

## Out of Canada: Images of Africa in Contemporary Canadian Culture

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Article abstract

Through a consideration of representations of Africa in recent European-Canadian fiction, specifically Jennifer Mitton's *Fadimatu*, Audrey Thomas's *Coming Down from Wa*, and Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone*, as well as public commentary in English, one can begin to answer the question, "what does Africa mean in contemporary Canadian culture?" Doing so allows for an examination of the relationship between the images of Africa in contemporary Canadian culture and European colonial representations of Africa. Studies by Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, Christopher L. Miller, and V.Y. Mudimbe are particularly useful in providing a framework for a study of what has come to be called Africanist discourse, and its operation as an instrument of power.

# Out of Canada: Images of Africa in Contemporary Canadian Culture

FLORENCE STRATTON

We've been through some really bad movements of people in places like Africa and others, but this [i.e. Kosovo] is supposed to be an area that has the European veneer of civilization to it.

— Lloyd Axworthy, *The House* (April 3 1999)

The currents of racism in Canadian society run deep, they run smooth, lulling white Canadians into a complacency that will see racism anywhere else but in Canada.

— M. Nourbese Philip, *Frontiers* (12)

## 1

**W**HAT DOES AFRICA MEAN in contemporary Canadian culture? My essay addresses this question by examining representations of Africa in recent European-Canadian fiction and public commentary in English. The novels I have chosen were all published in the 1990s: Jennifer Mitton's *Fadimatu* (1992), Audrey Thomas's *Coming Down from Wa* (1995), and Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998). The public commentary I consider includes statements by public figures such as Lloyd Axworthy, as well as media representations of Africa such as one featured recently on the cover of a *Globe and Mail* book review section: a picture of the environmentalist Jane Goodall kissing a chimpanzee, with a caption reading "Flirting with Africa" (Levin D1).

My essay also examines the relationship between the images of Africa in contemporary Canadian culture and European colonial representations of Africa. In this endeavour, I rely extensively on three studies: Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow's survey of four centuries of British writing on Africa; Christopher L. Miller's examination of several centuries of

French writing; and V.Y. Mudimbe's consideration of European representations of Africa stretching back to early Greek writing. Taken together, these studies provide the framework for my own examination of what has come to be called Africanist discourse: a system of representation or knowledge based on the binary notion of white western superiority and African inferiority.

Finally, my essay examines the operation of Africanist discourse as an instrument of power. By considering Canada's engagement in Somalia in the early 1990s and its current involvement in Sierra Leone, I attempt to uncover what Africanist discourse tries to conceal about its connections to structures of western political and economic domination of Africa. In this undertaking I am much indebted to Edward Said and his analysis of colonial discourse as a mode of representation that enables western control and exploitation of the non-western world.

## 2

One can assert with assurance that the relationship between Europe and Africa has continually been represented as simply North over South, light over dark, white over black: as an unmediated pairing of opposites. A discourse dependent on such a polarized logic has a hard time saying what it means, and it bears a perverse relation to truth.

— Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness* (246)

Jennifer Mitton's *Fadimatu* is a feminist parable written in the form of a novel of development. It tells the story of a young Nigerian woman's quest for freedom from the patriarchal oppression of her society. When the novel opens, Fadimatu is a nineteen-year-old school girl who is attempting to evade the sexual advances of the school's principal. Expelled from school for rejecting his advances, Fadimatu returns to her father's compound where she undertakes all of the domestic work of *the household* and carves calabashes to sell by the roadside to finance her further education. Due to the influence of one of her suitors, Fadimatu eventually gains admission to a teacher-training college where she studies fine arts. Then, upon graduation, she succumbs to her father's demand that she marry a wealthy man, becoming the third wife of a well-to-do Alhaji. During the course of the marriage, Fadimatu undergoes a faked circumcision, gives birth to twins who die in infancy, and endures the hostility of her husband who will not speak to her because she has not been totally submissive. Having failed to find fulfilment in the conventional female roles of wife

and mother, Fadimatu leaves the Alhaji and goes in search of her mother whom she has not seen since early childhood. She finds her married to a fabulously rich government official who sends Fadimatu on a trip to London. When she returns to Lagos, the Alhaji is waiting for her at the airport but she refuses to go back to him. She has by this time absorbed the lesson her friend Sunday has been trying to teach her since the time they left secondary school: that from birth to grave, from father's house, through educational institutions, to husband's compound, Nigeria is a prison for women (199). Fadimatu thus determines to find her freedom and independence by returning to London.

As Mudimbe might say, in *Fadimatu* "Geography separates and determines *a priori*" universes of female oppression and freedom (14). For in Mitton's narrative, Nigeria is portrayed as inherently sexist, while the west, specifically England, is designated as the site of women's freedom. The west is also characterized as the source of all liberating values and modalities. Fadimatu's friend Sunday is noted for her intelligence which, it transpires, she possesses, not because her mother took her to a "witch doctor," as it is rumoured, but because she has been educated by missionaries who continue to lend her books by English and American authors: "Sunday read to [her friends] about women who had only two or three children, or none at all, and yet their husbands did not put them away. She read to them about women who did not circumcise their girl children, and yet these girls were chosen in marriage" (34). Mitton even explicitly points to the west as the provenance of rational discourse. In the absence of Sunday, Fadimatu finds she is unable to think clearly (47). At the same time, Mitton's narrative strips Africa of its reasoning faculties, depicting it as a place of incoherent discourse and irrational behaviour (see, for example, 36-37 and 151-52).

