeneration.56 The notion that the seeds of Europe’s own savage past were lying dormant in its own populations became a dominant, newly productive conceit for a mode of colonial horror whose biological and ecological motifs had been evolving for more than a century.57

“The Heart of Darkness,” originally published in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1899, thus functions both as an iteration and subversion of a genre whose formal and thematic expectations were already well established. Conrad’s decision to write a horror narrative set in the Congo can be partially attributed to the expectations of the venue that commissioned it: serialized in three successive issues, “The Heart of Darkness” debuted in the special issue that marked Blackwood’s 1,000th edition.58 Over the course of those many editions, Blackwood’s had cultivated a particularly strong reputation for “Tales of Terror,” having featured works like Sir Walter Scott’s “Narrative of a Fatal Event” (1818), John Galt’s “The Buried Alive” (1821), and Michael Scott’s “Heat and Thirst, – A Scene in Jamaica” (1830). Poe satirized the house style in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1838), lampooning “the chief merit of the Magazine . . . the ‘bizarries’ (whatever that may mean) and what everybody else calls the ‘intensities.’”59 In Poe’s story, a character named Dr. Moneypenny explains this “species of writing” to Signora Psyche Zenobia, stressing, “Sensations are the great things after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations – they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet.” While Conrad’s tale fits within the magazine’s long-established tradition of printing the bizarre, the grotesque, and the exotic, it also aligns with an emphasis on colonial settings in Blackwood’s 1,000th issue, which featured such works as “A Daughter of the Muhamadans” and “Tante Lotje.”

What distinguishes “The Heart of Darkness” from the paint-by-numbers “sensation” fictions that Poe mocked is the way its direct treatment of the Congo amplifies and overwhelms the reader’s sensations through its graphic depictions of colonial violence. As a representation of the ongoing atrocities
perpetuated in King Leopold’s Belgian colony, its tropes and conventions take on a decidedly unnerving character: they resonate with familiar descriptions of Gothic “Dream-Lands” but prevent the reader from dismissing and containing these nightmares as mere fantasies. By capturing and reversing the aesthetic of bodily and ecological horror that had been figuratively displaced onto the colonies, Conrad’s narrative invokes the genre only to turn the screw. It conflates the instrumentalization of philosophical, scientific, and technological “progress” with occult rituals of mechanized mass human sacrifice – collapsing the supposed opposition between barbaric, “primitive” belief systems and Europe’s “civilized” epistemology of reason.

Rituals of reason are made to look like taboo superstitions well before Marlow departs for the Congo. We encounter them in meetings that take place in the headquarters of a colonial trading company, in an unnamed Belgian city that reminds him “of a whited sepulchre” (110). Marlow learns that he has been hired by his new employers to replace “one of their captains [who] had been killed in a scuffle with the natives,” and encounters two women “knitting black wool” who seem “uncanny and fateful.” These bad omens are juxtaposed with what is perhaps the most significant episode of the backstory, Marlow’s medical examination – “A simple formality,” the doctor assures him – which resonates throughout the novel as an instrument for measuring his psychosis. Marlow describes how, after checking his pulse, the doctor asked “whether I would let him measure my head . . . he produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully” (142). Marlow assumes that he has become the subject of a research experiment – that his perfunctory medical is a pretext for gathering data in a before-and-after investigation into the effects of colonial exposure on European crania. “‘I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,’ he said. ‘And when they come back, too?’ I asked. ‘Oh, I never see them,’ he remarked; ‘and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know’” (142). The doctor’s alarming disclosure suggests that the hypothesis of this phrenological experiment must be limited to the physiology of those who willingly volunteer for service in the colonies. “‘Ever any madness in your family?’ he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone.” Marlow, clearly annoyed by the doctor’s directness, retorts, “Is that question in the interests of science, too?”

