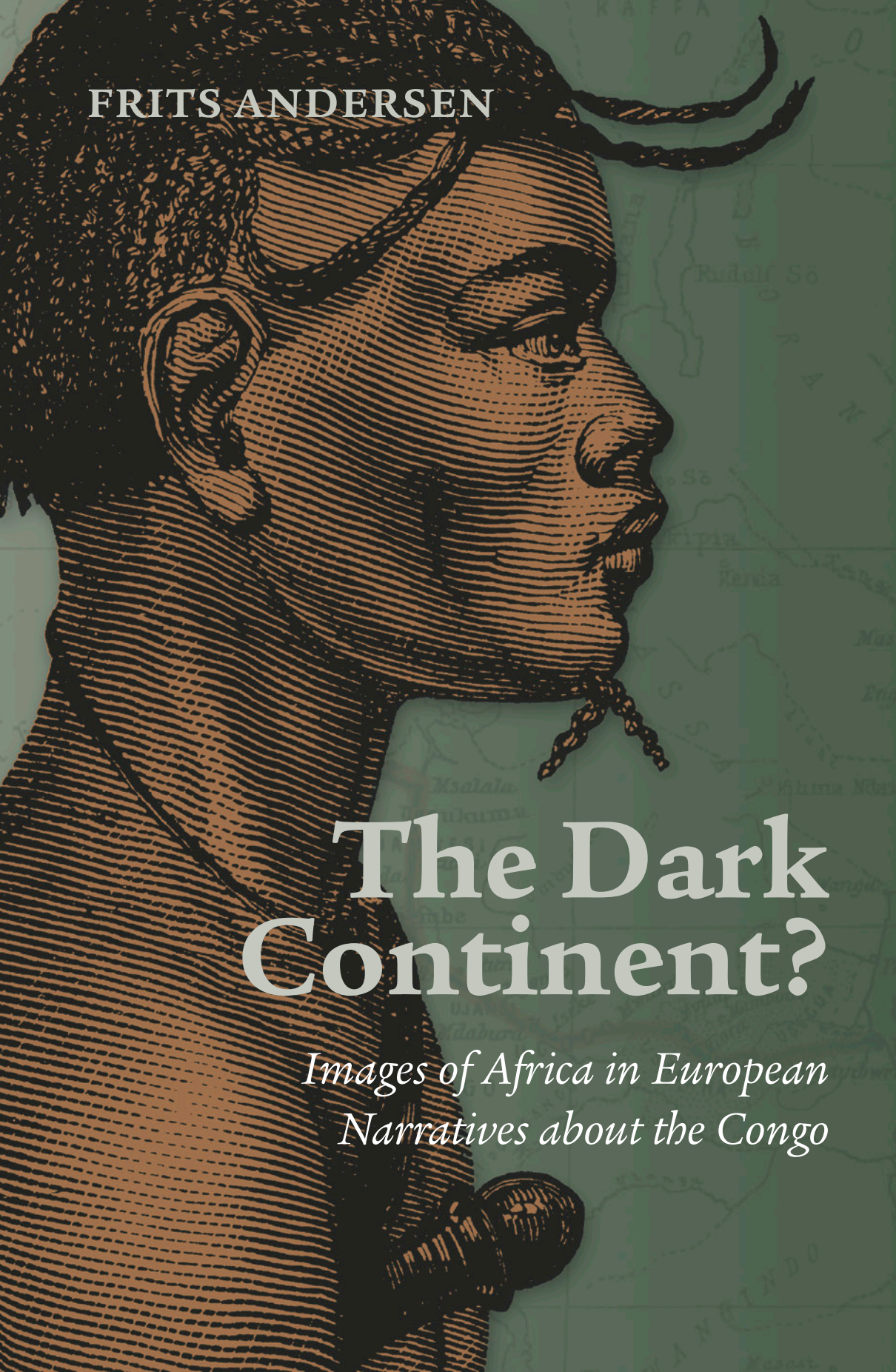
FRITS ANDERSEN



The Dark Continent?

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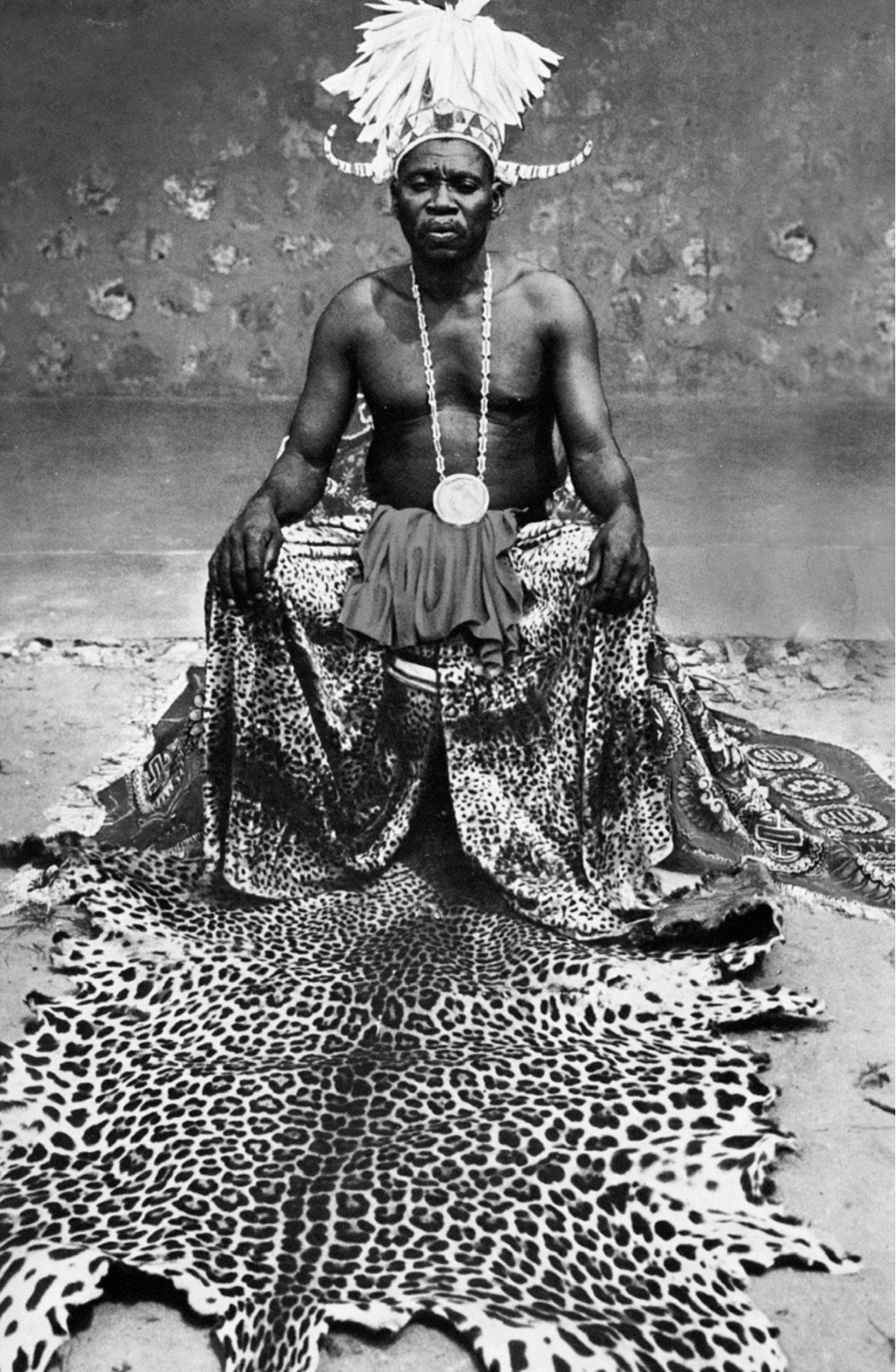


The Dark Continent?

