"In den Kongo, wo die Schwarzen am schwärzesten sind": Colonial Discourse in Urs Widmer's *Im Kongo*

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In the past two decades an increasing number of German language authors have written texts that take place in part or entirely in colonial or post-colonial countries and societies. While scholars of German literature were at first hesitant to engage in the post-colonial debate (Dunker 7), this has changed in recent years as the edited volumes by Paul Michael Lützeler and Axel Dunker demonstrate. Lützeler has attested to the authors of his anthology *Der postkoloniale Blick* a post-colonial perspective: "In den hier behandelten Texten der deutschsprachigen Schriftsteller und Schriftstellerinnen der Gegenwart jedoch hat - jedenfalls der Intention nach - der postkoloniale den kolonialen Blick abgelöst" (1997, 16; see also 1998, 29-30). There is no doubt that the intention of the vast majority of authors writing on colonial or post-colonial themes, Urs Widmer among them, is to contribute to the post-colonial discourse, or as Lützeler puts it: "[Der postkoloniale Blick lässt] faktische koloniale Verhältnisse erkennen, um sie im Sinne der Dekolonialisierung zu verändern" (1998, 14). However, as Michelle Matson has shown in the case of Franz-Xaver Kroetz's *Nicaragua Tagebücher* and Susanne Zantop in the case of Hans Christoph Buch's *Karibische Kaltluft*, there is occasionally a considerable gap between the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist intentions of the author and the colonial discourse of the text (Matson 105-106; Zantop 151-152). In this paper, I will examine the imagination of Africa and Africans in Urs Widmer's *Im Kongo* in order to test the alignment of the author's intention and the novel's discourse.

The critic Peter Arnds has shown convincingly how Widmer has used a metaphoric triangulation of Switzerland, the Congo, and Nazi Germany in order to expose the repressed Swiss involvement with Nazi Germany, the implication of Swiss corporations in the perpetuation of colonial power structures, and Swiss xenophobia. Arnds sees in Widmer's colonial discourse on the Congo a metaphor for Switzerland, as does critic Nikolaus Förster: "Das Herz der Finsternis liegt nicht in Afrika, sondern in der Schweiz, genauer: in der individuellen Vergangenheit des Erzählers" (Förster 82; Arnds 332-336). I will focus my analysis on Widmer's use of colonial discourse as metaphor in *Im Kongo*.

Im Kongo is modeled after one of the classic texts of colonial literature: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Widmer had written a new translation of Conrad's short

novel which was published in 1992, four years prior to the publication of *Im Kongo*. In an afterword to *Heart of Darkness*, Widmer expressed his deep admiration for the Polish born writer and called the text: "das wahrhaftige Abbild einer in dieser Form untergegangenen Wirklichkeit" ("Nachwort" 191). In order to analyze *Im Kongo*, I will take Chinua Achebe's post-colonial critique of Conrad's seminal text as a model. The Nigerian novelist accused Conrad's text of racism in a speech he gave at the University of Massachusetts in 1974, which started a discussion of a hitherto canonized author.[1] With regard to Widmer, it seems to me that a text that successfully progresses from a colonial to a post-colonial perspective should withstand Achebe's critique of Conrad from the 70s. I will therefore review Achebe's argument, focusing on three aspects of his speech: Conrad's imagination of African landscape and people, the absence of an alternative frame of reference, and the status of the narrator. Before proceeding with my reading of *Im Kongo* in the context of these three elements, I will attempt a working definition of a post-colonial perspective by revisiting Lützeler's definition of the "postkolonialer Blick" and considering Trinh T. Minh-Ha's self-reflexivity about her own post-colonial writing.

Chinua Achebe's speech "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" is a post-colonial critique of the colonial imagination of Africa. Preceding the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* by one year, it anticipates the key argument of this study, which has been claimed to have "single-handedly" spawned the academic field of post-colonial studies (Williams 5). Introducing his reading of Conrad, Achebe comments on a widespread ignorance of African civilization in general as well as academic discourse of his time:

> Quite simply it is the desire - one might indeed say the need - in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. (251)

A year later Said rephrases this point in the context of the European imagination of the Orient: "It [the study *Orientalism*] also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (*Orientalism* 3). In his 1993 follow-up study *Culture and Imperialism*, Said himself looked at *Heart of Darkness* to essentially confirm Achebe's findings:

> Conrad could probably never have used Marlow to present anything other than an imperialist world-view, given what was available for

> either Conrad or Marlow to see of the non-European at the time. Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West. (24)[2]

A closer look at Achebe's criticism will help to understand his accusation of racism in *Heart of Darkness* and its resonance for the post-colonial re-evaluation of the text. This analysis will also serve as the framework for my subsequent reading of *Im Kongo*.