“It would be,” he said, without taking notice of my irritation, “interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but . . .” “Are you an alienist?” I interrupted. “Every doctor should be – a little,” answered that original, imperturbably. “I have a little theory which you messieurs who go out there must help me to prove.” (143)
The doctor admits that he would like to gather data on mental changes “on the spot” – in the colonies – but this would constitute a different kind of study. It seems that Marlow intends to probe his examiner’s credentials by asking if he is an “alienist” (a specialist in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders), but his choice of words in the broader context of this scene implies that those who visit the alien worlds of the colonies might come back as something other than human beings. These ambivalent meanings resound elsewhere in Marlow’s narration: “I knew once a Scotch sailmaker who was certain, dead sure, there were people in Mars. If you asked him for some idea how they looked and behaved, he would get shy and mutter something about ‘walking on all-fours.’” (129). Marlow’s aside conflates madness and a belief in extraterrestrial life, figuring the sailmaker as both an “alienist” and a person to be studied by one.

Once he arrives in the Congo, Marlow witnesses events that defy rational explanation. His failure to make sense of things becomes a dangerous concern, not only for his ability to execute tasks that demand clarity of mind but also for his capacity to serve as a reliable narrator. This problem comes to the fore when Marlow joins a “caravan of sixty men, for a two-hundred-mile tramp,” to the Central Station. The order of grueling routine – “Camp, cook, sleep, strike camp, march” – breaks down when a white man weighing “sixteen stone” faints, catches fever, and has to be “carried in a hammock under a pole” (121). The native carriers begin to mutiny, and Marlow attempts to assert his authority by making “a speech in English with gestures, not one of which was lost on the sixty pairs of eyes before me” (122). However, the significance of his words is either misunderstood or ignored, and Marlow shortly discovers the “whole concern wrecked in a bush – man, hammock, groans, blankets, horrors” (122). As Marlow confronts his inability to maintain order he suddenly remembers, “the old doctor – ‘It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot.’” He speculates that the internal changes brought on by his mental distress might, from the standpoint of research, be the most valuable aspect of the whole endeavor: “I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting” (122).

Marlow’s doubts about the reasons for his mission are accompanied by growing concerns about his own faculty of reason, suggesting that his testimony might be read not so much as a report of facts as the case study of a psychiatric patient. Such a reading accounts for why Conrad’s first-person narration, with its lack of objectivity, becomes the necessary perspective from which to relate the dissociative nightmares that periodically erupt from its plot. The novel’s weird, recursive temporalities become more than vague
Marlow is here diagnosing Kurtz’s condition, but in recognizing the mental deterioration of a comrade with whom he so strongly identifies, this elaborate, third-person perspective becomes an act of projection, one far removed from the clinical, scientifically disinterested point of view introduced in that first visit to the “alienist.” Processing the mystery of Kurtz’s experience ultimately becomes an administrative matter when Marlow returns to Europe and is asked to hand over all of Kurtz’s personal documents, in the hope that they may be of some profit to the Company: “Mr. Kurtz’s knowledge of unexplored regions must have been necessarily extensive and peculiar – owing to his great abilities and to the deplorable circumstances in which he had been placed: therefore” (180). After Marlow refuses to provide them on these grounds, the company’s investigator “invoked then the name of science. ‘It would be an incalculable loss if,’ etc., etc.” (180). Marlow is unmoved by the appeal; he recognizes that treating Kurtz’s experience as scientific data will not make the truth of that experience any clearer, since its mystery cannot be rationalized in empirical terms.
The “struggle” not only to interpret but also to impose meaning upon disorder thus becomes a guiding conflict for the narrative as a whole. It takes on implications beyond individual struggles, scaling out to encompass the civilizing or “rationalizing” procedures exerted by Europeans upon the colonies. This wider critique of empire is embodied foremost in Kurtz – the “prodigy” dispatched as “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else . . . for the guidance of the cause intrusted to us by Europe . . . higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose” (127). Kurtz represents nothing less than the positivist ideal of Western civilization – a paragon of humane virtues, reason, and order. This enlightened visionary “had been educated partly in England . . . His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (154). Kurtz’s chimerical status as a pan-European makes him fluent in a range of languages and customs, giving him a comparative perspective on culture. His “enlightened” views accord with contemporary theories of social anthropology like James Frazer’s, which sought not only to discover the “science” of mythic systems but also to demonstrate that myth and magic were primitive stages of cultural development toward scientific thought. Kurtz’s evident familiarity with these theories explains why the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” deems him “appropriately” qualified to write a policy report on Africa. Marlow says of this report, “It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think” (155). Kurtz’s document advocates for the “power of good practically unbounded” that can be achieved not by suppressing “savage customs,” but by cultivating a belief in the supernatural powers of the alien race of “whites.” Mixing cultural progress with the shock and awe of the supernatural, though, ultimately places the supposedly superior qualities of “Immensity” and “august Benevolence” in the same category as “savage customs.” Kurtz’s scrawled postscript marks the deranged endpoint of his “altruistic” application of mythic force – his “noble words” devolve into a genocidal rant laced with the language of modern efficiency: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (155).