Images of Africa in European Narratives about the Congo

By Frits Andersen

Aarhus University Press

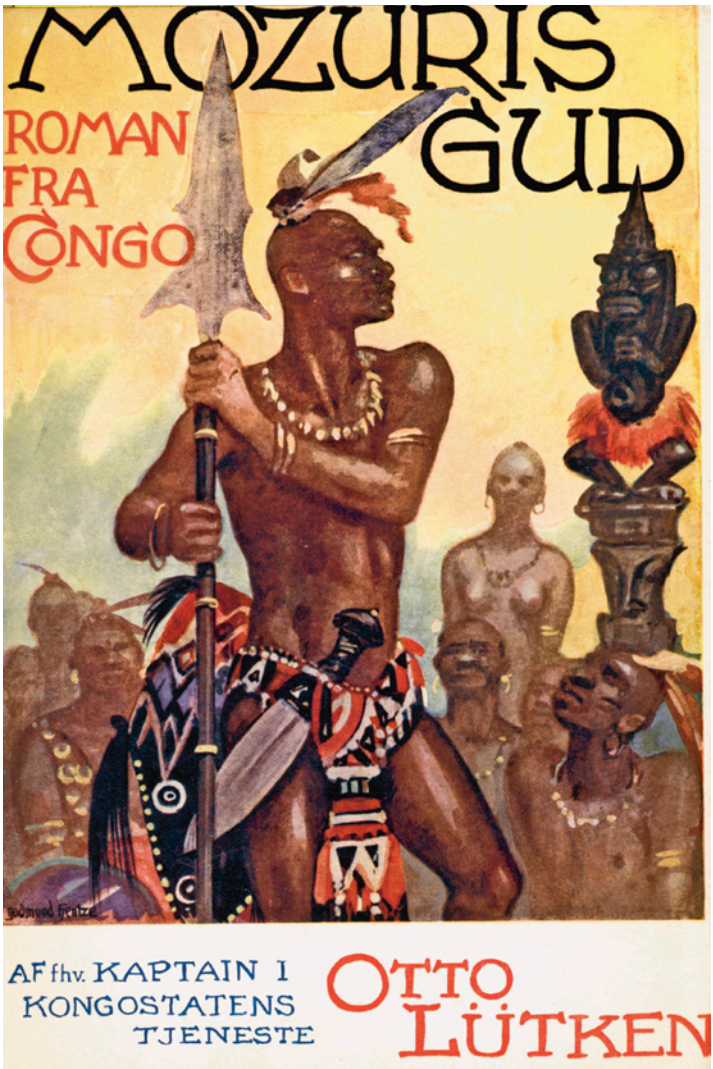

1902.

The Congo's position in global media around the year 1900 can be compared to that of Iraq and Afghanistan today. The country's immense resources and its late and savage colonisation made it a battlefield where travel accounts, testimonies, reports and novels competed to shape the European reader's images of Africa.

Preface

In an account from 1907 of an automobile journey through Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, the reader comes across a chapter titled "Red Caoutchouc". The narrator has stopped over in the Belgian port of Antwerp and is looking in the window of a shop, where some product samples of unusual colour and shape are displayed. When he enters the shop, he is proved right in assuming that they are rubber samples from the Congo – the raw material from which his car tyres are made, thus facilitating the wonderful journey, its staggering speed and this new way of perceiving the world. Octave Mirbeau's travel account is a futuristic celebration of the car, its speed and the new century. However, when the narrator takes a couple of steps into the shop, more disturbing films are played out on his inner screen: initially, a series of images that could be taken out of King Léopold's propaganda magazines, showing the colony as an idyll and the natives as happy rabbits jumping about at the edge of the woods; subsequently, the narrator imagines a series of photographs that depict atrocities and terrors, massacres and mutilated bodies. These photographs give rise to both fascination and indignation, leading the narrator to condemn Léopold's brutal rubber collection methods, while at the same time acknowledging that his own enthusiasm about cars and progress make him an accomplice – both a participant and bystander. After this, the narrator switches to an objective, documentary style, before the chapter fades out in a satirical passage that critically addresses all the presented images of Africa and ways of referring to the Congo; it all reflects back on himself.

A combination of experimental narrative and sophisticated, precise criticism, Octave Mirbeau's *La 628-E8* became, perhaps surprisingly, a scandalous success, published in several languages and a luxury edition with illustrations by Pierre Bonnard. The author, critic and journalist Mirbeau employs a plethora of strategies in his travel account without letting the reader escape his grip. In the passage about "Red Caoutchouc", Mir-



The many travel accounts and novels based on the experiences of Scandinavian contract workers in the Congo constitute a forgotten chapter in Danish literary history. The novels introduce and draw on reader expectations of the exotic, but the writer's own ideas and perspective are often affected, challenged, and shaken. Otto Lütken was a steamboat captain working in the Congo from 1907 who had to return prematurely in 1915, as he was suffering from malaria. His *Mozuri's God* (1928) was followed by other disturbing stories, including *Black Moral and Fataki* (1932). In 1930, Lütken published "Joseph Conrad in the Congo", an article about *Heart of Darkness* and his reaction to the novel.

beau's display of various images of Africa is unlabelled – he does not specify who he is attacking. He assumes that the reader can distinguish between – and recognise – them as widespread, typical ways in which people talk about the Congo. To use a contemporary term: the reader is expected to recognise them as 'discourses'.

The Congo's position in global media around 1900 can be compared to that of Iraq and Afghanistan today. Vast numbers of stories were competing to raise interest in Africa, and the continent was displayed in spectacular ways at the great World's Fairs and cultivated through the abolitionist movement's captivating travel accounts from "the dark continent". Towards the turn of the century, the Congo's immense natural resources and late colonisation turned it into a battlefield where travel accounts, testimonies, reports and novels were competing to shape European readers' images of Africa. One camp disseminated colonial propaganda about the need for missionary efforts to civilise the savages; another camp advocated for the Congo Reform Association – the first international human rights movement – with accounts of atrocities and terror that condensed and detailed the horror at which Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) had only hinted.

Mirbeau's travel book is one of many examples of the Congo's prominent position in European media a century ago. Today, the Congo is all but forgotten, except for the atrocity accounts which now and then remind us about the victims of the civil war – the greatest and most gravely overlooked human disaster since the Second World War. Mirbeau's travel book is critical towards reports, idyllic tales and atrocity tales. The book is an example of alternative narrative forms that help move Africa closer to Europe, but his example is unknown today, despite the great need for model examples to describe, e.g., the Congo as part of our world and history.

The same patterns and mechanisms that Mirbeau exposed in 1907 can be observed today – and with similar political consequences. It is a fair claim that our attitudes towards Africa – free trade, participation, emergency aid or intervention – are rooted in literary-historical conditions: narratives and narrative forms that emerged in the wake of the colonial powers' 'scramble for Africa', adapted for the new conditions of globalisation and modern media. These narratives are the topic of the present book; oblivion is its critical horizon.