Achebe's close reading begins by examining Conrad's imagination of the African landscape: "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (252). This opposition is reflected in Marlow's account of the British and African landscapes. Achebe mentions the example of the rivers Thames and Congo. Indeed, in sight of the British river, Marlow produces raptures such as the following: "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! … The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (Conrad 7). In stark contrast to that, Marlow's landscape description about the African coast paints a bleak picture: "This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black […]" (Conrad 25-26). The Thames is the source of "greatness" and the African landscape produces nothing but miniscule settlements, which do not seem to know development. The choice of words such as "grimness," "dark-green," "black," continuously invokes the darkness of the title and associates it with the African landscape. Conrad's Africa is furthermore devoid of any cultural achievements or even remote signs of civilization.

However bleak Conrad's vision of the African landscape may seem, Achebe's greater concern is for Conrad's imagination of the African people. After comparing Kurtz's mistress with his fiancée, Achebe concludes: "But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa" (255). Achebe provides a great deal of examples of Conrad's description of Africans, such as the "faces like grotesque masks" (255),[3] all of which leads Achebe to the conclusion that *Heart of Darkness* "depersonalizes a portion of the human race" (257).

Achebe closes his speech with two important claims, which deserve careful consideration in the context of Widmer's novel. Achebe points out that the narration does not expose or critique Marlow's racist attitudes because a) Conrad fails to provide an alternative frame of reference and because b) Marlow is a narrator who

comes across "as a witness of truth" (256). Marlow's overt politics are anti-colonial and his narrative tone evokes compassion for the African victims as it acknowledges their humanity. However, both the lack of (verbal) interaction between him and the Africans, and the virtual absence of speaking Africans in Marlow's narrative show that the novel's concept of African humanity perpetuates the assumptions that enable colonialism in the first place. The reliability of Marlow as a narrator is, for example, established in the frame story, where he is repeatedly referred to as a sage.

Before proceeding to read Widmer in the context of Achebe's critique, I will attempt to find a positive corollary and define the term post-colonial perspective for the purpose of this analysis. Lützeler's definition of the "postkolonialer Blick" serves as a helpful point of departure. He locates the origin of post-colonial discourse in writers of the developing world such as Carlos Pellicer, Bharati Mukherjee, Carlos Fuentes or Salman Rushdie, and identifies three main characteristics that qualify their writings as post-colonial:

> Erstens die Auseinandersetzung mit der Erblast des ehemaligen Kolonialregimes, zweitens die Konfrontation mit neuen parakolonialen Abhängigkeiten von industrialisierten Ländern und drittens die Thematisierung von Konflikten und Problemen, die mit den eigenen kulturellen Traditionen und eigenen Modernisierungs-bestrebungen zu tun haben. (1996, 222)

Thus, at least a critical awareness of these political and cultural issues has become a minimum requirement for subsequent writings on colonial or post-colonial societies to contribute to the post-colonial discourse. However, as Trinh argues, post-colonial writing has become much more complex.

> Today, hegemony is much more subtle, much more pernicious than the form of blatant racism once exercised by the colonial West. I/i always find myself asking, in this one-dimensional society, where I/i should draw the line between tracking down the oppressive mechanisms of the system and aiding their spread. (98)

Trinh emphasizes the complexity of the post-colonial author's task, which is to expose, for example, racist language and imagery without perpetuating it. Since the condemnation of overt colonial and repressive practices and politics is a given, covert colonial semiotic structures take the center stage of post-colonial debate. In the remainder of this paper, I will examine if *Im Kongo* indeed manages to escape the

limitations of language in its attempt to afford a "postkolonialer Blick" and succeeds in transcending Conrad's colonial discourse. For this purpose, I will analyze Widmer's representation of the Congo and the Congolese by looking at the three aspects of Achebe's critique: the imagination of African people and landscape, alternative frame of reference, and the status of the narrator.

The protagonist Kuno Lüscher sits in a treetop in the jungle of the Congo and types his autobiography into his laptop. He begins about one year earlier on the day on which his father is admitted to a retirement home where Kuno works as a nurse. 56 years old and single, Kuno is disappointed with his life. "Einzig ich habe kein Schicksal," he complains, longing for drama and excitement. This changes when his father meets Fritz Berger in the ward and it turns out that they worked for Wiking, an intelligence agency of the Swiss army that operated against Nazi Germany.[4] As Berger and his father reveal their involvement in grand politics during WWII, Kuno learns that his mother's death when he was a child was not an accident, but an assassination by the Nazis. Soon another figure from Kuno's past appears to turn his life upside down. Anselm Schmierhan, a former Nazi sympathizer and brewery magnate, visits Kuno to send him on a mission to find Willy who emigrated to the Congo 37 years ago to manage one of Schmierhan's subsidiaries. This is Kuno's opportunity to catch up with the missed opportunities of his life since Willy was once his best friend, but then ran off to the Congo with Kuno's great love Sophie. When Willy arrives at the brewery, Kuno discovers to his great dismay that Willy and Sophie have literally changed their race and are now black. Before long, Kuno is in the midst of exotic adventures together with Willy, magically becomes a black man himself, and finally settles in the Kongo to become the manager of the brewery.