As Chandra Mohanty has demonstrated, the assumption that women are freer in the west than in the rest of the world underlies much white western feminist scholarship, making it complicit with the assumptions of colonial discourse and with the oppressive political and economic structures that operate between western and non-western nations. It is a view which is also shared by at least one of Mitton's reviewers who refers to "various social and gender advances made in Western society" (Rollins 77). A rather different perspective informs the writing of the Nigerian author Flora Nwapa whose fiction challenges such western constructions by characterizing gender relations in Nigeria as having been altered *to the detriment of women* under British colonialism, by defining an indigenous Nigerian feminism, and by portraying Nigerian women as actively resist-

ing both patriarchal and colonial domination. Why isn't Flora Nwapa on Fadimatu's and Sunday's reading list?<sup>1</sup> In the final analysis, it is because of Mitton's fundamental agreement with the civilizing mission of western imperialism: her rejection of "the possibility that any advance over tyranny and barbarism could or did occur outside the West" (Said 38).

In this connection, Christopher Miller's argument that Africanist fiction is a paradoxical discourse seems to have particular application to *Fadimatu*. In Miller's analysis, narrative is inherently involved with time and progress, a genre description that would seem to be especially applicable to novels of development which, by definition, pertain to evolution and progress. At the same time, in Africanist discourse, Africa is conventionally identified with stasis, as it is in Mitton's novel where it is the unchanging values and attitudes of Nigerian society which block Fadimatu's development. Mitton resolves this narrative dilemma in the first place by making her plot episodic and hence non-progressive and, then, by taking Fadimatu out of Africa altogether, a move which allows her to transform what has been essentially a picaresque novel into a novel of development.

In terms of characterization, Mitton's Africans are either buffoons or monsters. In their farcical behaviour, they seem to be modelled on Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson whose antics, as Abdul R. JanMohamed observes, afford the western reader a sense of superiority (47). Mitton's cast of characters includes the school's Disciplinary Master, a teacher who "cannot read or write" and who displays his disciplinary authority by making such public pronouncements as: "I have caught these two with my red hands" (55-56); Fadimatu's father, who listens to Dolly Parton records and wears "shimmering, clingy" gowns made of "expensive European polyester satin" (19); Fadimatu's mother who walks with "small painful steps" because her high-heeled shoes are too small for her (233); and Fadimatu herself whose preference in clothing design is for material "with pictures of fans and sewing machines and Volvos" (150). The following statement by one of *Fadimatu's* reviewers quite accurately describes the main source of the novel's "humour": "The humour in *Fadimatu* derives from the comic absurdity of life in Northern Nigeria, where the trappings of Western culture sit incongruously atop the traditional patterns of religious and tribal life" (Rollins 77). If, as Homi Bhabha argues, hybridization is the *inevitable effect* of colonial power (112), then Mitton's characters are in real trouble. What her characterization of Africans as buffoons seems mainly to demonstrate is the hierarchical nature of the imperial process. Would Mitton be likely to find it comically absurd for white westerners to cultivate a taste for, say, African music?

The convention of representing Africans as monsters has an even longer tradition, reaching right back to antiquity. While, in their deviance, Mitton's Nigerians do not quite meet the standards of Herodotus's African monsters — "the dog-headed men and the headless people that have their eyes in their breasts" (qtd. in Mudimbe 75) — they nonetheless conform to the model. Fadimatu's best friend Sunday has "one bad eye," as does one of her teachers; her other good friend Baby has "a withered leg, and when she walked, her whole body jerked up and down ungracefully" (Mitton 7), while Fadimatu herself has an ugly rash on her shoulders. There is also a boy with a limp, a girl with a rash on her face, and any number of enormously fat women. Mitton's "geography of monstrosity" (Mudimbe 78), also seems to be limited to Africa, while England is viewed as normative and restorative. For, while they are in London, Sunday has her eye fixed and Fadimatu's rash apparently diminishes (257).

Mitton's Nigerians are also moral monsters. In the course of the novel, eight women accused of prostitution are tortured and murdered because it is said that their "sinning was responsible for the lack of rain" (13); Fadimatu's friend Baby is raped at a party; and the corpses of Fadimatu's twins are mutilated. There is even a hint of cannibalism in the description of the activities of a violent sect whose members, among other acts of barbarism, "cut organs from children" and use them "to work their protection magic" (120). As Hammond and Jablow observe, cannibalism is one of a syndrome of qualities which, in western discourse, constitute the category of savagery: "any one trait as it distinguishes a savage from a European becomes an index to the existence of the other traits which are part of the syndrome" (36-37).