The selected material represents a broad field of travel literature and travel accounts, including: Joseph Conrad's literary novel *Heart of Darkness*; Henry Stanley's voluminous accounts of his famous explorations in Central Africa, which were international bestsellers; lesser known Danish literature about the Congo from the beginning of the twentieth century; popular fiction from the 1930s, such as *Tintin au Congo* and *Tarzan and the Leopard Men*; and novels by authors of world literature, including V.S. Naipaul, Graham Greene and Urs Widmer.

The decision to link the present study specifically to the Congo is also based on factors in literary history. One important factor is the central role played in world literature

by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and his account of his own journey to the Congo, about which extensive, continuously relevant material has been and is being written. Conrad condenses central, much-discussed questions in the history of travel writing; in his writing, testimony and credibility are put into play in the interrelationship between travel experience, travel account and travel novel.

Another factor is the attention towards a hitherto overlooked chapter in Danish literary history: the broad field of travel accounts and travel novels about the experiences of Scandinavian contract employees in the Congo. In particular, this interest was spurred by the Danish reporter Peter Tygesen's travel book *The Congo – I Presume* (2001), which shares many similarities with the internationally recognised *Congo. A History* (2010) by David Reybrouck. Both books have been praised for their gripping historical accounts, which facilitate complex, balanced understandings of the Congo's history, from Stanley's discoveries to the arrival of the Chinese today. With their combination of testimonies and source-based history, both books have drawn attention to a chapter in history which Europe – to a large extent – has forgotten and repressed, even though Europe has been – and still is – very much involved. Contrary to Tygesen's and Reybrouck's historical expositions, the present perspective is one of *literary* history: its focus will be on how the history of the Congo has been told, and how European travel accounts have contributed to creating mechanisms of oblivion and problematic notions of the place that are still in effect today.

A third factor is the accounts of Stanley's two major Congo expeditions, which present crucial, extensive and challenging material that has not previously been investigated in a literary studies context. Questions of credibility, testimony and authority not only pertain to traditional literary studies issues such as realism and representation; they encompass a far broader and more problematic field. The travel writer's authority not only concerns the connection between the textual rhetoric and the represented world; it also comes into play in relation to readers, scientific and literary institutions (who may accept or refuse the account), market conditions and the author's choice of genre, public reputation, as it is created between biography and media reception, and so on. In this light, Stanley, "Africa's great explorer", becomes a central and fascinating focal figure. His life and journeys are linked to the colonisation of the Congo, and his travel accounts are therefore topographically related to Conrad's texts. This provides an opportunity to compare two very different types of text and observe surprising common characteristics, among other reasons because they hold key positions in the literary-historical transformational field around the end of the nineteenth century, which, in turn, have defined the terms for the travel literature of the twentieth century.

The present book uses Stanley and Conrad as focal points of the period in which the Congo was a free state under the rule of King Léopold; however, it also includes travel accounts and travel novels from the period in which the country was a Belgian colony – and all the way through to the present day. While the prose perspective makes it possible

to broaden the field of comparable texts, the topographic limitation has other advantages – e.g. a shared foundation for pursuing similar, dominant motives across genres and time, which are of general relevance to travel literature and research in the field.

Each travel description contributes to a literary topography of the Congo – a description of the place, its people and geography, resulting in redefinitions of traditional topographies inherited from earlier texts and travellers through an active process, which often takes place in explicit, dynamic dialogue with the predecessor. Throughout these transformations and variations of the literary topography of the Congo, however, it is still possible to trace some consistent patterns from the earliest travel accounts to the present day. A central component in this pattern is Conrad's image of the continent's interior as a "heart of darkness". Another, equally central constant is the idea of what will be termed "the exception": a consistent figure in twentieth-century travel description from the Congo, which structures the place as a geographical, historical, legal and rhetorical exception from norms, laws and rules.

The reason that these literary topographies have gained particular strength in descriptions of the Congo is partly due to the fact that the country is not a delimited historical, legal or geographical reality in the traditional sense. The political geography, today referred to as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is an extremely unstable concept whose borders with the neighbouring countries of Uganda and Rwanda can be perceived as purely theoretical constructs when viewed in light of the wave of civil wars that have ravaged the country since independence. Before colonisation at the end of the nineteenth century, Central Africa consisted of a vast number of chiefdoms and a few kingdoms, which – in changing alliances – defined zones of power and influence that, naturally, did not adhere to the same well-defined borders as national states. In the country's era as King Léopold's private colony, under the misleading term *L'État Independant du Congo*, and subsequently under Belgian rule, the region was not organised as an independent, modern state, but rather divided according to the colonial, administrative districts that had been defined in the initial phase of colonisation on the basis of mercantile interests. Obviously, the first travellers did not imagine the Congo as a separate geographical or ethnographic unity, but as a sphere of influence – a battlefield for competing topographies: on a day's march in the 1880s, it was possible to travel through two or three chiefdoms each with their own culture, language and attitude towards foreigners. For centuries, the population in the coastal parts of the Congo drainage basin had established flexible social systems, partly dependent on interaction with Europeans, while the societies farther east did not have much contact with Europeans; instead, they were under pressure from Arab slave traders, who were expanding from east to west. The Congo to which the Danish Lieutenant-colonel H. Jenssen-Tusch refers in his encyclopaedic work *Scandinavians in Congo* (1905) is actually not a demarcated territory, but a sum of overlapping, partly conflicting definitions of geological, meteorological/climatic, political and ethnographic nature – albeit with the Congo River as a staple point of reference.

