

Naipaul's "Darkness": Africa

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To my parents

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.

Jorge Luis Borges, Afterword, *El Hacedor*

A writer after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other); and I do believe [...] that I would have found equivalent connections with my past and myself wherever I had gone.

V.S. Naipaul, Author's Foreword, *Finding the Centre*

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1. Introduction

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow tells his friends that when he was a young boy, Africa was still a blank space on the map. Since then, however, this space has been filled “with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness”¹. By the end of the 19th century the association of Africa with darkness seems to have been a common phenomenon. Henry M. Stanley, the great adventurer-explorer, wrote books on Africa called *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) and *In Darkest Africa* (1890). In his essay “Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent” Brantlinger argues that Africa “grew ‘dark’ as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was reflected through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of ‘savage customs’ in the name of civilization”(1985: 166). This led to a view which Brantlinger calls the “myth of the Dark Continent”(166) and which insists on imperialisation as a moral and religious necessity. Even for those who, like Conrad, take a critical position towards the imperial enterprise it is difficult to resist this myth².

While Stanley’s and Conrad’s are representations of Africa during the time of European colonisation, V.S. Naipaul sets himself the task of describing the continent at the period of decolonisation. Naipaul knows Africa well. He has travelled through Zaire, the Ivory Coast and Uganda, has lived and worked in East Africa and has written several books and articles about the continent. His earliest piece of fiction on Africa is to be found in the novel *In a Free State* (1971). The title novella of this work relates the long drive of two English expatriates from the capital of an unnamed African country to the safety of their compound. Naipaul’s second and most famous novel on Africa, *A Bend in the River* (1979) shares with the first text the point in time of their setting, some years after the countries’ independence from colonialism, and the pessimistic tone. Africa appears also in Naipaul’s latest novel *Half a Life* (2001) where Willy Chandran settles with his wife Ana in the still colonial Mozambique and only leaves after the country has gained its independence from Portugal.

J.M. Coetzee notes that the part of *Half a Life* in which Naipaul describes Africa has “a strongly journalistic flavor” and that it belongs to a mode of writing “Naipaul has

¹ Conrad, Joseph. [1899] 1995. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin Books, 22. Subsequent citations within the text as HD.

² At a metaphysical level, Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* confirms the image of Africa as a place of darkness: the fact that Kurtz “sets himself up as a tribal god reinstates the idea of racial superiority at a deeper level than the critique of colonialism”(Hampson 1995: XXXV). Moreover, his Africa is a place that loosens all restraints and threatens everyone who faces its “great demoralisation”(HD: 36) with regression to an earlier stage in the development of humanity.

perfected over the years, in which historical reportage and social analysis flow into and out of autobiographically colored fiction and travel memoir: a mixed mode that may turn out to be Naipaul's principal legacy to English letters"(2001: 10). This 'mixed mode' is also characteristic of the three shorter essays that will be discussed in this paper. "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa" (1975) deals with the political and social situation in post-colonial Congo (i.e. Zaire). "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" (1984) outlines the author's observations during a trip to the Ivory Coast and "Home Again" (1994) relates Naipaul's experiences as resident of a compound in East Africa³. Apart from Naipaul's 1994 essay, all of these texts may be considered as 'travelogues' in a wider sense - as defined by Barbara Korte in her book *English travel writing from pilgrimages to postcolonial explorations* (2000: 9) - and literary texts, since the "actual experience of a journey is reconstructed, and therefore fictionalised, in the moment of being told"(2000: 11).

Travelogues are instrumental in establishing a knowledge of foreign countries and cultures. Their authors are, however, seldom free from preconceived notions and images of these places. Often their views have been influenced by earlier travel accounts. Pfister states that travelogues are almost always "indebted to other texts, even if this indebtedness or complicity is not always openly acknowledged"(1993: 109). Conrad is well aware of the tradition of writing on Africa. Many parallels can be drawn between his novel *Heart of Darkness* and Stanley's reports of his travels and explorations⁴. But while Stanley advocates European intervention in the name of civilisation and progress, Conrad tries to expose the selfishness of these ideas and the ruthlessness of the colonials. Frequently, Naipaul is placed within this tradition of writing on Africa. Especially Conrad is often considered one of his literary predecessors. Coetzee states: "Joseph Conrad [...] is one of Naipaul's masters. For good or ill, Naipaul's Africa comes out of *Heart of Darkness*. (2001: 10). Consequently, most discussions of the author's novels and essays on Africa include an analysis of his relationship to Conrad.