In the last fifteen years, what has come in the west to be called "African female genital mutilation" has become part of that syndrome: a conventional western means of equating Africa with savagery. It is a topic which has been covered extensively by the media and always explored in great (and titillating) anatomical detail, as is also the case in Mitton's narrative even though the operation Fadimatu undergoes is a faked circumcision. Many westerners know considerably more about the practice than they do about, say, the damage done to African nations by western economic policies. Statements about the latter are suppressed by Africanist discourse. Nor is the prurient interest manifested in African women's genitalia by this discourse a new development. In the nineteenth century, a number of near-naked Hottentot women were put on public exhibition in London and Paris so that their sexual parts could be examined (Gilman 232).

Mitton also relies on the usual western stereotype of African socie-

ties in her portrayal of Nigeria as corrupt from top to bottom. To call the characterization stereotypical is not to deny the possibility of corruption in Nigeria. Its status as a stereotype is made evident by the tendency in western discourse to associate all African societies with corruption, with the very few exceptions — only Nelson Mandela's South Africa? — serving to prove the rule. The characterization depends for its strategy on the notion of the relative probity of western societies: the image of the west as morally superior to Africa. If, as I do, you come from Saskatchewan where sixteen members of the former Conservative government have been found guilty of fraud charges, the notion of relative probity may have lost some of its lustre.

One of the reviewers of *Fadimatu* is especially impressed by the credibility of Mitton's portrayal of life in Nigeria: "Mitton has captured the twang and tangle of life in small-town Nigeria with its invisible lines of convention, taboo, and structure in a convincing way.... The characters are fully sketched and believable and an overpowering sense of place — smells, sounds, and even the texture of the air — comes through" (Petty 123-24). But, as Hammond and Jablow observe, stereotypical images of Africa are so embedded in western culture that they are accepted in the west "as the only appropriate way to write about Africa" (17). In other words, verisimilitude is achieved by conforming to the conventions of Africanist discourse.

### 3

Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness.... Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans.

— Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa" (788)

Audrey Thomas's *Coming Down from Wa* is set in Ghana and features a European Canadian protagonist who undertakes a journey of self-discovery through a threatening African landscape. William MacKenzie travels to Ghana ostensibly to do research for his Masters thesis on the lost-wax-proc-

ess, a Ghanaian metal casting technique in which the original wax model is replaced or “lost” in the casting process. But William’s real purpose is to research his parents’ past. In the 1960s, as volunteer teachers with a Canadian organization, they had been based at a Catholic girls school in Wa where William himself was conceived. But shortly after William’s birth, something happened to destroy their relationship and to cause the family to return suddenly to Canada and live in isolation from friends and relatives for the next two decades. William does eventually uncover his parents’ guilty secret. Around the time of William’s birth, his father had been seduced by a fifteen-year old Ghanaian school girl who became pregnant. His mother urged abortion, but when the girl suffered an apparent miscarriage, William’s mother rejected her and the girl disappeared forever, possibly having died from the haemorrhaging.

However, it is William’s discovery of his own moral frailty or “dark” side that is the real focal point of the narrative. Thirsty and heat-struck, already over-wrought by what he has found out about his parents and having just been short-changed by an orange vendor, William loses his self-control and starts to throw stones at the children who are following him. Realizing that his “civilization,” too, is a fragile veneer, he is able to forgive his parents, accept his own flawed nature, and get on with his life by returning to Canada.

*Coming Down from Wa* belongs to what Hammond and Jablow describe as a fairly recent western tradition, deriving from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and encouraged by the development of psychoanalytic theory, of representing Africa as “the Dark Labyrinth”:

For most of the psychologically oriented writers Africa is the labyrinth, and at its centre is the African who represents the lost natural self. Once contact with that self has been made and accepted, transfiguration frees the European from Africa. His need for it is over and he may continue his life, though with renewed self-acceptance, away from the scene of his quest. (146-47)

In following the labyrinthian tradition, Thomas, like Conrad, uses Africa as a metaphor for the protagonist’s inner psyche which must be confronted to achieve freedom or expiation. As in Conrad, too, the role of Africans in Thomas’s narrative is to represent the primitive, irrational, “dark” forces that are inherent in all human beings, including “civilized” Europeans and Canadians. It is a representation which, as Terry Eagleton observes, “disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them” (135). For, as the personification of savagery, Africans are necessar-



ily portrayed as lacking even a veneer of civilization, as trapped, seemingly everlastingly, in an earlier stage of human evolutionary development.

And, indeed, the savage African stereotype shows up periodically in Thomas's narrative. For example, at the village where William goes to observe the lost-wax process there is a boy who cannot speak because he has no tongue. "Was he born that way? Was it cancer? Could it have been — surely impossible today — a punishment?" William wonders (99). Since William never does discover the reason for the boy's disability, the question remains open. But, in the absence of an alternative explanation, Thomas's play on deeply held western beliefs about African barbarism simply reinforces them. Later in the narrative William meets a boy with one hand missing. "Somebody chop it off," he tells William (222). While William wonders if the boy might not be exaggerating, his mother accepts the boy's account of his mutilation (228). Thomas also devotes several pages of her novel to "African female genital mutilation," including, like Mitton, a detailed description of the procedure (129, 175-77) and thus providing further evidence of the on-going tendency for western texts on Africa "to repeat each other in a sort of cannibalistic, plagiarizing intertextuality" (Miller 6).