Descriptions of the Congolese landscape occur in five distinct places. There are four passages in the novel's chapters I and II, which otherwise take place in Switzerland. The four passages therefore have the appearance of excursuses or digressions from Kuno's story and are visually set apart by means of italic type setting. The fifth place that contains representations of the Congo is chapter III of the novel, which begins with the arrival of the narrator in Kinshasa and almost entirely takes place in the Congo except for a brief visit in Switzerland.

The forest is the dominant image that Widmer repeatedly employs to describe the Congo. The first depiction avoids the darkness of the forest, but it also does not evoke a hospitable place:

> *Das ganze Land, das Herz Afrikas, ist Wald. Grün, feucht, ewig. Du kannst dich jahrelang mit dem Buschmesser vorwärts hauen, du bist immer noch im Wald. Es gibt keinen Ausweg. Es gibt keine Erinnerung es gibt keine Zukunft.*

> *Die Gegenwart ist bewusstlos. Bäume, Bäume, himmelhoch. Lianen, sich schlingend. In ihnen mag ein Raubtier verborgen sein. Im Gras eine Schlange [...] Es ist heiß. Das Wasser ist frisch. Die Frucht ist saftig. Morgen bist du tot. Andere gehen über deinen Kadaver. Hunde verschleppen die Knochen deines Skeletts. Spielen mit ihnen, achtlos, bis ihnen ein Panther ins Genick springt.* (39)[5]

The symbolism of "Wald" comprises darkness, disorientation, danger, etc. and is as such opposed to that of "Lichtung," which is often associated with truth and enlightenment.[6] Widmer's use of the forest in the present paragraph is no exception. Danger is lurking everywhere including the biblical temptation of the snake. To make matters worse, there is no end to it, no way out. According to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, this symbolic connotation of the forest is medieval: "Im mittelalter gilt der wald als ein unwirtlicher ort, wo wilde thiere und böse geister ihr wesen treiben, wo der mensch aber nicht gerne weilt. darum tritt in dichtungen wald für die einöde, wüste des orients ein" (Bahder 1075). The symbolic meaning of forest shifts gradually due to processes of modernization and the forest is romanticized as early as in the 17th century (ibid.)[7]. Kuno's experience of the Congo and by implication Africa is for the most part stuck in the medieval symbolism. While there are moments of eroticized and exoticized romanticization ("*die Frucht ist saftig*"), ultimately the anarchical danger prevails. The transformations of early modernity, which have made the forests safe in Europe, are denied to the African continent. It is only consequent that the land is deprived of history: "*Es gibt keine Erinnerung es gibt keine Zukunft*" (39).

In contrast to Conrad and despite the image of the whole country as forest, there are also cities in Widmer's Congo. However, the image of the Congolese city is hardly more enticing than the forest and echoes the stereotype of the chaotic, at times even apocalyptic slums of the "Third World" that pervade the Western imagination of African urbanity. The people in the cities scour the dumps for food and drink the excrements of others (87), the huts are falling apart (90), the despair of the cities is so absurd that nothing seems real (91), the people are irrational because they think they will hit the jackpot when they don't even have a lottery ticket (91-92), and they will put up with the death of a fellow person for a can of tuna:

> *Schnell kann es um Leben und Tod gehen. Zum Beispiel schon, wenn alle im selben Augenblick erfahren haben, dass es am anderen Stadtende Thunfischkonserven gibt, Levi's Jeans, ja sogar gratis Kühlschränke und Autos zur freien Benutzung, so dass die gesamte Bevölkerung, alle von ihren Stadträndern her, die Stadt durchquert, zum anderen Stadtrand hin, Blechnäpfe*

> *über den Kopf haltend, mit Karren und Säcken, schreiend und schiebend. Oh, da wird natürlich der eine oder andere tot getrampelt.* (92)

In addition to the suggestion that stamping to death in such a situation is natural, the spatial marginalization of the entire population is striking as we learn that the entire population resides at the fringes of the city. This is in line with the Western cliché, that in Africa the people live in slums at the fringes of the city, implicitly denying the existence of an inhabited, civilized, and cultured center.

Commenting on *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe claims that "the most interesting and revealing passages are, however, about people" (Achebe 4). This is also true for *Im Kongo* as the very first paragraph about the Congolese illustrates:

> *Die Eingeborenen des Kongo wissen so sehr, dass die Menschen zum Leid geboren sind, dass sie nicht darauf achten. Es nicht erkennen. Sie wissen nicht, was Leid ist. Sie kennen kein Wort dafür. Für uns sind sie grausam, nur für uns. Ihnen ist das Töten selbstverständlich, das jähe Umkommen [...] Fühllos gehen sie über die Leichen, die die Opfer der Höheren wurden. Nachbarn, Verwandte. Sie sind wie die Tiere ihrer Wälder. Tragen den Tod in sich, sie wissen nichts von ihm.* (21)