The way in which Heart of Darkness figures enlightenment progress as a myth whose “magic current of phrases” depend on the suppression and cultivation “savage” myths anticipates Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument in Dialectic of Enlightenment that the “very denial” of superstitious beliefs, which serves as “the nucleus of all civilizing rationality,” becomes “the germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality.”63 “In the enlightened world,” they write, “mythology has entered into the profane. In its blank
purity, the reality that has been cleansed of demons and their conceptual
descendants assumes the numinous character which the ancient world
attributed to demons” (28). *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes this irony by
relating the cultic rituals that Kurtz invents for his deification to the myth
of “altruism” that informs European perceptions of imperial rule. For
example, Marlow expresses particular contempt for his aunt’s opinion
that he might serve as

[s]omething like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of
apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just
about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all
that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about “weaning those
ignorant millions from their horrid ways,” till, upon my word, she made
me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run
for profit. (113)

Marlow follows up with the chauvinistic thought that women are particu-
larly susceptible to such myths: “It’s queer how out of touch with truth
women are. They live in a world of their own, and there has never been
anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they
were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset” (113).

As Marlow’s dismissal of this “too beautiful” world suggests, Conrad’s
critique of enlightened progress – so forcefully overshadowed by the
“darkness” that, from the title page forward, becomes unrelenting – is
ultimately embedded in aesthetic motifs. *Heart of Darkness* treats the
“beautiful” world as a delusion, an aesthetic veil that masks cruel and
horrifying realities. This criticism applies not only to the idealism of the
enlightenment but also to the literary forms that reify it. To this extent
Conrad’s rejection of beauty functions in similar fashion to that of the
naturalist novel, which includes ugliness “because it depicts life as it really
is. Its aim is truth, –unconditional and honest,” writes Chekhov: “To
narrow down [literature’s] functions to such a specialty as selecting the
‘unsullied’ forecloses its imperative to deliver the truth, and an honest
writer “must overcome his aversion, and soil his imagination with the
sordidness of life.”64 But whereas Chekhov argues that “a writer must be
similar to a chemist: he must abandon the subjective line,” Conrad’s
impressionism heightens subjectivity as a means of refuting the assumption
that the world’s ugly truths can be rationalized through a kind of scientific
detachment. While a naturalist novel might identify the “sordidness of life”
as a condition to be reported objectively, Conrad’s anti-realist aesthetic
denies, at the level of narration, the integration of what Adorno calls “the
beautiful single whole,”65 whereby “the beautiful is metamorphosed into the movement of the enlightenment as a whole.”66 In other words, Conrad avoids the kinds of distance that facilitate an enlightened perspective on sordidness – his narrative attempts neither to escape the ugliness through a third-person narrator capable of rising above it nor to resolve social problems symbolically through strategies of narrative closure. “The paradigmatic Conradian scene of the imperial encounter” argues Michael Valdez Moses, “is one of disorientation, in which the Western mind, far from subjugating the pliable native environment to the scientific and epistemological categories of its omnipotent and omniscient European intelligence, finds itself at a loss, overthrown, confused, panicked, and turned back on itself.”67 The novel’s description of harrowingly grotesque scenes, Valdez Moses continues, “provides a sustained and unflinching exposé of European colonialism and imperialism at its worst . . . but also attempts to generate in the reader cognitive and emotional dissonance that is the experimental ‘aesthetic’ correlative of the shock felt by Conrad’s characters when confronted with the unsavory realities of Western imperialism.”68 Rather than using a naturalistic point of view to raise awareness of brutal colonial practices, Conrad uses “shock” to implicate the reader, who shares in the traumatic experience.