For Thomas as for Conrad, savagery is like a contagious disease, spreading, in the case of her narrative, from Africans to Canadians. Just as Africa brings Kurtz down to primitive levels of desire and violence, so, too, it does William and his parents. The notion of contagious savagery is further reinforced in Thomas's novel by the many references to illness in the narrative, references which also uphold the convention of Africa as a disease-ridden continent. The volunteers William meets experience seemingly endless medical problems: dysentery, dengue fever, malaria, encephalitis, mental breakdown. Even William, though he takes every known precaution and spends only a few weeks in Africa, becomes deathly ill and has to be hospitalized.

But what is, finally, most disturbing about Thomas's narrative is the answer it poses to the question: What is Africa's problem? According to William's friend Johnny, a Canadian volunteer who is the novel's real hero and its most reliable commentator on Africa, Africans "shit whenever and wherever [they] feel the need" (149) — a view that is confirmed later in the novel when William, while running on the beach, almost steps "on a large coil of human shit" (277). It is not that they have an aversion to sanitation, Johnny explains, but rather that they are incapable of comprehending the relationship between excrement and disease. "I can talk about hygiene until I'm blue in the face," he says in frustration, "but it's an

uphill battle" (150). Nor can Africans be made to understand the nature of AIDS. They may accept condoms gladly, but they are likely to "cut the tips off because they believe intercourse is a sacred mingling of the male and female fluids" or to "[hang] the condoms up, like fetishes, over the sleeping mats" (45). Even water contamination is a concept which is too difficult for Thomas's Africans: someone "threw a sick cow in the river last weekend," a nurse tells William, "and now there are four (known) cases of cholera" (118). In the novel's perspective, then, Africans are irrational, superstitious, backward — in a word uncivilized.

What is Thomas's solution to this "African problem"? One thing is certain: it is extremely unlikely to come from African leaders, most of whom are, at least in Johnny's view, "savages or wankers" (184). Rather it is western volunteers who are going to solve the problem, though not ones like William's parents who thought they could save the world through their idealism, nor ones like so many of William's generation who see working in Africa as a career opportunity. Rather it is the committed but pragmatic Johnny who provides the model, a man who is apparently immune to Africa's corrupting influence: one who in true Kiplingesque fashion takes up the "white man's burden" of bringing civilization to darkest Africa.

And while it might be argued that, through her attention to the lost-wax process, Thomas bestows a modicum of humanity on Africans, the primary function of the technique in the narrative is as a metaphor for William's and his parents' loss of control when they are in Africa. Thus, as Achebe might put it, Africa is once again reduced "to the role of props," in this case for the breakup of three petty Canadian minds.

#### 4

Presently one of the liveliest conventions is that of Africa as a preserve, and it took shape in the literature of the height of empire. Partly rooted in the already familiar convention of the sportsman's paradise, it also reflected the new possessive attitudes toward the land. Conservation was the new theme: to preserve for the civilized world those features of Africa which were unique.

— Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow,  
*The Africa that Never Was* (89-90)

Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* is the best-known of the three novels discussed in this essay. Enthusiastically reviewed both nationally and in-

ternationally, it was also nominated for the Governor General's Award and the Giller Prize. Set in modern-day Kenya, *The White Bone* is a story about imperilled African elephants. A combination of quest narrative and ecoparable, it tells of the elephants' search for The Safe Place, a wildlife reserve or national park that will provide refuge from the ravages of the worst drought in elephant memory and from the predations of ivory poachers who track the elephants with vehicles, planes, and helicopters, shooting them and then hacking off their faces to get at the tusks. The story is told entirely from the elephants' perspective and is replete with elephant terminology, history, and mythology. It was not, however, her intention, Gowdy has stated in an interview, to write an animal fable (Bush D1). Rather, with its harrowing scenes of elephant massacres and mutilations, the novel is concerned with the fate of the African elephant.

Gowdy prefaces her narrative with a map of the terrain traversed by the elephants in their search for food, safety, and missing family members. It is a vast area populated by an enormous variety of African wildlife: giraffe, crocodiles, monkeys, snakes, vultures, hawks, lions, warthogs, cheetah, zebra, hippopotamuses, hyenas, mongooses, rhinoceros, as well as elephants. The representation of Africa as a wildlife park is a cliché which, like several of the images examined in this essay, has a long tradition in western discourse, stretching back to antiquity. Pliny, for example, describes Africa as a place where "There are forests filled with a multitude of wild beasts, and further desolate haunts of elephants" (qtd. in Mudimbe 77). Hammond and Jablow, in the excerpt above, offer a more recent history of the trope as it occurs in British fiction. They also suggest its political function as an instrument of western knowledge and power, a form of territorial appropriation which justifies western imperialist expansion and domination. The association of Africa with wildlife is also a mainstay of the western conservation movement which uses it in its campaign for the preservation of African animals in their natural habitats and present numbers.<sup>2</sup> If Africa and animals are synonymous — which is the implication of Gowdy's narrative, and an identification made more explicit by western conservationist discourse and also by the *Globe and Mail* in its review of the Jane Goodall-chimpanzee story — then what is the place of Africans in Africa? In the territory covered by Gowdy's map, Africans have no place, for it is a domain which humans enter only as predators.