At first sight this passage could be seen as evidence for a critique of Western demonisation of African tribes because "*für uns sind sie grausam, nur für uns*" (21). This accusation of "our" misjudgment, however, ultimately underlines the normalcy of the ascribed inhumanity for "them."[8] The consciousness of suffering is one distinguishing element of humanity. There has been an abundance of suffering both during colonial and post-colonial times on the territory that comprises the two Congolese nations today.[9] According to Kuno's account, the Congolese do not have a word to name this "*Leid*." This is a problematic metaphor. The official language of the Democratic Republic of Congo is French , but it is safe to assume that nobody in the Congo has to resort to the language of the colonizer in order to verbally express pain and suffering, since over 400 languages are spoken in this nation such as Swahili, Kongo, Luba, and Lingala (Encarta). Since language is another human privilege that the Congolese do not seem to fully master, the paragraph's climax and conclusion that they are like animals is no surprise. "They" are indifferent or "*fühllos*" vis-à-vis corpses even if they are their relatives. In the face of these images of the Congolese it may seem pedantic to note the word "*Eingeborene*." Yet, it is no coincidence that this term opens the paragraph, because for these kinds of descriptions to even become conceivable a distinction between "us" and "them" is a prerequisite and "Eingeborene" is the

first signifier of this division. Trinh explains the effect and connotation of the term by contrasting an avowed with an ascribed identity: "Terming us the 'natives' focuses on *our* innate qualities and our nobelonging to a particular place by birth; terming them the 'natives,' on *their* being inferior and 'non-European' (52)." The mechanism of terming "them" is illustrated by Widmer's use of the term "Eingeborene" in the above paragraph. While in *Im Kongo* the Germans are German and the French are French (65), the Congolese are not Congolese or Mongo, Luba, Lunda, or any of the other nine ethnic groups of this country (Encarta), but natives. The denial of national or ethnic identity of the Congolese is consistent throughout the novel and facilitates the imagination of them as sub-humans who pose a threat (39), appear to have a thousand feet (40), and are like "*Ungeheuer*" (47).

There are significant differences in the narrative voices between the italicized digressions of the first two chapters and Kuno's account of his voyage to Zaire in chapter III. While all digressions except the third (47-52) contain at least one marker of a first person narrator they are for the most part written in the third person.[10] They contain many generalizing statements about "the natives" such as the very first one: "*Die Eingeborenen des Kongo wissen so sehr, dass die Menschen zum Leid geboren sind, dass sie nicht darauf achten*" (21). The dominant use of the third person in these passages in combination with the kind of statements that are made bestows an air of all-knowing authority on the narrator. From the very beginning this narrative voice is not portrayed as a naïve echo of the colonial discourse, because it displays awareness about the cultural groundedness of its value judgements ("*nur für uns*," 21). Despite this cultural awareness the narrator of the italicized passages consistently describes Zaire in a language that emulates Conrad's visions of darkness. It is in this crucial point that the narrative voice of these passages is in no way different from Kuno's perspective of the non-italicized text in chapter III: the imagination of the Zairian landscape and people. After he has arrived in the Congo, Kuno, like his precursor Marlow, enters a barge to sail upstream on the Congo. The similarity of Kuno's observation with Marlow's would be uncanny if we didn't know about Widmer's own fascination with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

> Nur Wald vor, neben und hinter mir. Bäume, Bäume: wo nicht Wasser war, da waren Bäume, Bäume: wo nicht Wasser war, da waren Bäume. Baumriesen beugten sich über die Fluten, schienen hineinstürzen zu wollen und taten es dennoch seit den Urzeiten nicht [...] Andere Tiere schrieen, Todesschreie, denen eine schwere Stille folgte. Ich konnte meine Augen vor dem schwarzen Grün kaum abwenden. So etwas Schönes hatte ich noch nie gesehen, so

> etwas Entsetzliches. (127)

The fascination with the imagination of the African forest as a threat has turned into an obsession as the word “Bäume” is repeated five times in one sentence. Kuno is overwhelmed by the “fascination of abomination,” as is Conrad’s Marlow, when he stylizes the forest again as “entsetzlich.” The same can be said for the imagery that is invoked to describe the Congolese: they are horrific and barbaric. This is best illustrated by Kuno’s account of the tribal chiefs’ yearly convention in the jungle. Kuno joins Willy, who has been transformed into an African King, as his vizier.[11] As they arrive at the meeting place, an immense clearing in the jungle, Kuno describes the people as demons: “Wilde Monster, furchterregend, alle bewegungslos, und schweigend” (154). The practices these demons engage in are so horrific that Kuno inevitably distances himself through a sort of semi-unconscious trance:

> Ich sah und hörte nichts mehr. Oder wie durch eine Glaswand, als beträfe es mich nicht. Ein Teil dieses Kults zu sein wäre zu furchtbar gewesen. Alle um mich herum gerieten in ein wahres Delirium. Waren besessen, schienen verhext. Frauen wälzten sich kreischend am Boden, mit gespreizten Beinen, während ekstatische Männer über ihnen standen und ihre bemalten Penisröhren im Rhythmus ihrer Gesänge in die Luft stießen. Andere tanzten heulend und kratzten sich mit spitzen Stöcken blutig. Ja, der Wald selber schien zu tanzen und zu toben. (125)