Taking account of this closeness to a classic of English literature it seemed appropriate to choose a title for this paper that alludes to this influence. In 1974 Naipaul writes an essay entitled "Conrad's Darkness"⁵ in which he tries to define his special relationship

³ With the exception of a travel diary of Zaire which was published "in a limited edition of 330 copies as *A Congo Diary* (1980)"(Gupta 1999: 43), this paper will analyse all of Naipaul's writings on Africa.

⁴ In his book *In Darkest Africa* Stanley makes the same journey down the River Congo as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, and he is also delayed because a steamer has broken down. Moreover, Marlow and Kurtz seem to be modelled on Stanley and Livingstone (Hampson 1995: XVIII).

⁵ Naipaul, V.S. [1974] 1980. "Conrad's Darkness". In: *The Return of Eva Perón*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 205-228. Subsequent citations within the text as CD.

to this famous writer, which is also “an account of his difficulty” (CD: 205). In spite of strong reservations, Naipaul sees many links between him and his literary forerunner. Conrad was the first “modern writer” he was introduced to. He states that despite his English passport, Conrad does not possess an in-depth-knowledge of English society; that he is, in fact, “a writer who is missing a society” (CD: 226), which links him to Naipaul, the naturalised British citizen. In addition to this Naipaul writes: “Conrad’s value to me is that he is someone who sixty or seventy years ago meditated on my world, a world I recognize today. I feel this about no other writer of the century”(CD: 219).

What then does the expression ‘Conrad’s darkness’ mean? This issue can be seen on different levels. The ‘darkness’ may have to do with the topics of a narration. According to Naipaul, typically Conradian topics are “passion and the abyss, solitude and futility and the world of illusions”(CD: 208). On the other hand, the stories often seem to elude, they become obscure and impenetrable. “Mystery [...] is the Conradian word”(CD: 223). Moreover, ‘darkness’ is, of course, an allusion to Conrad’s famous book *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which narrates Marlowe’s voyage down an African river in search of Kurtz, an ivory agent. In “Conrad’s Darkness” Naipaul especially praises the African background of this narration which in his eyes constitutes “the most effective part of the book”(CD: 215). Like Conrad, Naipaul represents Africa as a place of darkness. Everything he observes seems to confirm his pessimistic view. In his books, Africa is seen as “a ‘dream-like and threatening’ place that resists understanding, that eats away at reason and the technological products of reason”(Coetzee 2001: 10).

His representation of Africa, as well as that of other Third World societies, has often caused controversial debates. While some critics conform with John Updike’s statement that novels like *In a Free State* and *A Bend in the River* constitute the best and most truthful that has been written about Africa for a long time (1983: 45), others consider him a racist and neo-colonialist (Maja-Pearce 1985; Samantrai 2000). When Naipaul won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001 these controversies came to light again. The reactions to Naipaul often seem “divided along political and / or geographic lines; conservatives from the Western world love him; and leftists from the rest of the world hate him”(Dalleo 2001). Chinua Achebe’s harsh critique on Naipaul seems to support this statement. He compares Western criticism to a little girl “lapping up [...] every drop of pretentiousness that falls from the lips of this literary guru, a new purveyor of the old comforting myths of her race”(1988b: 19).