In contrast to the elephants, which, as several reviewers have noted, are both individually drawn and complex characters,<sup>3</sup> Gowdy's humans, known as hindleggers, are stereotypically portrayed in classic Manichean fashion. Most humans are evil: vicious murderers of elephants. However,

in recent times, a few humans have been redeemed from their cruel ways through the agency of *the white bone*, a grail-like object which the elephants believe will direct them to The Safe Place: “[The humans] set out to discover a place of tranquillity and green browse and, when they did, declared it a safe vicinity for every creature on The Domain (44).

With one exception, a reference to Masai engagement in the killing of elephants (305), Gowdy does not specify the ethnicity, race, or nationality of the ivory poachers. However, as is well-known by those who watch *National Geographic* documentaries about elephants (or by anyone who has seen the movie *To Walk with Lions*), ivory poachers are African. It is also fairly common knowledge that national parks are an American invention, the first one to be established being Yellowstone National Park in 1872.<sup>4</sup> There are only two categories of humans in *The White Bone*: evil (African) ivory poachers and good (western) conservationists.

The racial allegory thus embedded in the narrative is underscored by the racially-coded patterns of imagery which run through Gowdy’s narrative: what Patrick Brautlinger calls “the white-and-black, light-and-darkness dichotomies of racist fantasy (263). *The white bone*, a symbol of “forgiveness and hope” (43), which “bleaches whiter all the time” and is “the whitest thing you’ve ever seen” (70), is not only, obviously, white, but comes from a species of white elephant which is now extinct. Black, on the other hand, is used throughout the narrative to signify death, depravity, corruption, violence, evil. Thus the further descent of humans into evil is described as “the darkness [which] had entered the humans and was corrupting their already corrupt spirits” (43), while the elephant hope that some humans might some day find redemption is expressed in the metaphor: “Even the blackest crevices have known a moment of sunlight” (45).

Equally problematic is Gowdy’s inversion of the conventional human/animal dichotomy. Gowdy’s elephants have history, religion, philosophy, art, literature, and science, while African civilization and culture are non-existent. Indeed, in *The White Bone* Africans are so dehumanized that they display the nature of savage beasts: “With hyena-like yells the humans gallop into the swamp, knees capering above the water, guns firing” (86). While the inversion of the human/animal binary quite evidently serves the interests of Gowdy’s ecological project, it has the effect of reinscribing the binaries of colonial discourse in its denial of humanity to Africans.

Gowdy’s ecological project also requires the exclusion from her narrative of any reference to the historical or socio-economic context of her

story about the hunting of elephants. For example, no mention is made of the impact of elephants, the largest land mammal living today, on farming, the primary occupation in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1989, the year a world-wide ban was imposed on ivory trading, Kenya had about 20,000 elephants (Douglas-Hamilton 328). As Roger A. Caras observes, elephants make difficult neighbours: “Each adult elephant requires between three and four hundred pounds of food a day plus sixty gallons of water. Even a few elephants feeding through a single night can wipe out an entire village’s food supply” (129). Given that farmers and ranchers have to compete for land with wildlife parks and reserves, it is interesting to note that Kenya has a much higher percentage of its area in parkland than do the United States or Canada: 6.1% to 1.8% and .81% respectively (Nelson 607-08). It is also instructive to remember that one of the reasons that European colonizers in North America hunted the buffalo almost to extinction was to enable farming.

In the view of Gowdy’s narrative, it would seem that Africa is meant to serve the interests of wealthy western safari tourists, the “entranced humans” who will stare at the elephants in *The Safe Place* (205).<sup>5</sup> And while tourism is a major foreign-exchange-earning industry in Kenya, ivory poaching is mainly the work of Africans impoverished by the declining economies of their nations which have been forced by IMF and World Bank conditions to devalue their currency, to “slash social services and public subsidies on staple foods, energy, and transport,” to cut jobs in government offices and agencies, and to use most of their foreign-exchange earnings to pay the interest on debts to western financial institutions (Lappé and Collins 112).<sup>6</sup>

But in the final analysis, it does not seem to be poachers who, in Gowdy’s view, are the ultimate threat to the elephants’ future. Rather, it is African people in general: there are just too many of them. Human population growth is a concern which runs throughout Gowdy’s narrative. For example, “In the last half century ... the profusion of humans and the need to make constant detours around their habitations” has drastically restricted the movement of the elephants (6-7). As is the case with most African nations, Kenya’s population density is considerably lower than that of European countries. In persons per square kilometre: Kenya 49.4; France 108.6; Germany 230.0; UK 243.0.<sup>7</sup> Gowdy is not alone in seeing “over-population” as Africa’s major problem. Her view is shared by many in the ecological movement.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the “over-population” theme is frequently played by the western media, and many western governments and agencies continue to urge the implementation of population con-

trol measures in Africa. Taken together with western economic policies toward Africa, these population control measures might be viewed as a soft form of extermination, one of the ways in which the west continues to act according to the note that Conrad's Kurtz appends to his eloquent report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (84).