But here again, the disorienting shock of “cognitive and emotional dissonance” might be attributable to something other than Conrad’s protomodernist innovations – for it also draws heavily upon the affective impact of horror, which delivers a charged “aesthetic correlative” to shock its readers. Gothic fiction, according to Eve Sedgwick, works to spatialize the subject such that “it is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it should normally have access.”69 This blockage causes the reader, along with the “fictionalized self,” to experience the sensation of being “buried alive,” dimly aware of “circumambient life, when the self is pinned in a death-like sleep.”70 Heart of Darkness adapts this Gothic trope by blocking Marlow’s immediate access to the horrific images and events he observes. Ian Watt famously called this “delayed decoding,” a technique Conrad achieves by “combining forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning.”71 Delayed decoding is often signaled in Heart of Darkness by the ambiguous word “something”: “the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole” (178); “Something big appeared in the air . . . and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet” (150). Since the unknown “something” is
not described in detail, it cannot be recognized immediately; narrative tension builds as its deferred meaning comes only gradually into focus. The most shocking and famous example of delayed decoding occurs when Marlow realizes that the “round knobs” of wood he takes for “attempts at ornamentation” of Kurtz’s sanctum are in fact “heads on stakes . . . black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids” (164). Delaying the close-up of the image potentiates its mysterious force, whose sudden impact causes Marlow “to throw my head back as if before a blow,” recapitulating the violent act of decapitation. However, it is Marlow’s avowed lack of shock that becomes shocking: “they would have been more impressive”; “I was not so shocked as you might think,” he assures us (164). By the time Marlow reaches Kurtz’s inner station he has become dulled to the horror of such sights. The process by which Marlow becomes traumatically desensitized to spectacles of violence resonates with moments of losing sensation, feeling as if “our eyes were of no more use to us than if we had been buried miles deep in a heap of cotton-wool” (147). “It seemed to me,” Marlow later relates, “as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. I felt an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night” (170). This feeling of being buried alive under the weight of “unspeakable secrets” is an embodied sensation that functions both as a standard Gothic trope and as a novel critique of empire. Marlow’s suffocating secrets are, to a certain extent, disburdened by his confessional narration; however, his constant struggle to find adequate language to express his experiences articulates a broader discursive problem. Said argues that Marlow’s rhetorical uncertainty arises because he cannot dissociate “the official ‘idea’ of empire and the remarkably disorienting actuality of Africa”; and that this contradictory position “unsets the reader’s sense not only of the very idea of empire, but of something more basic, reality itself. For if Conrad can show that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention, the same is true of a world being made and unmade more or less all the time.” This effectively extends the linguistic instability that occurs at the level of Marlow’s speech to the worldbuilding projects of empire that involve enacting and enforcing an “official ‘idea’” of reality. As Mark Seltzer explains, these worldbuilding projects produce “a doubling of reality . . . a world that consists in itself plus its registration.” It is in the act of registration that “the official world has remade ‘a world elsewhere,’” along with “the presupposition of alterity.” Thus when Chinua Achebe criticizes Heart of Darkness for the manner in which it “projects the image of Africa as
‘the other world,’” his argument accurately describes Conrad’s method but does not fully account for the possibility that, by deliberately calling attention to “the image of Africa” as a projection, it becomes the uncanny double or fictional antinomy of “the official world” of European empire.