Considering the contradictory nature of these critical responses it remains the task of the reader to find out for himself what is true. The aim of this paper is to analyse

whether Naipaul really purveys the ‘myth of the Dark Continent’ or whether he has managed to free himself from these traditions of writing on Africa. The approach that will be taken here is suggested by the Foucauldian definition of discourse as a strategy of power and subjection, of exclusion and regulation (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker 1997: 184-187). The categories required for the analysis of Naipaul’s texts are mainly those established by Spurr in his book *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993). In this study, Spurr claims that with the end of European colonialism there has been a ‘paradigm shift’ in the field of literary studies. Consequently,

literary works once studied primarily as expressions of traditionally Western ideals are now also read as evidence of the manner in which such ideals have served in the historical process of colonization. The particular languages which belong to this process [...] are known collectively as colonial discourse. (Spurr 1993: 1)

In fact, there is not just one colonial discourse but a whole series of “colonizing discourses, each adapted to a specific historical situation, yet having in common certain elements with the others”(Spurr 1993: 1-2). The best known variations of this discourse are primitivist, Orientalist and Africanist discourse. The main aim of any of these discourses is to confirm the colonisers’ superiority over their colonial subjects, by opening up dichotomies characterising the Others as backward, irrational, uncivilised, while ascribing to oneself attributes such as modern, rational, or civilised.

One of the main features of any of these “othering discourses” (Jervis 1999: 7) is the production of stereotypes which “simultaneously generalize, exaggerate and fix certain features of particular individual instances of a category, thereby rendering them necessary, universal and immutable features of the category in question”(1999: 7-8). The result are fixed patterns of perception according to which everything is interpreted and which prevent an unbiased representation of reality. It would, however, be equally restrictive to consider every critical statement on Africans and on developments in Africa a prejudice. In an interview Naipaul once remarked that:

in Africa you can get a profound refusal to acknowledge the realities of the situation; people just push aside the real problems as if they had all been settled. As though the whole history of human deficiencies was entirely explained by the interlude of oppression and prejudice, which have now been removed; any remaining criticism being merely recurrence of prejudice and therefore to be dismissed. (cited in King 1993: 116)

The analysis of Naipaul’s texts will therefore attempt to distinguish between ‘justified critique’ and instances where the author’s use of language coincides with the rhetoric of colonial discourse. It has to be admitted, however, that it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between these two discursive practises.

The first chapter of this paper will present typical features of colonial discourse in order to provide a solid base of vocabulary and concepts used in the ensuing analysis. These features are mostly taken from Spurr's book *The Rhetoric of Empire* but they are frequently supplemented by ideas from other authors. The theoretical assumptions are accompanied by examples from books by two famous Victorian travel-writers: Henry Morton Stanley's *In Darkest Africa, Vol. I and II* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The former author was chosen because he is a typical representative of this mode of colonialist writing, while Conrad has been selected because of the many similarities between his and Naipaul's work. The chapter entitled 'Resistance' at the end of this section shows how colonial rhetoric can be left behind and how something like a 'postcolonial perspective' can be established.

The analysis of Naipaul's texts will start with an examination of "In a Free State". After a short introduction dealing with the several possible interpretations of the narrative's title, a comparison with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* will serve as a first step toward the characterisation of the text's position in relation to colonial discourse. The ensuing examination will focus on the depiction of the African characters, white expatriates' attitudes towards them and Africa in general. Since the description of the members of this latter group seems to aim at exposing their prejudices and misconceptions, it will be discussed whether the negative characterisation of the African natives has to be considered an ironic play with the reader's expectations or whether this is due to the narrator's own involvement in the rhetoric of colonial discourse. To resolve this problem, the relation between the text's characters, its narrator and its author will be examined.