## 5

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination.

— Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (9)

Backward, primitive, irrational, deformed, diseased, corrupt, cruel, savage, evil: these are some of the ways in which Africa is represented by dominant, anglophone Canadian culture in the 1990s. Tied to an earlier discourse whose roots lie in European colonialism, these images are part of the cultural heritage of Canada and other western nations. Based on the binary notion of inherent European or white-western superiority and African inferiority, they circulate endlessly throughout western culture. An expression, confirmation, and justification of western power, they help to shape western, including Canadian, attitudes, perspectives and policies; to promote anti-black racial discrimination and violence; to maintain such practices as the exclusion of immigrants on the basis of racial criteria; and to sustain the old imperial structures of inequality and exploitation that continue to govern political and economic relations between western and African nations.

What has come to be called "the Somalia affair" is indelibly imprinted on Canadian consciousness: Shidane Arone, tortured and beaten to death by members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia; the killing of two other Somali civilians by Airborne soldiers; the video made by members of the Airborne of themselves drinking beer and making racist remarks about Somalis; another video showing an Airborne initiation ceremony in which the only African-Canadian soldier present is led around on a leash like a dog with the message "I love the KKK" written on his back; the disbandment of the Airborne Regiment. While the Canadian media expressed "shock" and "horror" over the racist words and deeds of members of the Airborne, it was not inclined to make a con-

nection between the behaviour of Airborne soldiers and the processing in Canadian culture, including so many of the media's own images, of Africans as savage and backward.

How, for example, were Somalis portrayed in the Canadian media in the period between 1991, when the civil war first broke out in Somalia, and December 1992, when the Airborne Regiment left for its assignment in Somalia? Even a quick glance at headlines from Canada's daily newspapers is instructive: "Millions face starvation in Somalia"; "Somalian peoples dying 'like flies': Canada could send peacekeeping force"; "Africa's misery: starving populace walk streets of death in Somalia"; "Warlord accuses rival of ending truce"; "Aid reaching Somalia stolen by gangs of thugs"; "Only massive UN intervention can stop this."<sup>9</sup> As these headlines suggest, lurking behind the media coverage of the Somalia crisis is a racial allegory in which the forces of evil — the so-called "warlords" and militia members — are deployed against a helpless civilian population, whose champions are the forces of good: interventionist western armies. In the particular context of "the Somalia affair," the casting of Somali civilians as helpless beings in need of care and protection is, perhaps, the most disturbing of these crude, stereotyped characterizations. For, it may well have been their refusal to play the classic victim role, to fit neatly into the prescribed western categories, that sealed the fate of the Somali civilians killed by Airborne soldiers.

The question might also be asked: What were Canadian soldiers doing in Somalia in the first place? The official answer to this question is that the Airborne regiment was on an American-led United Nations humanitarian mission to safeguard food distribution to starving people in war-ravaged Somalia. However, as Said reminds us, "the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting" (xvii). Somalia has enormously rich and unexploited reserves of petroleum, copper, manganese, and uranium. In the final years before the overthrow of Somalia's pro-American president Mohamed Siad Barre, major American oil companies acquired exclusive exploration and exploitation rights to nearly two-thirds of Somalia's territory.<sup>10</sup> Once in Somalia, western forces targeted as the enemy the most powerful of the Somali military commanders, General Mohammed Farah Aidid, a leader whose socialist and nationalist politics were a threat to the preservation of western political and economic domination of the region.<sup>11</sup> Hence, one of the effects of western intervention in Somalia was the prolongation of the civil war, an outcome in which the western media played a crucial role through its demonization of General Aidid. And through

its representations of Africans as lesser beings who are unable to resolve their own problems, Canadian literary and public discourse provided the justification for western intervention in Somalia in the first place, for the preservation of western political and economic domination.

Many Canadians will also remember, in this case with pride, how in 1999 Canada “opened its doors” to refugees from Kosovo, offering to take five thousand. In that same year, Canada accepted only twenty-four refugees from Sierra Leone, a country also caught up in a civil war. The number of displaced people was in each case about the same: roughly 1.3 million. How can this unequal treatment be accounted for?