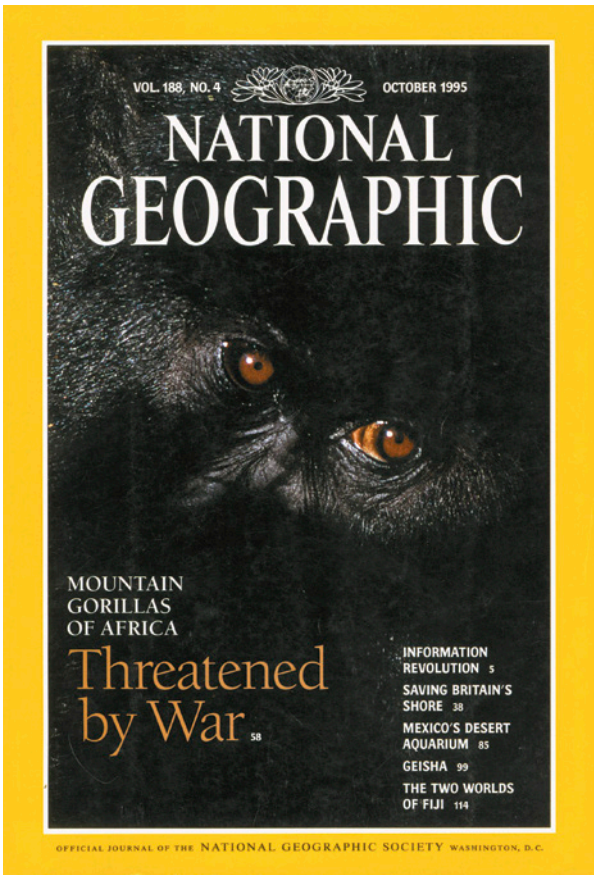
This image of the country as overlapping zones – both in relation to political power spheres, biotopes and ethnic diversity – is consistent in twentieth-century literature about the Congo, which comprises travel accounts as well as literary fiction and scientific literature. The complicated and detailed division into provinces and sub-districts during colonial rule can be seen as an attempt to subject the immense area – the size of Europe minus Spain and Italy – to effective control and discipline. This plan, however, never proved entirely effective, not even in the relatively stable period of the 1940s and 1950s. The passing of a new constitution in 2005 entailed even more detailed sub-divisions and bureaucratic administration, which – in most of the territories – was a symptom of powerlessness rather than control. From the founding of the colony to independence in 1960, the relationship between state and society has been precarious – and much worse under the successive, corrupt presidents. In vast parts of the country, the state is only present in the form of outposts. Vice versa, the population is not represented in the state, whose exercise of power is usually built on preferential treatment to – and alliances with – a few clans that are played off against each other, in addition to support from foreign nations: first the USA, later Angola, Rwanda and Uganda, among others. The UN's massive presence in the Congo before and during the election in 2006 was a symptom of the imbalance between state and society, whose institutions only functioned because of the Belgians' bureaucratic apparatus and ceased to function as intended a long time ago. In spite of changing truces and interim peace negotiations, the society-devastating conflict continues, and the deployed UN troops, whose mandate is far too weak, are powerless. Despite the fact that deployment of forces with a mandate to engage in offensive operations in March 2013 resulted in many militias laying down their weapons, new conflicts have broken out. Between five and six million people are believed to have died because of the war and its consequences – hunger and disease. And as part of the militias' strategy, whose goal is to gain control of the area's natural resources, the spectacular violence is carried out as a meticulously calculated scare campaign with massacres and savage, ritual rapes on an estimated scale of 400,000 every year.

Blogs by aid volunteers in Amnesty International and troops from the UN operation are written in tropes and figures that repeat the first descriptions of the place. This applies, for instance, to Sahara Sarah's blog from 2006, "Breaking Hearts in the Heart of Darkness". Fiction novels also use these rhetorical effects. John le Carré's novel *The Mission Song* (2006), about political intrigues and an attempted coup d'état – which refers to real political dramas, especially in relation to the question of whether Rwanda's mercenaries and allies in the Congo's eastern Kivu Province would allow the democratic election in 2006 to be held – plays out a number of possible scenarios under a motto quoted from the character Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

A very diverse field of texts and forms of communication partake in creating and maintaining topographical images of the Congo. Stanley's epic narratives about the mighty river and the great forests and Conrad's novel about the dark heart and the

Maps played an important textual and visual role both in travel accounts like Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886), and in travel reports like the great Scandinavian *Three Years in the Congo* (1887). Readers could orient themselves via the abstract overview of the map, while at the same time the strange place names and vast, unnamed expanses signified compellingly unfamiliar places.

terrifying images of violations against natives – which the first international human rights movement promoted in every accessible media to fight King Léopold's "Red Rubber" regime – are recycled in current accounts from the Congo. The bloody trail of Léopold's rubber collection methods leads all the way up to present day. Reports on mountain gorillas, who are threatened by the seemingly endless conflict in the border regions around the great lakes, contribute to the dehumanising perception of this part of the world by pathetically describing the animals as the reader's friends and objects of identification, while the human beings are beyond reach of both sense and solidarity. Similarly, human rights and relief aid organisations' campaigns, as well as global news, disseminate problematic images of "atrocities". Explicitly, they call for responsibility and solidarity with the millions of Congolese who are affected by the political, economical and ecological disaster; however, implicitly they promote a simplified, infantilising image of the population as passive victims – irrational beings of nature – who are at the mercy of the 'evil spirit' of the area. Current travel reports also contribute to the tendency, like the many examples of "tragic tourism" in which the reader is guided through the war-torn, brutalised Congo, including shocking accounts of cannibalism, exploitation



Contemporary reports about mountain gorillas, threatened by tourism or civil wars, represent the animals as the reader's friends and objects of identification, while the human players are located beyond reason and solidarity. Ever since Paul du Chaillu's description of the first encounter between a white man and his distant relative in the book *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* (1859), the gorilla has been a staple element in images of Africa in popular culture. The 1903 July edition of *National Geographic* features an article about the recently deceased du Chaillu, his legendary travels – also including the first encounter with a Pygmy – and his amazing talk at the National Geographic Society. In the 1995 October edition, the point of view is with the gorilla; however, the structure of the atrocity account is the same.

and victimisation. Masked by the reporter's objectivity, once more the ghost stories are presented, which have – first and foremost – sealed the country off inside a world of evil imagery to which rationality has no access. This place is beyond our comprehension; it is the horrible and bestial site of meaningless violence – a dystopia whose images affect the European reader without bringing about any fundamental changes in our understanding, responsibility or solidarity.

The abolitionist movement and subsequent missionary tales, whose moral crusades addressed violations and oppression in Africa, were – ironically – main players in the colonisation of the Congo and the formation of the problematic discourse of 'the Dark Continent', which still characterises present-day human rights campaigns and the majority of political thinking regarding Africa. Humanitarianism's moral feelings and the media's compassion discourse are both superficial and fleeting, drawing our attention away from the structural inequality that can only be addressed through considered analysis and political pragmatism. In relation to the literary history of the present book, this entails that compassionate and indignant testimonies must be investigated in a historical and critical perspective and compared with *other* testimonies. At this principal level, the book

can be said to present a literary-historical contribution to the current debate about liberal humanitarianism and human rights.

Like the travel accounts about the European discovery of Tahiti, which constitute a literary-historical transformational field in the eighteenth century, where various branches of travel literature converged and ramified into new tendencies, the accounts of the European discovery of the Congo constitute a similar transformational field around the end of the nineteenth century. The present study places Stanley and Conrad as central players in this field, comparing their descriptions of the same place within the defined art-historical era of *fin de siècle.* The late colonisation at the end of the nineteenth century, when European nation states were facing profound internal crises and external rivalry in Europe and Africa, in conjunction with the specific media and technology-related conditions for the discovery, make the Congo a crucial example for research into historical developments in a global sense of place. The Congo's status as a *not yet* fully formed national state makes twentieth-century travel accounts from the country relevant in relation to current redefinitions of places and frontiers in Europe – changes which are also subjects of travel descriptions and essay novels.[1] The Congo's status in the international public sphere as a non-place, or as a vaguely defined zone of crossing, overlapping topographies, makes it a relevant topic for literary-historical studies of mixed, overlapping prose perspectives and investigation into the relation between literature and globalisation. Bernard Piniau writes, from an international political relations perspective, in the introduction to his book *Congo-Zaïre. 1874-1981 La perception du lointain* (1992) that the global forgetting and political isolation of the Congo make it an apt topic for studying literary rhetoric's influence on global media and politics. Although Edward Said (and Erich Auerbach before him) has been a source of inspiration to the present book, the critical basis is not the postcolonial theoretical tradition, which has, for a long time, held a monopoly in the area of travel studies and "Africanism". On the contrary, this book is a contribution to the current development in the field of world literature, albeit in a new direction, where it is an important point that a very broad field of texts and testimonies are compared. Emphasis is not put on how the texts *represent* Congolese reality, but how they *create* European ideas of that reality. World literature is not used to describe a specific canon, but to characterise the dynamic creation of images of the world, which have powerful influence on the formation of 'real' world history and geography. This entails a different appraisal of Conrad's canonical story and results in Stanley's travel accounts being positioned differently in world literature, at the same time as access is created to a different understanding of Stanley's rhetoric than the one typically advocated by postcolonial criticism. Moreover, it is demonstrated that a vast number of forgotten texts played an important role in the creation of our conceptions of Africa, making them interesting objects of study and reappraisal. This entails their potential in regard to both complexity of experience and complexity of interpretation.