The second main part of this paper is dedicated to the analysis of Naipaul's later texts on Africa. The examination of the two novels and three shorter narratives does not proceed chronologically but focuses on important topics. Therefore, the analysis does not aim at an interpretation of these texts as a whole but presents a selection of topics relating to the way in which Africa and Africans are presented. These include the special position occupied by the texts' hybrid narrators whose situation, aims and limitations will be discussed in the first chapter of part four. Themes like magic, rituals, sexuality and violence are central in Naipaul's depiction of African culture and will be discussed in the second chapter of this part. The analysis of the effects of racial mixing is given a separate chapter as it is an important issue in most of the texts, both in the sense of co-existence of different cultures at one place and on the level of personal relationships. The ensuing two chapters discuss problems in the educational sector and on the political arena in different post-colonial African societies, while the sixth chapter of this part is dedicated to the relation-

ship of Europe and Africa. The final chapter in this section deals with the model of history promoted in *A Bend in the River* and locates the place it ascribes to Africa. The conclusion will try to determine whether Naipaul's attitude towards the 'Dark Continent' has changed between the publication of "In a Free State" and that of *Half a Life* and expose some of the reasons for the persistent controversies around Naipaul's literary work.

2. Colonialism and its Rhetoric

2.1 Features of Colonial Discourse

In order to define the most important characteristics of colonial discourse one has to consider the nature of the 'colonial situation'. The set of circumstances that goes under this name is characterised by "the domination imposed by a foreign minority, 'racially' and culturally different, over a materially weaker indigenous majority in the name of a racial (or ethnic) and cultural superiority"(Spurr 1993: 5-6). There is a constant uncertainty, a 'latent crisis' in the relations between these two groups, however, and therefore a constant need, on the colonialists' side, to justify their authority. This is done mainly by references to ideological and stereotypical representations of 'the Other'.

Spurr distinguishes between twelve rhetorical modes of writing deployed "both in the modern period of European colonialism (roughly 1870-1960) as well as in the more recent period of decolonisation"(1993: 1). Taken together they constitute "a kind of repertoire for colonial discourse, a range of tropes, conceptual categories, and logical operations available for purposes of representation"(1993: 3). Representation in this context is never neutral but always closely connected to questions of power; fundamentally, it seeks to establish and maintain colonial authority. This problem has not simply vanished with the transitions of many former colonies into independent states. Although institutions of colonial power have been dismantled, one cannot speak of a "clean break" with the colonial past: "the relations of colonizer to colonized have neither remained the same nor have they disappeared" (1993: 6-7). It has to be noted that not all of the features discussed in this chapter necessarily occur within every text with colonialist tendencies. Frequently, authors employ just a few of these rhetorical strategies or even try to write against some of them while at the same time, willingly or unwittingly, reproducing others.

2.1.1 Surveillance

Surveillance in the colonial context refers to the observation and description not only of the indigenous peoples themselves but also to the examining of landscapes and interiors. Many journalists or authors writing about exotic places will claim to describe only exactly what they have seen, without adding or leaving out anything. For many novelists, the travelogue represents the last refuge of a romantic "Unmittelbarkeitsästhetik" (Pfister 1993: 111) enabling them to claim the authority of a person who has seen the

things he is writing about with his own eyes. There is no such thing as an ‘innocent gaze’, however. The

nomination of the visible is no idle metaphysic, no disinterested revealing of the world’s wonders. It is, on the contrary, a mode of thinking and writing wherein the world is radically transformed into an object of possession. [...] The writer’s eye is always in some sense colonizing the landscape, mastering and portioning, fixing zones and poles, arranging and deepening the scene as the object of desire. (Spurr 1993: 27)

The writer takes possession of the landscape by ordering and arranging what he sees. This active element of the gaze is what Spurr calls “the commanding view”(1993: 15) and what must be considered “an originating gesture of colonization itself, making possible the exploration and mapping of territory which serves as the preliminary to colonial order”(1993: 16). It also contributes to a phenomenon Mary Louise Pratt observes especially among male Europeans and which she has named the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey scene’(1992: 201).