The Unearthly Earth: Anthropocene Horror

In numerous scenes of world-making and unmaking, *Heart of Darkness* narrates imperialist struggles to impose a “radically unstable reality” on a planet that strenuously resists human control. Strange planetary forces, endowed with autonomous agency, create a narrative ecology that is made stranger by a discourse of alienation and alien life that figures Africa as a remote world and its inhabitants as nonhuman beings.

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. Well, you know, that was the worst of it — this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. (139)

On closer inspection, this passage exemplifies the uncanny doubling procedures involved in Marlow’s “projections.” The earth hovers between singular and plural — a form containing both itself and its opposite. Yet both iterations — the “shackled” earth to which Marlow is accustomed, and the “free” un-earth he encounters — are monstrous. The distinction between these two images of the earth turns out to be illusory, and their frightening reintegration anticipates the more terrifying realization that “men” who seemed “inhuman” might not be. Indeed, the double-negative of “not” . . . “inhuman” — which rhetorically extends the projection by means of a euphemistic doubling — is reintegrated only by means of a pun: “It would come slowly to one.”

This slow reckoning occurs across a series of scenes that punctuate Marlow’s allegorical journey to the interior. At the Trading Company’s first outpost — “a waste of excavations” — Marlow describes a “scene of inhabited devastation” surrounding what appears to be a construction project where a “lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants” (116). In the hivelike disorder, he stumbles across other semi-animate figures, “a boiler wallowing in the grass” and “an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air . . . as dead as the carcass of some animal,” before finding a “shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly” (116). In this grove of death, people and machines are disfigured,
literally and figuratively, by exhaustion, exposure, and decay. These sights, too, are “incomprehensible” to Marlow, and his problematic failure to identify the “dark things” as human beings exemplifies a strategy of rhetorical disfiguration that communicates the dehumanizing conditions of industrialized brutality in the Congo.

Deformation appears to be both the effect and the intention of “work” itself, as when Marlow describes an apparently pointless effort to destroy a cliff: “A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway” (116). However, Marlow casually observes that “The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on” (116). The only thing that resembles an actual railway is the chain gang tasked with clearing away the blasted earth.

They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. . . . All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. (117)

This portrait of “men who could by no stretch of the imagination be called criminals” reconfigures them into a single body, a moving mass of flesh, rags, earth, and metal, whose overlapping features create a macabre cubist effect. The ontological category of the human is thus one that the novel troubles from both temporal extremes: the “savages” who live in a prehistoric state of nature (“monstrous and free”) seem not yet human, while routines of forced labor transform the subjects of colonial worldbuilding into posthuman beings.75

In the current posthuman turn, the horror genre is consistently invoked as a mode of imagining (and theorizing) “the world-without-us.”76 The literary works that are privileged by this paradigm tend to posit a weird, monstrous, nonhuman force that comes from somewhere radically external. Yet the source of this terror also tends to be displaced onto the colonies, which become convenient repositories for all that remains fantastic and unknowable. Conrad presents us with an alternative vision of what I have called “Anthropocene horror,” one that imagines the autoextinction of “the human,” not as a species, but as an enlightened ideal. His narrators journey toward a source of nightmares that seems to exist elsewhere on the dark
frontiers, but they arrive there to discover only projections of themselves, the underside of the world fashioned by their daily lives. Denying the perspective of an omniscient narrator and instead showing us horrific events from within the echo chamber of an individual’s mind, Conrad’s impressionistic style dissuades us from believing that we can access an objective standpoint beyond our subjective points of view. His narratives ultimately suggest that horror comes not from a nonhuman world-without-us, but from an instrumentalized one – a world that is too much with us, that becomes inhuman by being dehumanized.