The unspeakable “horror” of Conrad’s Africa seems to be lurking in every sentence of the media’s coverage of the Sierra Leone conflict. The Sierra Leone war is routinely described as a “senseless” or “pointless” conflict. This is a conventional description of African warfare and one which plays on the old notion that violence is the natural state of life in Africa.<sup>12</sup> The media also repeatedly provides confirmation of African barbarism. “*Even by the standards of African wars*, the conflict in Sierra Leone has been particularly brutal,” writes one *Globe and Mail* columnist, (Drohan A1, emphasis added), while another speaks of “Sierra Leone’s descent into darkness ... propelled by almost medieval barbarity” (Knox A10). Even the famous last words of Conrad’s Kurtz appear regularly in the coverage: “The horror! The horror!”<sup>13</sup>

As we have seen, the western category of African savagery already contains the notion of cannibalism as part of its syndrome of arbitrarily related traits which, in the circular logic of Africanist discourse, are used to distinguish savage from civilized modes of existence. Hence, it seemed almost inevitable that the media would invoke the notion of African cannibalism, just as Conrad had done a hundred years earlier in *Heart of Darkness*. From a *Globe and Mail* article: “One Human Rights Watch report records the testimony of a Roman Catholic priest who saw rebels decapitate a soldier who had already surrendered. Then they ate his liver and heart, raw” (Duek A11). Questions can be raised about the claim of cannibalism made in the article. For example, how close would the priest have needed to be to have observed which body parts were being eaten? However, the actual existence of cannibalism is not the real issue. Rather, it is cannibalism as a conventional means of characterizing the Other — as part of the system of binary thinking that structures almost all western discourse about Africa and helps make Africa available to the west for domination and exploitation.<sup>14</sup>

According to the U.N. Human Development Index, Sierra Leone is



the poorest country in the world. Yet it has an abundance and variety of mineral resources: diamonds, gold, rutile, iron, and bauxite. Many of the companies which have been involved in diamond mining in Sierra Leone are Canadian, including DiamondWorks and AmGen Minerals. In 1998 DiamondWorks financed the reinstatement of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, who had been deposed in an army coup nine months earlier. In return, DiamondWorks was offered huge diamond concessions: a twenty-five-year lease on about thirty per cent of Sierra Leone's landmass. The deal was obviously a steal since, according to the president of DiamondWorks, Sierra Leone's diamonds, the fifth most valuable in the world, are worth \$300 million in the ground, while the operation cost DiamondWorks a mere \$3.5 million. While the Canadian government knew what was happening, it did not take any action, despite the fact that the provision of such military support was in violation of a U.N. embargo against providing military equipment to *either side* in the Sierra Leone conflict ("To Buy a War").

Making the case for humanitarian intervention, the Canadian government has also, since 1998, supplied the Kabbah side in the civil war with millions of dollars worth of military assistance. At the same time, both the Canadian media and Canadian public officials have demonized the opposing rebel force and its leader Foday Sankoh.<sup>15</sup> But contrary to the media's characterization of the rebels as lacking any agenda other than the country's pillage, they have on a number of occasions articulated their political platform, which includes the eradication of poverty through the use of the country's mineral resources in the interest of the people of Sierra Leone.<sup>16</sup> And while the rebels' claimed commitment to the welfare of ordinary Sierra Leoneans has been undermined by the atrocities they have committed against civilians, there are also many accounts of war crimes perpetrated against both civilians and soldiers by the forces on the Kabbah side, though these are almost never mentioned by the media.

As a condition made by Foday Sankoh, the peace agreement he and President Kabbah signed in 1999 included a provision for the termination of all mining concessions.<sup>17</sup> The response by Canadian mining executives to this provision was to say that they expected that, in a few weeks' time, it would be "business as usual," for they had reason to believe that the final legislation would apply only to small-scale local operations and not to large-scale western companies. As a DiamondWorks vice-president put it, he expected that the company would "be able to retain its licences to the diamond-rich Koidu kimberlite pipes" (Robinson B13). And though the rebels have been blamed for the breakdown in 2000 of the peace agreement, its collapse is due at least in part to the government's failure

or inability to act on the agreement's mining provision. Not surprisingly, when Foday Sankoh was arrested following the breakdown, the news was greeted enthusiastically by Canadian diamond mining firms. In the words of an executive with AmGen Minerals, "We'd love to go back in. I'd take my pail and shovel and go mining diamonds" (Fennell, "Snaring" 36).

From this perspective, then, Canada's foreign policy in Sierra Leone begins to look like an attempt to preserve and foster Canadian investment interests. And because it does not seem likely that the rebels, who are a powerful and well organized force, can be defeated, Canadian intervention, along with that of other western nations, has had the same effect as it did in Somalia: it has prolonged the conflict which means that Sierra Leoneans continue to be killed, maimed and rendered homeless. It has, however, created a bonanza for the international arms industry.

Over the years, the Canadian government and media have both repeatedly expressed their horror at the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Sierra Leone. As the 1999 report on Sierra Leone commissioned by Lloyd Axworthy puts it:

The country has been traumatized by violence, human rights abuses and atrocities on a massive scale. Very large portions of the population are now relying on international assistance for the provision of the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, clean water and medicine.... The hard statistics of Sierra Leone's refugees and internally displaced persons cannot convey the personal misery of this national nightmare. (Pratt 29)

Yet, no one in government or the mainstream media has ever suggested that Canada might alleviate some of the personal suffering by "opening its doors" to Sierra Leone refugees.<sup>18</sup> It would seem that Africanist discourse, the overwhelming prevalence of ideas suggesting African inferiority, makes such an idea quite literally unthinkable.