The present study of the history of this type of prose is an attempt to write literary

history on globalised conditions. It is rooted in a contemporary and local context, which limits the knowledge about the place the texts address. However, it does not hinder a critical approach to the texts as European narratives about a different place in the world, and – in an expanded sense – as dominant narratives about places in the world which – like the Congo – have been assigned positions in a distant, asynchronous, completely different world, far away from the global media reality. The texts investigated in this book not only describe the historical preconditions for the West's images of Africa today; they actively contribute to their creation. The present narrative aims to contribute to the understanding of this literary history – how the place has been forgotten and repressed. On the other hand, it also intends to demonstrate that from the earliest texts about the Congo, there have been opposing tendencies, e.g. represented by Octave Mirbeau, which today may serve as model examples for the much-needed revision of western images of Africa. A crucial motivational factor has been the opportunity to contribute a literary-historical understanding of the background to the recent twenty years of extremely violent conflicts in the Congo – the apparent unsolvable nature of which is intrinsically linked with the combination of demonisation, oblivion and non-participation that still pervades the media, despite declared intentions of the opposite. However, the goal is not to expose the myths in the belief that there once existed a state of innocence to which we can return; nor is it the intention to deny that the Congolese reality is so chaotic and terrifying that it is difficult to conceive rationally. However, part of this book's drive and horizon is to contribute to overcoming this obstacle, though it is beyond the scope and subject area of the book itself.

As suggested above, the selection of text types and genres is broad, ranging from

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Many hundreds of maps, photographs, portraits, and sketches of people, landscapes, fauna, prospects, and colonial situations illustrate the pages of Jenssen-Tusch's encyclopaedic *Scandinavians in the Congo* (1905). Some were borrowed from the private collections of travellers, but most were copied from the plethora of travel books and magazines of the era, including *Voyage au Congo*, *Le Congo Illustré* and *Le Mouvement Antiesclavagiste*. "The Dance of the Fetish Man" illustrates the section of the book on religion and superstition. It is an exact copy of the original, "The Antics of the Charm-Doctor" in Herbert Ward's *Five Years with the Congo Cannibals* (1890), a typical travel account derived from Ward's service under Stanley during the first years of the colonisation, 1884-89. Based on a rough sketch by Ward, the picture was created by the professional illustrator W. B. Davis; however, many of the other illustrations in the book are the author's own. After his return from Stanley's final, failed expedition in 1890, Herbert Ward set up as a visual artist in Paris. Based on his sketches and huge collections, he created, among other works, the allegorical sculpture "Sleeping Africa" (1902), which depicts a naked native woman lounging on a map of the continent, and the sculpture "The Charm Doctor" (1902), which closely resembles the travel book's illustration.

• CONTENTS
• NOTES
• BIBLIOGRAPHY
• INDEX
• RIGHTS

unpublished diaries and letters to popular literature, canonised novels and completely forgotten travel accounts. This selection may seem rather eclectic, but will be substantiated in the introduction. Briefly explained, it is part of an attempt to encompass crucial aspects of the history of travel literature, which a narrower selection of material would lose sight of, as well as a more general attempt to describe tendencies in the history of prose – processes of differentiation that are seldom given specific attention.

Not including Congolese texts, the book deselects the issues pertaining to the reciprocity of cultural encounters, which today is a topic of much attention. It is a point in relation to many of the texts selected, most obviously the key examples by Stanley and Conrad, that they are read in a non-national perspective. This decision is based on the authors' positions as cultural 'mongrels' and in consideration to the globalisation processes that the readings aim to investigate. Furthermore, the trans-national perspective is connected to specific factors in the history of the Congo: during the colony's first period as Free State, the contractual employees, who contributed many of the travel accounts, were recruited in countries such as England, Switzerland, Italy, France, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and – obviously – Belgium, albeit Belgians did not receive preferential treatment. There were – and are – undoubtedly national differences in the backgrounds and receptions of the travel accounts, but they are not central to the focus of this book.[2]

This book is written in accordance with inductive exposition – both as a whole and in the individual parts and chapters. In order to provide the reader with a basis for following the argumentation through the material, which cannot be assumed to be known, detailed examples will be presented and subsequently expanded upon in analyses, followed by reflections that tie the observations together. Furthermore, it has been the ambition also to accommodate readers who are more interested, for instance, in the reappraisal of Stanley's expeditions or the Danish narratives about the Congo than in subject-specific, research discussions. For that reason, an attempt has been made to minimise subject-specific terminology and references, instead including presentations of, e.g., historical conditions that may benefit the reader's sense of orientation and the text's usefulness. The vast majority of illustrations have been selected from the books analysed. They are not intended as documentation, but rather to provide an impression of the often lavishly illustrated publications and visual narratives through which the texts were disseminated. The book consists of five sections.

In "The Congo in Prose – Introduction", Stanley is presented via a chapter that deals with the great explorer's closely linked biography and journeys on mundane, global and world literary terms. This is followed by a chapter about the prose perspective in which all the texts are read. It is not about genre discussion, but rather a specific way of reading, which is developed through so-called "model examples" in the history of travel literature. The chapter "Literary Topography of the Congo" presents basic topographical figures and the history of the European discovery of the Congo, while the last chapter in this part links the method to related subject positions.

The second section, "H.M. Stanley: Magic and Market", focuses on the author's two major texts, *Through the Dark Continent* and *In Darkest Africa*. The former is read with a focus on the work's opening rhetoric and equilibristic perspectives, arguing that they should not merely be seen as oppressive and dominant, but as transcending, critical and self-critical. The latter is read in a broader context, discussing the status of the testimony in relation to other, competing, accounts and to media and market forces. The last chapter, "The Space of Prose: Magic and Pragmatism", reads 'between' the texts, pointing towards a number of spaces and material characteristics that explain why Stanley has been forgotten, while at the same time being crucial factors in the magical and exemplary qualities of the travel books.

In the third section, "Red Rubber – Tales of Terror", Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is at the centre. The text is investigated via changing constellations with other prose narratives about the same period, especially Conrad's own travel diaries. This facilitates a nuanced look at – and criticism of – widespread misinterpretations of the novel, especially historians' and literary scholars' use of the text as a testimony about atrocities. This section ends with readings of texts that serve to put Conrad's novel into perspective: C.J. Cutcliffe Hyne's "The Transfer", Dane Jürgen Jürgensen's Congo novels and Octave Mirbeau's transnational colonial criticism of the Red Rubber regime.