In his account of the rescue of Emin Pasha, Stanley provides a good example for this trope. When he and his company have reached Mazamboni’s Peak, they are fascinated by the splendid view and start examining the landscape’s contour:

A hundred square miles of country opened to our view [...]. Leagues upon leagues of bright green pasture land undulated in gentle waves, intersected by winding narrow lines of umbrageous trees that filled the hollows, scores of gentle hills studded with dark clumps of thicket, graced here and there by a stately tree, [...] and far away to the east rose some frowning ranges of mountains [...]. Our eyes followed the obscure track, roved over the pasture hillocks, great and small, every bosky islet and swarded level around it, along the irregularities of the forest line that rose darkly funereal behind us, advancing here, receding there, yonder assuming a bay-like canoe, here a cape-like point. The mind grasped the minutest peculiarity around as quick as vision, [...]. A score of years hence, [...], let but allusion be made to this happy hour when every soul trampled with joy, [...] and we shall be able to map the whole with precision and fidelity⁶.

This passage includes many characteristics of the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey-scene’. Mary Louise Pratt describes three conventional means travel-writers usually employ in such scenes to create both qualitative and quantitative value for their achievement. At first the landscape is aestheticised. It is depicted in the fashion of a painting and ordered in terms of background, foreground, symmetries, etc. Despite all the hardships and miseries encountered on their way, it seems as if this magnificent view is even more than a compensation. The “esthetic *pleasure* [...] constitutes the value and significance of the journey”(Pratt 1992: 204). Another striking feature of this passage is the use of a large number of adjectival modifiers. The hills are “gentle”, the trees “stately” and “umbrageous”, and the pasture land is “bright green”. The high amount of adjectives help to create “*density of mean-*

⁶ Stanley, Henry Morton. [1890] 2001. *In Darkest Africa – Or, the Quest, Rescue, and Retreat of Emin Pasha, Governor of Equatoria, Volume 1*. Santa Barbara, California: The Narrative Press, 248-249. Subsequent citations within the text as DA I.

ing”(1992: 204) in these passages by presenting the landscape to be exceedingly rich in both its material and its semantic substance. The third strategy is connected with “the relation of *mastery* predicated between the seer and the seen”(1992: 204). The writer produces the landscape for his audience conveying the impression that what he sees “is all there is, and that the landscape was intended to be viewed from where he has emerged upon it. Thus the scene is deictically ordered with reference to his vantage point, and is static”(1992: 205).

Just like the landscapes, the indigenous peoples’ bodies have always been an object of Western scrutiny, commentary and valorisation. The body is seen as “the essential defining characteristic of primitive peoples”(Spurr 1993: 22). Its description usually ends by attributing some kind of value to the visual observations. Stanley’s description of a ‘Queen of Pigmies’ may serve to illustrate this:

She was brought in to be seen by me with three rings of iron around her neck, the ends of which were coiled like a watch spring. Three iron rings were suspended to each ear. She is of a light brown complexion, with broad round face, large eyes, and small but full lips. She had a quiet modest demeanour, though her dress was but a narrow fork clout of bark cloth.

Her height is about four feet four inches, and her age may be nineteen or twenty. I notice when her arms are held against the light, a whity-brown fell on them. Her skin has not that silky smoothness of touch common to the Zanzibaris, but altogether she is a very pleasing little creature. (DA I: 307-308)

The examination of the Queen’s body can be compared to the exploration of a landscape. The passage establishes the native Other as a natural object of study. The eye “proceeds systematically from part to part, quantifying and spatializing, noting color and texture, and finally passing an aesthetic judgment which stressed the body’s role as object to be viewed”(Spurr 1993: 23). In the description there is no hint at the reciprocity of the observation. Stanley seems unaware of the fact that he himself might also be the object of inspection. He describes the native African woman from the privileged position of power – the Queen is his captive – typical for the colonial situation.

2.1.2 Appropriation

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow points out that the “conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much”(HD: 20). This definition of the colonialist enterprise can be linked to a striking feature of colonial discourse, which according to Spurr “implicitly claims the territory surveyed as the colo-

nizer's own"(1993: 28). However, this appropriative strategy usually disguises itself and takes the form of an appeal. Colonial intervention is seen as a response to a manifold calling: "that of nature, which calls for the wise use of its resources; that of humanity, which calls for universal betterment; and that of the colonized, who call for protection from their own ignorance and violence"(1993: 34).