The orgy that Kuno describes is so removed from his own cultural background that he has to mentally shield himself with a “Glaswand” from the terrible event. To be a part of this would be too much even for the imagination. The description of the ritualistic dance itself bears all the features of classical colonial imagery. There are no individuals, only an undifferentiated, frenzied mass: “alle um mich herum,” which behaves more like animals than human beings. They do not move, they wallow; they do not sing or shout, they shriek. Their rite is hypersexual. They are violent, chaotic and blend into, even become one with, the forest, which has previously been set up as a space of horror and terror. All of this combines to one horrible, yet fascinating impression of exotic Otherness that only leaves one explanation to the “rational” observer: They must be “besessen” or “verhext” (125).

The imagination of the Congo and the Congolese in *Im Kongo* is replete with imitations of the colonial imagination found in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which Achebe has so forcefully attacked. In the following, I will examine if the text critiques

this extensive imagery, or if it merely perpetuates it. Two questions come immediately to mind: How does the narrative voice function and what is the meaning of the protagonists' racial transformations? To understand the text's imagination of the Congo, an analysis of the narrative voice and the narrative structure is crucial.

The first four digressions in chapters I and II are particularly important. They are visually set apart through italics, they interrupt Kuno's narrative and are, for the most part, not written from a first person perspective. Thus it would be conceivable to read them as inserts that do not come from the narrator Kuno, but from an impersonal voice, which imitates the colonial discourse about the Congo. Then the digressions could be seen in contrast to Kuno's perspective and as an example of an antiquated racist discourse that has to be overcome. However, a close reading suggests this is not the case and that the digressions can also be attributed to Kuno. First, as I have shown above, the images of the Congo in chapter III are consistent with those in the italicized passages. Second, Kuno writes the novel in the Congo sitting in a treetop in the jungle. Thus the only explanation for the use of the first person in the italicized passages, such as: "*Bei uns singen die Vögel*, [...]" (39), is to attribute it to Kuno writing from his new African perspective. The spatial configuration of the narrator sitting in the forest of the Congo, which has been established as the metaphorical essence of that country, also plausibly explains why he digresses to talk about the Congo in the midst of a story that takes place in Switzerland. Third, and most importantly, a number of observations in the italicized passages directly refer to the events that Kuno recounts in chapter III. The descriptions of the same events and settings are strikingly similar. Consider, for example, the description of the round meeting space in the second digression: "*Die Eingeborenen schlagen kreisrunde Lichtungen in den Wald*" (40) and in chapter III: "Wir gingen langsam in das Rund, das die Maskierten, die entlang dem Lichtungsrand saßen, freiließen. Wie eine Zirkusarena" (154). Or, consider Kuno's personalization of the forest to describe his impression of the ceremonial gatherings: "*Der Wald singt, dröhnt, weiter, näher*" (39) and: "Ja, der Wald selber schien zu tanzen und zu toben" (159). The third digression begins: "*Wer Zeuge wird, wie sich die Stammesfürsten in den verschiedenen Wäldern treffen, ist verloren*" (47). What follows is a description and analysis of the chief meeting at which Kuno partakes together with Willy in chapter III. Only the fourth digression about the cities goes considerably beyond what takes place later in chapter III. However, here too, central motives such as the "*Löwenherrscher*" (90-95) are taken from Kuno's experiences related in the later part of the novel. In summary, the evidence suggests that all descriptions of the Congo come from Kuno.

Hence, the meaning of these descriptions depends largely on the status of the narrator. Can we trust his perspective or are his observations set up as an

example of colonial discourse, which the text as a whole subverts? Achebe poses this question about Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. His answer is that far from "holding it [Marlow's perspective] up to irony and criticism […], Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence" (256). Widmer shares this evaluation of Marlow. In the afterword to his new translation of Conrad's novel, he describes him as "durchaus sehend" (205) and writes: "Marlow rettet sich, weil er die Tödlichkeit der grenzenlosen Gier erkennt. Anders als Kurtz weiß er um die Qualität der Distanz" (206-7). Widmer has modeled Kuno in many ways after Marlow. Like Marlow, Kuno comes across as "a witness of truth" (Achebe 256). The purpose of Kuno's writing is first and foremost a journey of self-discovery, a quest to unravel his past and to attain a deeper knowledge of his self. Underlining the connection between Kuno and Marlow, Nikolaus Förster argues that Kuno belongs to those who "fernab der europäischen Welt- in der Fremde das Eigene entdecken und zuweilen am liebsten die Augen vor dem verschlossen hätten, was sich ihnen dort offenbart" (63). To fully grasp and come to terms with those discoveries, Kuno sits down seven days and nights without sleeping and eating, to cover the entirety of the 56 years of his life (214). Is this truly biblical endeavor successful? On the personal level, he discovers who was responsible for his mother's death. He learns about his own repressed implication in this tragic event from Willy. He, not Willy as he believed his entire life, had provided Anselm with the photo of his mother in exchange for a toy gun and thus provided the Nazis with the information about their target (170). As if to underscore Kuno's complicity in his mother's death, we learn that he even shot at Harry Harder with his toy gun, who was the bodyguard for his mother (170). Thus Kuno, who thought that he has no fate (16), finds out about his own tragic implications in the world politics of his time. Are we to mistrust a narrator, whose discoveries about himself lead him to completely reassess his own life?