The fourth section, "The Twentieth Century", deals with the history of Congo literature in the twentieth century, and the influence of the legacy from Stanley's and Conrad's seminal texts on Europe's relationship with Africa. Though the prose perspective aims to avoid traditional genre divides, the material is divided into three main branches, all of which are present in Stanley's and Conrad's texts: the first chapter puts emphasis on Scandinavian accounts of journeys to the Congo and the rhetoric of oblivion which they instigated. The second chapter addresses Graham Greene's, V.S. Naipaul's and Urs Widmer's Congo novels as readings of *Heart of Darkness* – adaptations that pick up the thread of the exoticism and discourse critical characteristics of the original. The third chapter addresses a number of popular cultural films, comics and texts. The last chapter works across the divides in order to map essential characteristics in the field and highlight connecting lines and patterns in the extensive material. It all ends in one of the places where it began – with Peter Tygesen's *The Congo – I Presume*, the narrative in whose wake the others followed.

The fifth and last section, "The Congo in Prose", sums up the points about place, testimony, atrocity accounts, human rights, world literature and globalisation discussed in the book

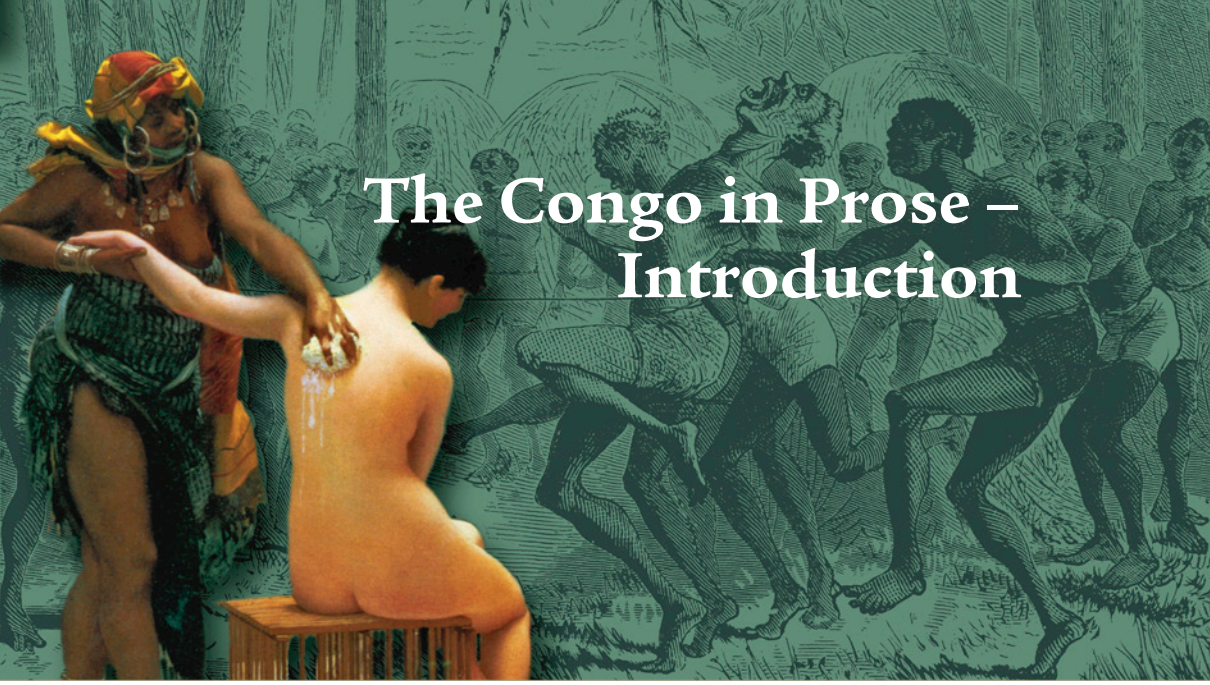
Several of the Scandinavian works referred to in the book have not yet been translated into English. In order to improve readability, these titles and all citations from them appear in English translation. Please refer to the bibliography for the original titles.

The Stanley Archives at the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale provided me with the opportunity to work with Stanley's manuscripts, letters and diaries.

I

Each travel account contributes to a literary topography of the Congo – a description of place, people and geography – while at the same time transforming inherited topographies. Nevertheless, despite all the transformations and variations, it is still possible to trace consistent patterns from the earliest travel accounts up to the present day.

• CONTENTS
• NOTES
• BIBLIOGRAPHY
• INDEX
• RIGHTS



The Congo in Prose – Introduction

1 Life and Works: Reading Stanley

In his article "Lost and Found: Exploring the Legacy of Stanley and Livingstone" (*The New Yorker*, 2 June 2003), the American historian Adam Hochschild describes how explorers have been subjected to extremely conflicting appraisals in historical writing. Initially, they were seen as self-sacrificing front-runners for the spreading of civilisation; since then, historians have proven that both private and national motivations were far more ambiguous, leading to the current situation in which Native Americans, among others, are protesting about an American national holiday named after Columbus. In the thousands of books written about Livingstone and Stanley, a line can be drawn around 1968: before then, biographies on one or both of the explorers basically painted a picture of them as pioneers for progress and standard-bearers for the dissemination of morality and civilisation. However, this interpretation mainly concerned the great Livingstone's saint-like achievements, while Stanley was assessed with more reservation. Livingstone was the first European to cross the African continent in 1852-56. He described the Victoria Falls in one of the earliest and most successful bestsellers in a long series of Victorian travel accounts, and he allegedly paved the way for Christianity and civilisation in Africa. Livingstone's travels were accident-ridden and produced few results, which only helped to further the romanticised idea of him as a lonesome wanderer and pilgrim: a national icon. Stanley's explorations and travel accounts were more

Stanley dressed up and photographed in a studio in 1885, as reproduced in the autobiography published in 1909, which was edited by his widow Dorothy Stanley. In the autobiography, Stanley mentions his discomfort at being portrayed in the notebooks of his fellow travellers. During the hardships of the journey, one is not dressed to be exposed, but exists rather in a state of "undress". In Herbert Ward's *My Life with Stanley's Rear Guard* (1891), Ward can only imagine that the irreconcilable anger Stanley directs against him after the scandalous Emin Pasha expedition must have been caused by Stanley's coming across one of Ward's "harmless" caricatures of the great expedition leader when he opened James Jameson's sealed crates. While Stanley was writing *In Darkest Africa* in Cairo after the expedition, an American tried to purchase his famous homemade tropical cap with air holes, wanting to exhibit it in a collection of curiosities. However, the cap ended up in the Royal Geographical Society museum, where it can be viewed with Stanley's boots.

modern and efficient; they also created a lot more conflict in Africa and in the British public sphere, where people found it difficult to come to terms with his very American approach. This goes for all Stanley's great travels in Africa: the meeting with Livingstone in 1871, described in *How I Found Livingstone* (1872); the trans-African expedition 1874-77, during which he mapped the source of the Nile river system and became the first European to follow the Congo River from its source at Lake Tanganyika to the Atlantic, described in *Through the Dark Continent* (1878); the 1879-84 colonisation expedition in King Léopold's service described in *The Congo and the Founding of Its Free State* (1885); and, finally, the most controversial of the expeditions, the rescuing of Emin Pasha in 1887-89, described in *In Darkest Africa* (1890).