Stanley's narrative provides an example for this rhetorical strategy. When describing the characteristics of an Equatorial forest tribe, he mainly emphasises the negative traits of the members of this tribe. In his opinion they are fierce, detestable and bestial. There is still some hope, however, since "there is not one of them which does not contain germs, and by whose means at some future date civilization may spread, and with it those manifold blessings inseparable from it"(DA II: 77). The narrative leaves no doubt that the natives, if left to themselves, are unable to progress to civilisation. Rather, they need the white men's help and guidance. This discourse presents the colonisers as bringing order to a world of chaos and transforming the colonial enterprise, not only into a justifiable affair, but even into a moral necessity, since the colonised peoples are presented as profiting from their presence. The "exploitation of colonized territories, thus becomes a moral imperative as well as a political and economic one"(Spurr 1993: 29).

Appropriation can also take place on a grammatical level. In an essay on France's vocabulary for colonial affairs, Barthes notes "the predominance of substantives as a sign of "the huge consumption of concepts necessary to the cover-up of reality"(cited in: Spurr 1993: 31). He observes a tendency to use substantives in order to convey generalised concepts, such as 'humanity', 'nature' or 'civilisation' whose "substance is presented as already known and therefore beyond contestation"(1993: 31). In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow evokes these ideas only to unmask them as "philanthropic pretence"(HD: 46), for the selfish interests of the representatives of British colonialism. In colonial discourse concepts like "rationality, science and 'civilization' [...] constitute the legitimising framework of modern Western values"(Jervis 1999: 6) and are therefore not disputable. "The pervasive character of the nominative in colonial discourse reflects a desire to set forth as self-evident the substantive reality of a moral abstraction"(Spurr 1993: 32). Nomination and substantivisation may thus be seen as grammatical forms of appropriation.

2.1.3 Aestheticisation

The Third World is often seen as a subject with inherently aesthetic value. In journalistic and fictional representations of its societies and peoples, the picturesque is therefore frequently emphasised. “The Third World continually provides what writers call ‘material’ of a special nature: the exotic, the grotesque, the bizarre, the elemental”(Spurr 1993: 46). Due to the cultural and geographic distance its exoticisation is facilitated. The abundance of nature, the ease of subsistence, the lack of private possessions, the ‘romantic’ simplicity, the pleasures of day-to-day life, all clothed in unfamiliar scents, sounds, colours and images have for centuries been common topoi in the representation of exotic societies (cp. Hammerschmidt 1997: 48). Distance not only contributes to the exoticisation of Third World societies, however, but is also instrumental in purveying an image of its inhabitants’ atavism:

the people of the Third World appear unprotected by the restraining constructs of advanced civilization. Their suffering is interpreted as giving expression to elemental passions which law and reason are supposed to have suppressed in the West; hence the fascination with religious fanaticism, bloodthirsty dictators, and tribal atrocities (Spurr 1993: 46).

The natives of Conrad’s narrative are portrayed according to this notion of atavism. They are “prehistoric men” (HD: 62) belonging “to the beginnings of time”(HD: 69) and are therefore without restraint (HD: 85). To the narrator, they appear like primitives, and he is unwilling to admit more than a very “distant kinship”(HD: 85) between them and the European observers. Due to the Third World’s and its inhabitants’ supposed atavism revolution, disaster, madness and barbarism seem much more natural there.

Witnessing a natural disaster, or the miseries of suffering, or even dying people may constitute a rather shocking experience. There exists a strong need to protect oneself, however, and hold “the evil at arm’s length” by elaborating “a symbolic structure that displaces its object”(Spurr 1993: 53) and thus mediates and limits the effects on our experience. This rhetorical strategy can be illustrated with a passage from *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow is appalled by the sight of a group of dying natives.