Furthermore we have to consider Kuno's societal and cultural revelations. As Kuno structures his autobiography thematically and sequentially, the passages about the Congo comment metaphorically on their paradigmatic context. The thematic parallels between the Kongo and Switzerland are obvious: Mobuto and Hitler, who share the same phone number only in reverse; the motif of the forest; Berger's interactions with Hitler and Kuno's with Mobuto; to name but a few. Referring to those parallels, Arnds argues that "the Congo is an extension of Switzerland's past and present" (333). The sequential context of the digressions in chapters I and II are further testimony to Kuno's subversive revelations about Switzerland. Their position within the narrative is carefully timed and functions as a montage in that the descriptions of the Congo serve as direct metaphorical commentary about what precedes and follows them. For example the first Congo excursus elaborates on the

forest and its deadly dangers. This immediately follows the episode about Kuno's mother's and Herr Harder's death. Both have died next to the forest, which leads right up to the borders of fascist Nazi Germany. Consequently the account of the lurking death and danger in the Congolese forest serves as an associative description of the Swiss forest of Kuno's childhood. Another example of this narrative strategy is the fourth digression, which contains several references to the dictatorial power of the "Löwenherrscher" (90-95), who will later be identified as Mobutu, and which is directly followed by Berger's account of his encounter with Hitler. The combination of these two stories next to each other establishes the parallel between the Congolese tyrant of the present and Hitler. The sophisticated narrative structure shows the refinement of the narrator. By virtue of Kuno's narrative about the Congo, he not only succeeds in self-discovery, but also achieves to break the tenacious taboo about Swiss involvement with the Nazis. (Arnds 332 f.)[12] Thus, the very success of the narrator in reevaluating himself and in criticizing Swiss politics bestows authority on him that precludes an ironical or satirical critique of his subtextual imagery.[13] To the contrary, the imagination of the Congo as a dark place is a cornerstone of the narrative strategy as it serves to bring out the dark revelations about Kuno, the protagonist, and Switzerland's past and present. Therefore, the dismal images of the Congo are not only to be taken at face value, but in fact - just as with Conrad - they cannot be dismal enough. This reading is supported by Widmer's assessment of *Heart of Darkness*. He is unaware of the subtextual implications of Conrad's metaphoric. He calls it "ein ganz diesseitiges, durch und durch realistisches Buch - das wahrhaftige Abbild einer in dieser Form untergegangenen Wirklichkeit [...]" ("Nachwort" 191) and concludes: "Man kann und muß *Herz der Finsternis*, obwohl darin die Gesetze der Literatur und nicht die der journalistischen Dokumentation herrschen, als die 'Wahrheit' lesen" (201).

The satiric and ironic levels of the narrative do not provide a different frame of reference that would allow putting Kuno's language into a post-colonial perspective. The targets of the satire are Hitler and Mobuto on the one hand and their respective Swiss protégées Berger and Kuno on the other. The two dictators are portrayed as absurdly egocentric despots, who terrorize even their closest friends with arbitrary despotism. In both encounters, Berger and Kuno are entirely at the mercy of the despots' whims: "Jetzt hab' ich's! Ich wollte Ihnen beweisen, dass ich alles kann, was ich will. Und jetzt will ich, dass sie gehen," says Hitler (102) and "Ich kann dich zertreten" says Mobuto (164). Yet, the dictators give Berger and Kuno respectively their private phone numbers as a token of the exclusive confidence that they enjoy. Thus the satire by way of a synecdoche unmasks the underbelly of Swiss politics both vis-à-vis the Nazi regime and post-colonial dictators. While Kuno's neo-colonial

involvement as a Swiss entrepreneur, who enjoys the protection of the local despot, is certainly satirized and thus critiqued, his use of images of darkness to describe the Congo is not questioned by the satire. To the contrary: a good deal of the satire paints grotesque images of the Congolese as is exemplified in the following description of the Congolese commanding officer:

> Er schritt ebenso würdig wie ich und blieb ebenso oft an den Stoppeln hängen. [...]
> Er nahm den Hörer und hielt ihn ans Ohr. "Ja?" Er klang genau wie sein Herr, blickte aber wesentlich herrscherlicher. Dann allerdings knickte er in sich zusammen, als habe ihm jemand einen Tritt in die Kniekehlen gegeben. Er verbeugte sich ein übers andere Mal. Endlich nahm er den Hörer vom Ohr. 'Der Großmächtigste aller Herrlichen hat die Güte, mein Schicksal in Ihre Hände zu legen,' sagte er mit einer Stimme die schon tot war [...].
> Er machte rechtsumkehrt und rannte über das Maisfeld zurück. Er stolperte mehrmals und fiel beinah hin. (202-3)

The discrepancy between the commander's proud appearance and his inability to walk without stumbling effectively ridicules him. In addition, to make his humiliation complete his life is put into Kuno's hands by the despot. This type of display of black ineptitude and impotence has a long tradition in Western discourse on Africans. Be it the minstrel show of 19th century United States, or anthropological displays in colonial Europe, satire of Blacks provided containment of the feared "darkness" on the one side and a sense of superiority on the part of the white audience on the other.[14]

Finally, I turn to the phantasmic element of Kuno's, Willy's, and Sophie's racial transformations. As Willy and Sophie before him, Kuno turns black and becomes a Congolese native: "In der Zwischenzeit lebe ich unter dem Äquator, als sei ich nie woanders gewesen. Ein Eingeborener" (206). Arnds notes the metaphorical meaning, but refrains from drawing the conclusions: "I would argue that Willy's, Sophie's and Kuno's metamorphosis into black people reflect a process of both assimilation and corruption. Seen in this light, their turning black takes up the traditional concept of black as evil" (337). Indeed, this is the function of the skin color change. Instead of undermining colonial discourse and abandoning its metaphoric configurations, the novel ends up contributing to both, because blackness is reduced to a metaphor for Kuno's corruption as Willy's successor at the head of the brewery. Arnds is also correct when he analyzes what brings about the change, both in Widmer and

in Conrad: "The Congo transforms those who visit it. It turns its colonialists into greedy monsters and they become one with the surroundings" (337). This is the most plausible interpretation of both Kuno's and Marlow's transformation. Widmer has in this regard not moved significantly from Conrad's position. The only difference is that he has externalized the transformation. Whereas Kurtz has turned black inside (Conrad 146), Kuno has turned black on the outside. However, the meaning of blackness as a signifier of moral corruption is the same in both cases. The fact that Kuno's identity has not really changed adds to the claim that the racial categories have not been challenged. After all, the story of his life remains the story of a Swiss. The fact that he writes his life story in German despite his claim to only speak French and an unnamed Congolese language is just one indication of his unchanged identity. He is a wealthy entrepreneur, who owes his income to the fact that his Swiss beer company is the "Markt-Leader" in the Congo (207). Thus it turns out that the racial change occurs on the surface.

As such, the racial transformations remind of the phenomenon that critic Katrin Sieg has observed in her research on Native American impersonations in Germany: "Ethnic drag, I hypothesized, provided Germans with a way both to mourn the vacancies left by the Holocaust and to refuse the role of the perpetrator" (220). Since Kuno's writing is an endeavor to come to terms with his past and metaphorically with the Swiss complicity in Nazism, his racial transformation appears to be an attempt to shed the identity of the perpetrator. Seen in relation to the theme of neo-colonial capitalism, Kuno's and Willy's transformation into black capitalists suggests symbolically a shared responsibility with the victims. Whatever the meaning of the racial transformations may be, one wonders what the implication is to those who are impersonated and whose image is used both literally and metaphorically. Again referring to German Indian clubs, Native American anthropologist Marta Carlson comments: "This racial embodiment is an appropriation of exoticized colonized peoples [...] They have no idea how their use of the Native American image affects Native Americans themselves" (215-16). Kuno's transformation and Widmer's black imagery is a similar appropriation of exoticized blackness.

Förster has argued that Widmer's colonial images collapse under their own weight: "Exotische Klischees werden auf die Spitze getrieben, so daß ihr Konstruktcharakter offenbar wird" (93-94). This is also how critic Peter von Matt interprets the accumulation of exoticisms: "Wenn man den Schrott nur lange genug als Schrott hinstellt, zusammenschraubt und klappern läßt, muß irgendwann, und wäre es nur sekundenlang, das Gegenteil dahinter hochschießen [...]" (B7). While this certainly was Widmer's intention, this strategy does not succeed. Achebe asserts that *Heart of Darkness* fails to open up the possibility for a critical reception of Marlow's