In this same connection, it may also be worth noting that, when on national radio, Canada's then Minister of Foreign Affairs made it known that, in his view, the phrase "African civilization" is a contradiction in terms, no one, at least not in my hearing, said anything. That is what is finally so scandalous about the remark by Lloyd Axworthy with which I began this essay: not so much that Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs should have portrayed Africans as primitive and backward — as lacking even a veneer of civilization — but rather that nobody in the mainstream media, or even amongst opposition members of parliament, picked up

on it. It is then, perhaps, as M. Nourbese Philip says: racism is such an integral part of Canadian culture that white Canadians are oblivious to its existence. It is necessary to build resistance.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would especially recommend to Fadimatu and her friends Flora Nwapa's *Efuru, Women Are Different* and *One Is Enough*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Dykes and Douglas-Hamilton.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Richardson 35 and Bemrose 57.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of national parks, though influenced by the earlier European practice of maintaining hunting reserves for the rich and royal, was developed in specific response to the destruction of natural resources and the disappearance of wildlife in North America as a result of European immigration. See "Conservation of Natural Resources" 666-67.

<sup>5</sup> This is a view which is shared by the *Globe and Mail* travel writer from whose perspective Kenya's "on-the-take government has left a once-prime safari destination rotting with corruption, its roads and security services falling apart at the seams" (Dwyer T2).

<sup>6</sup> The literature on African elephants indicates that there was very little ivory poaching by Africans until the mid 1970s (Douglas-Hamilton 116-23, 315-45). It was at this time that most African economies became fragile due to the enormous increase in interest rates on debts to western banks.

<sup>7</sup> These figures are taken from the "The Nations of the World," *2000 Britannica Book of the Year*, 601, 606, 636, 733.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Chadwick 465-73.

<sup>9</sup> In the order of their appearance, these headlines are taken from the following newspapers: *Globe and Mail* 27 June 1992, A10; *Winnipeg Free Press* 6 Aug. 1992, A8; *Calgary Herald* 8 Aug. 1992, A5; *Vancouver Sun* 12 Aug. 1992, B11; *Globe and Mail* 17 Aug. 1992, A1; *Montreal Gazette* 28 Aug. 1992, B3.

<sup>10</sup> For further information on the connections between American oil interests and the U.N. mission in Somalia, see Michael Parenti 122-25, on whose analysis I have drawn.

<sup>11</sup> Outside of demonizing media characterizations, information on Mohammed Farah Aidid is hard to come by in this part of the world — a fact which might in itself be significant. The following are the only references I located: Hirsh and Oakley's *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope* 19; and Ruhela's *Mohammed Farah Aidid and His Vision of Somalia*.

<sup>12</sup> See Huband D4 and Bierman A18. Another recent example is Gwynne Dyer's use of the analogy of two bald men fighting over a comb to characterize the Ethiopian-Eretrian conflict (*Cross Country Checkup* 14 May 2000).

<sup>13</sup> As, for example, in a *Maclean's* article which begins: "Given the horror that has characterized Sierra Leone's recent past" (Fennell, "Gems" 30).

<sup>14</sup> An even more recent example of the use of cannibalism to identify Africa with savagery is Toronto mayor Mel Lastman's now infamous remark made on 8 June 2001, in response to an interviewer who wanted to know whether he planned to travel to Africa to support Toronto's bid for the 2008 Olympics: "What the hell do I want to go to places like Mombasa.... I'm sort of scared about going there ... I just see myself in a pot of boiling water with all those natives dancing around me" (*The National* 11 July 2001).

<sup>15</sup> "Foday Sankoh is a very bad man," begins one *Globe and Mail* article, which also calls him "the devil" (Gee A19), while in the view of the *National Magazine's* Brian Stewart, he is a "homicidal maniac" (16 May 2000). The Canadian government evidently shares the media's perspective. Canada's special envoy to Sierra Leone, David Pratt, has been quite blunt in his assessment: "Sankoh is a hard person to like" and "Kabbah is a hard person not to like," he is quoted as saying (Stackhouse A10).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Ambrose Ganda's "A Mission for Peace" 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> "The Government commits itself to propose and support an amendment to the Constitution to make the exploitation of gold and diamonds the legitimate domain of the people of Sierra Leone, and to determine that the proceeds be used for the development of Sierra Leone, particularly public education, public health, infrastructure development, and compensation of incapacitated war victims as well as post-war reconstruction and development" (Lomé Accord Article VII.14).

<sup>18</sup> The employment of racist double standards with regard to black immigration is a practice of long-standing in Canada. In 1909 and 1910, in response to the promotion by the Canadian government of American immigration to the plains region of western Canada, a number of black Oklahomans applied to emigrate. The government acted to virtually seal the Canadian border to African-Americans by adapting standard medical and character examinations to turn away black applicants. The Canadian press of the early 1900s reinforced and transmitted existing anti-black prejudice. See Troper 121-45.

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