After 1968, portraits of Livingstone and Stanley became increasingly negative. Due to their almost mythological positions as the foremost representatives of Victorianism, these heroes of yesteryear were the first to be dethroned when the African colonies achieved independence, and universities in Europe and the USA rewrote colonial history from a historical perspective focusing on oppression and racism. Hochschild's article offers a panorama of different texts in the critical tradition after Livingstone and Stanley with examples from biographies, various exhibitions and auctions selling all sorts of objects from the great expeditions. It also accounts for the way that Hollywood, within changing environments and ideologies, has fictionalised the legendary meeting. In the article, Hochschild lays claim to an objective view; he is, nevertheless, deeply involved. The author of *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1999), Hochschild is responsible for the most biased of critical history's portraits of Stanley, who, without hesitation, is declared to be the model for Joseph Conrad's cannibalistic Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*; moreover, Stanley is accused of having major responsibility in the extermination of millions of Congolese forced labourers in the 1890s.

Regardless of whether biographies are critical or lionising, their structures and appraisals unwittingly continue the discourse of personality cult and heroism that was associated with explorers in the nineteenth century. At that time, expedition leaders' achievements were seen as direct results of their determination, bravery, stamina and, most importantly, their outstanding morals, which became clear through rhetoric and decorum, as well as power of judgement – characteristics which, in the iconography of the time, were closely related to equivalent national qualities.

The race between competing explorers was also perceived as a trial of strength between nations, and the expedition leaders, e.g. de Brazza and Stanley, were sketched as Latin and Anglo-Saxon archetypes respectively. The value, authority and reliability of travel accounts whether by Livingstone, Burton or Stanley

Illustration from Stanley's first extensive travel account, *How I Found Livingstone* (1872). The caption reads: "Look out, you drop that box – I'll shoot you". This kind of image earned Stanley a reputation as the most brutal of all explorers and made him the favourite scapegoat of post-colonial criticism. Recent studies indicate that most of the situations were exaggerated and staged in order to accommodate the reader's expectations of excitement, determination and action.

were interpreted as aspects of the traveller's moral character. A book's reception by the *Royal Geographical Society*, and through constant media attention in the newspapers, could canonise a traveller and create a national icon, a condensed image of Victorian ideals, as happened with Livingstone's *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (1857). However, critics could also sow doubts about the reliability of the account by pointing out flaws in the author's morals, thereby creating national scandals. This often happened to Stanley.

In a similar way, retrospective biographies about Stanley have concentrated on conjuring up a psychological and moral image that is assumed to explain everything. Whether he is portrayed as a sadistic and ruthless criminal who initiated and lead innumerable genocides – often associated with sexual perversion – or as a disciplined and determined explorer who fought against slavery in deeply felt sympathy with the natives, the benchmark is basically the same type

Stanley with his field notebook, in which he recorded valuable observations during the marches, later to be organised in diaries, edited for telegrams, and finally compiled in tomes that would recreate Africa as a stage and Stanley as a celebrity, both of which became issues of contention in years to come. The picture shows Sean Lynch in the role of Stanley in the TV documentary *Henry Morton Stanley: Congo River, 1874* (1976). Spencer Tracy played Stanley in Henry King's *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939), and numerous films and computer games have rewritten the story. The lighting and lamp company *Stanley Electric Co.* is named after the explorer "who brought light to many places in the world, hitherto unknown to man".

of heroism. One would expect that the personality cult would be the target of criticism rather than the aim – at least in more recent biographies.[3] Given that biographies today carry almost the same authority as the scientific societies in the nineteenth century, it is of interest to refer to a recent and interesting example, Tim Jeal's *Stanley: The Impossible Life of Africa's Greatest Explorer* (2007).[4] Jeal argues for a moral re-evaluation of Stanley and a more positive appraisal of his role in Africa's history of colonisation. In a revisionist way, the book turns the negative appraisals in biographies by Richard Hall, Frank McLynn and John Bierman upside-down.

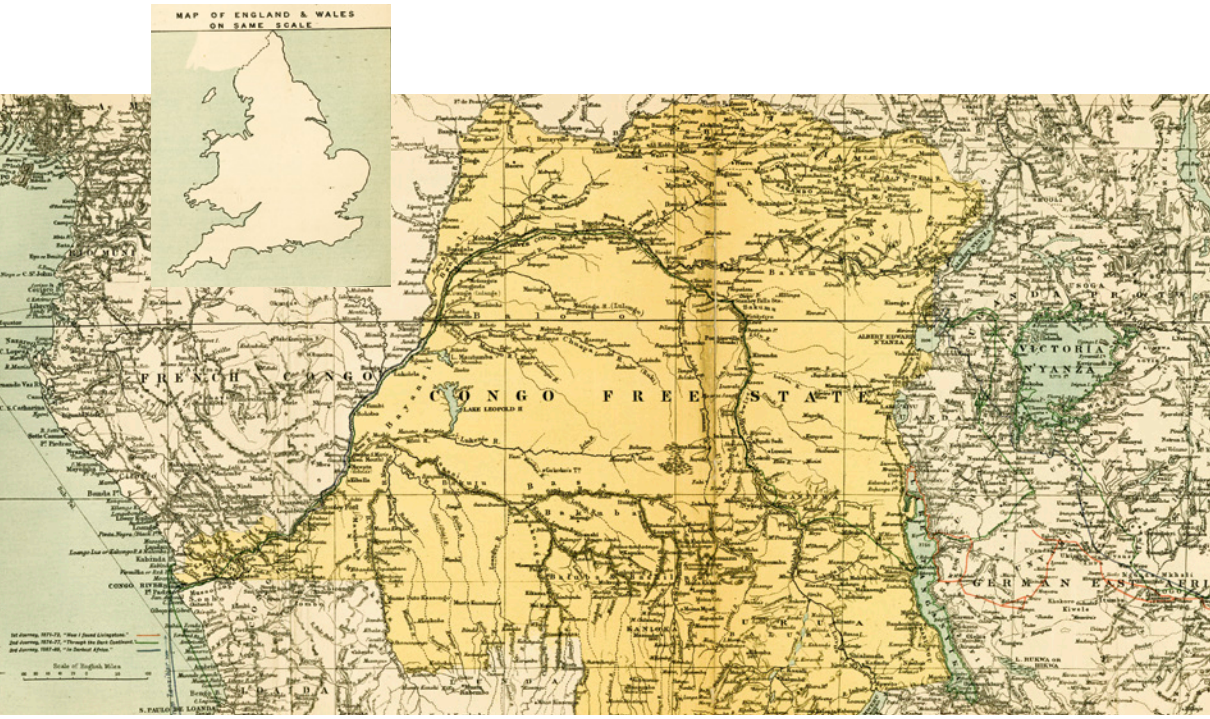
In the introduction, Tim Jeal explains the genesis of the book as a concurrence of different circumstances. First, during the writing of the biography *Livingstone* (1973), which is also revisionist but with the aim of downplaying predominantly positive appraisals, Jeal had already planned to continue with a

biography about Stanley. However, he had to give up the idea when he realised that Richard Hall had already gained access to parts of the Stanley family's enormous archive of unpublished material during his research for *Stanley: An Adventurer Explored* (1974). Secondly, while working on *Livingstone*, Jeal had come across correspondence that gave an impression of Stanley as self-effacing, generous and loyal towards his friends, which was in blatant contrast to his reputation as self-promoting, sadomasochistic and ruthless, as presented in, e.g., McLynn's *Stanley: The Making of an African Explorer* (1990) and John Bierman's *Dark Safari* (1992) – books that also presented Stanley as a willing accessory to King Léopold's brutal colonisation. Thirdly, Jeal, exceptionally, gained access to a plethora of archival materials on Stanley, which the Belgian colonial museum Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale had purchased at great expense in the meantime.