images because Conrad does not provide "[…] an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions" (256). The same applies to *Im Kongo*. If we accept the above argument about the superficiality of Kuno's racial transformation, the novel does not contain any fleshed out and fully developed black characters or images. The only two Africans in the novel that could be called characters are the border guard and Mobutu. That Mobutu does not provide an alternative black image needs no further explanation. The second case is more complex. Arnds sees in the border guard a positive image and points to "the worldliness of the Zairian customs official, who addresses Kuno in flawless German" (339). I do not share this assessment. The following introduction of the customs officer in the novel places him squarely into the figurative configuration of a dark and uncivilized Africa: "Tatsächlich wurde mir am Flughafen von Kinshasa sogar mein Handgepäck geplündert. Ein schweißnasser, tiefschwarzer, schlecht rasierter Zollbeamter winkte alle Passagiere des Flugs aus Brüssel durch. Nur mich nicht. Ich war der einzige Weiße" (121). Kuno's very first experience in the Congo confirms his worst clichés about the country: he is robbed. The one who robs him is no other than the customs official. True, he embarrasses Kuno's condescension by addressing him in flawless German and mentioning that his preferred authors are Simenon and Montaigne, which contrasts with Kuno's preference for light fiction. Yet, the description of his appearance can hardly be described as sympathetic and, more importantly, the fact that he turns out to be a corrupt thief more than outweighs his education. In short, nowhere in the novel do we encounter Africans who behave in a civilized manner let alone who could serve as an example of a complex, fully fleshed out human character. Hence, regardless of what the intentions might have been, the novel perpetuates the racist colonial discourse without offering an alternative language or imagination.

Examining Widmer's imagination of Africa and Africans, I have shown that *Im Kongo* reproduces the colonialist imagination of its model *Heart of Darkness*. These images are not criticized by the text explicitly and the sophistication and authority of Kuno's narrative voice undercuts any implicit satire. The reduction of Africa to a metaphor for Kuno's and Switzerland's past and present corruptibility is intended as one of the novel's main goals - the criticism of the Swiss implication in totalitarian politics. In this regard the novel succeeds and contributes to the dialogue about the Swiss implication with Nazism. However, as Achebe rightly pointed out that "Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz" (257), Widmer's Congo is also merely a setting for Kuno's self-discovery and serves as a metaphor for or parallel to European fascism of the 20th century. As Adam Hochschild has shown in *King Leopold's Ghost*, from 1880 to 1920 the population of the Congo was decimated by one half (233). While the colonial government committed unspeakable crimes

(ibid. 112, 120, 196), the purpose of the enterprise was to Belgium merely a "chance to gain upward mobility towards wealth and glory" (ibid. 63). Although Widmer is painfully aware of these atrocities,[15] his images and metaphors perpetuate the colonial discourse that preceded and facilitated them.

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Notes

[1] See for example Humphries 110-112 and Brantlinger 371.
[2]Said is much more forgiving when looking at Conrad's imagination of Africa (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 19-31) than he is when critiquing the Orientalist scholars' imagination of the Orient. Curiously he does not reference Achebe's criticism despite the striking similarity to his own argument and despite the fact that, as a Conrad scholar (Said, *Joseph Conrad*), he must have been familiar with the speech.
[3] For more examples see Humphries 113.
[4] Wiking was a real organization that was led by Emil Häberli, Widmer's uncle, to whose memory the novel is dedicated (Luchsinger 10).
[5] I use Italics in all quotes from *Im Kongo* as it is used in the original text.
[6] See, for example, the use of the term in Heidegger's *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks*, in which the clearing is the exclusive place that enables the knowledge of all forms of being: "Nur diese Lichtung schenkt und verbürgt uns Menschen einen Durchgang zum Seienden, das wir selbst nicht sind, und den Zugang zu dem Seienden, das wir selbst sind" (42).
[7] For a detailed study of the symbolic shift in the image of the forest due to the impact of modernity see Jack David Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm : From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
[8] While the restriction "nur für uns" opens up the possibility of a different evaluation of "them" it perpetuates the hierarchical dichotomy between "us" and "them," because an alternative example of "their" actions is not given.
[9] See Adam Hochschild's study on atrocities committed in Belgian Congo and the Human Rights Watch report by Scott Campbell on atrocities committed in Zaire under Mobuto.
[10] For example "für uns" (21), "bei uns" (39), and "sage ich euch" (87).
[11] The repeated use of the word "vizier" is another example of the text's "orientalization" of the Congo. The term refers to a high official in Muslim countries. The Congo however is 70% Christian and only 10% Muslim (Encarta).
[12] Widmer's novel exposes mainly the economic profiteering through the character Berger, who sells his optical equipment to the Nazis and was backed by the Swiss chamber of commerce and industry (75-76). Historian Raul Hilberg shows that the cooperation of Switzerland with the Nazi regime was not just economic. He argues that the decree which demanded that all passports held by Jews be stamped with a red "J" was initiated by Switzerland in an attempt to prevent fleeing Jews from entering Switzerland (54-55).

[13] Indeed, Förster considers Kuno successful enough to include him as a paradigmatic literary example in his study about the *Wiederkehr des Erzählens* (see 61-63).
[14] For a discussion of blackface and the function of the minstrel show in 19th century U.S. see for example Roediger, 97 -99.
[15] See, for example, Widmer's foreword to Sven Lindqvist's travelogue *Durch das Herz der Finsternis*, which explores the traces of the Belgian genocide in present day Africa.

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