Jeal's book is presented as a tale of extraordinary discoveries, an exploration in the archive, unearthing an entirely different image of Stanley than that of the militant conqueror. The scoop is a detailed argument that Stanley's famous "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" is to be understood as a literary invention without any basis in what was actually said. In reality, Stanley continued Livingstone's ideals, but he undermined his own reputation, initially by lying about his past in order to avoid it catching up with him and compromising his fame, and subsequently by lying about his lies. For instance, he exaggerated the idea of his travels as military operations in a misconceived and failed attempt to copy and fit in with the style and moral code of English officers.

Particularly in post-colonial criticism, there is a strong and problematic tendency towards the biased and undocumented use of Stanley as a scapegoat for colonial cruelty. Tim Jeal's criticism is, in that respect, completely justified. However, apart from a few isolated corrections of earlier biographies, the archival material does not contribute much to the book's reasoning. Most of his points had already been presented in earlier biographies, including the discussion of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"[5] Jeal's introductory claim of revolutionary finds in the Belgian Stanley archive cannot change the fact that he does *not* provide anything new about the main points; he merely adds more anecdotal layers, e.g. gossip about what Stanley's fiancée was doing in London, at the cost of actual accounts of the expeditions.

The positive re-evaluation of Stanley is practised within the aforementioned glorifying moral discourse. The attempt to save Stanley from criticism, and glorify his conduct when at all possible, builds upon often dubious assumptions and linked sentimentalised anecdotes about his compassionate and empathetic nature. Sources from Stanley's own hand that compromise his reputation are rebutted with reference to his tendency to exaggerate and lie. On the other



"Sir H. M. Stanley's Three African Journeys" and "Map of England & Wales on same scale", from *Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley, G.C.B., edited by his wife, Dorothy Stanley* (1909). The maps are part of the monumental tale of the autobiography.

hand, Jeal emphasises and over-interprets sources that support the heroic image, without ever doubting *their* credibility. Stanley's reservations towards King Léopold's excessive territorial expansion plans in the 1890s, for instance, are interpreted as a counterfactual point that cleanses him of any colonial guilt: if King Léopold had employed Stanley as governor of the Congo Free State, instead of leaving him out in the cold, the "Red Rubber" terror of the 1890s would have been avoided.

This goes to show that the most recent extensive biography about Stanley relies on the same problematic methods and revisionist bias as previous ones, which obstructs rather than facilitates a much-needed new understanding of the expeditions and the time. The biographers' continuation of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with heroism, which also characterises the structure of iconoclastic biographies, can in general be described as an internal paradox. By applying a moral and sentimental model for the portrayal and describing historic events as results of individual characteristics and morals, the idea of the sentimental traveller is inscribed as the hidden standard for the appraisal

of Victorian explorers who, in fact, distanced themselves from the paradigm of sensitivity. Biographies, including Tim Jeal's, never relate to the texts as anything other than sources for assessing the traveller's morals, resulting in their failure to acknowledge Stanley's unique position in the period as a modern though maladjusted outsider, who fits neither one nor the other typological category, and whose travel literature offers highly unusual descriptions of the world. In this way, the black and white polemic about Stanley as a person ends up overshadowing the texts and their exemplary traits.

In contexts where they are compared, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Stanley's travel accounts are usually considered to be complete opposites.[6] There are valid reasons for this point of view, although it is somewhat simplified and obscures the understanding of conflicting *internal* traits in both writers' descriptions of experiences in Africa. In the same way that retrospective criticism of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* represents a clear divide between those who distance themselves from the book, claiming that it is colonial and racist, and those who admire it for its literary qualities and emphasise its criticism of colonialism or universal traits, the reception of Stanley's Africa books has, from the very first reactions to the present day been equally biased – either condemning or glorifying – with only a very few exceptions.[7] In Conrad's case, the dispute has lead to an increased focus on the text, subjected to any number of imaginable, subtle textual analytic strategies, while Stanley's are rarely analysed within the area of comparative literature. It might seem like a paradox that Conrad's novella steals all the attention, considering the corpus and historical significance of Stanley's expeditions and texts.

One of the main claims in this chapter is that Stanley's texts played a crucial part in the development of a modern, global iconography of the Congo and Central Africa in the late nineteenth century, and that they to a great extent defined the conditions for subsequent literary and documentary interpretations. The expeditions and the texts about them became matrixes with consequences for the region's reality, economy and political attitude; however, they are not necessarily consistent with the very reductive ideas found in post-colonialism of the explorer as someone who was inevitably followed by a bloody wake of oppression and racism. Instead of allowing our knowledge of colonialism's oppression and violations to stand in the way of our reading, we need to approach and *read* Stanley in order to achieve an important basis for forming up-to-date images of the world in a time of global media.

The question is: what is required to read Stanley properly? "Stanley" in this context is being used both as a description of the texts published under his name, and to describe the author-persona that has been invented as an inseparable part of the texts. In literature about Stanley his explorations are usually

recounted with the travel accounts as the main source, often chronologically and appropriately focusing on dramatic climaxes, echoing the epic structure in Stanley's own texts, projecting him through either critical or noncritical reflections that rarely take into account the orchestrated and performative nature of the texts.

Biographies after 1990 unsurprisingly focus on Stanley's fragmented life story, a clear contrast to his own and earlier biographers' attempts to create homogeneity.[8] Stanley was born John Rowlands in Wales in 1841, where he grew up in conditions similar to those of a poorhouse, practically an orphan. At eighteen he travelled to the USA, where he was adopted by Henry Hope Stanley, a wealthy businessman in New Orleans. The Stanley name replaced Rowlands, and during a hectic period in which he fought on both sides in the civil war and wrote his first reports of retributions against Native American rebels, he invented a new autobiography piece by piece erasing his Welsh past.

The obscured facts have gradually been disclosed through disputes about Stanley's credibility, which followed every new published version of his accounts of extraordinary deeds. The first time it happened was in connection with the 'discovery' of Livingstone. This expedition was funded by the *New York Herald*, an anti-British newspaper that did not mince its words in its derogatory articles about the British lack of will and determination. The fact that Stanley chose to present his account to the members of the Royal Geographical Society, with strikingly dramatic use of language and gestures, as well as his attempt to invent a fictitious identity, was bound to compromise the credibility of his accounts. Had Stanley even met Livingstone, or was the whole story pure fabrication?

The fundamental suspicion surrounding Stanley's personal and national identity is an important aspect of his activities as a traveller and writer. References to his shady past are continuously used to question his motives, and the texts' value as evidence is under constant attack. At the same time, the travel accounts, and the extraordinary endurance and determination they express, can be seen as Stanley's attempt to establish a post-national – Welsh, American, British, Belgian – identity as an entrepreneur for the Congo Free State. Stanley was imperturbable and hard as a rock, but he had an almost superhuman ability to force his way forward, which earned him the nickname Bula Matari, 'Breaker of Rocks'. Viewed in this light, the aim of the travels and accounts was first and foremost to create a sense of truth and authority, fatherhood and belonging that nobody could take away from him. Alongside his legendary sense for dramatisation and capturing the audience's imagination in the books that instantly became international bestsellers, we find a quest for the truth. Most obviously, it was about winning acknowledgement and prestige, but it was also a challenge for this explorer who had no scientific background and a