Black shapes crouched, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...].
They were [...] nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. [...]
Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. (HD: 34-36)

The dying natives appear dreamlike and unreal. They are described as ‘black shapes’, ‘shadows’, and ‘phantoms’ lying on the ground. At the end of the passage Marlow compares the scenery to a painting. This might be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with an unfamiliar and horrifying reality. Throughout the passage Marlow uses the vocabulary of the visual artist. His description is based on light and shadow, form and colour, outline and geometric shape. In the face of this shocking incident he resorts to the aestheticisation of his experience, thus distancing himself from it. Taken together, this rhetorical strategy implies “a certain possession of social reality which holds it at arm’s length and makes it into the object of beauty, horror, pleasure, and pity”(Spurr 1993: 59).

2.1.4 Classification

Due to a quasi-religious notion of teleological progression and rapid developments in the field of science and technology, the 19th century saw a change in the perception of primitive societies:

Das räumliche Nebeneinander von ‘Wilden’ und ‘Zivilisierten’ verwandelte sich angesichts der rapiden technischen Entwicklung der europäischen Gesellschaften und des Glaubens an die Unbegrenztheit des menschlichen Fortschritts in ein zeitliches Nacheinander. (Kohl 1993: 19)

The “ideology of modernization”(Spurr 1993: 69) began to govern the way in which Third World nations were classified. According to this logic the primitives were seen as backward peoples because they had supposedly been arrested in their development as human beings at a very early stage in history. This same notion can be observed in a passage of Conrad’s novel:

But suddenly , as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who would tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand, because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories. (HD: 62)

The natives, Marlow and his crew encounter in this scene, belong to an early stage in the evolutionary development of mankind. They are even so far away from the white explorers that comprehension is rendered impossible.

Considering primitive peoples exist at an earlier stage in the history of evolution implies, however, the setting up of a hierarchy of human societies “whose end or highest point is represented by modern European civilization”(Spurr 1993: 64). The superiority of Western societies established by means of this classification concerns both the moral / intellectual and the social / political character of these societies. Moreover, these two levels are closely connected as “the higher orders of technology and government reflect a greater capacity for reason and human feeling”(1993: 64).

For many 19th century scientists the backwardness of indigenous races seems to have been a matter of fact. There was an ongoing discussion, however, on whether this backwardness had to be considered an unchangeable fact or whether these races were actually capable of improvement. “Where Darwin sees the social and moral inequality between races as produced by differences in the evolving human relation to natural environment, Gobineau sees them as ‘native, original, sharply defined and permanent’”(Spurr 1993: 65). Both the ‘essentialist’ and the ‘historical’ view have been appropriated by the colonial discourse since they help to assert the European coloniser’s superiority and have thus been essential in legitimising the ‘civilizing mission’.

In colonial discourse the hierarchical classification of the different races is organised around the dichotomy of civilisation and savagery. The indigenous peoples are classified “according to their relative complexity of social organization”(Spurr 1993: 68) and to the coloniser’s interests and needs. A typical example is the classification of Africans into “primitive tribes, advanced communities, and Europeanized Africans”(1993: 68). This system of classification judges non-Western societies by Western standards. This implies that all nations should aspire towards “a single standard of economic and political organization”(1993: 62), leaving aside that different cultures may choose to have different ways of organising their societies. The complexity of a tribal society cannot be acknowledged because it fails in meeting this standard and because social complexity is identified only with modernisation. As most African societies do not fulfil these standards many authors, journalists and other commentators assume a condescending pose, lecturing “Africans on how they should govern themselves”(1993: 62).

2.1.5 Debasement

In his account of the search for Emin Pasha, Stanley describes a member of a tribe of pigmies with the words:

That little body of his represented the oldest types of primeval man, descended from the outcasts of the earliest ages, the Ishmaels of the primitive race, for ever shunning the haunts of the workers, deprived of the joy and delight of the home hearth, eternally exiled by their vice, to live the life of human beasts in morass and fen and jungle wild⁷.

On an other occasion he considers the members of “wild tribes” to be “incorrigibly fierce in temper, detestable in their disposition, and bestial in their habits”(DA II: 77). In both cases he reduces the indigenous people to beings of an inferior status, in fact, almost to animals. Spurr has called this rhetorical device ‘debasement’ and he gives two reasons for the perseverance of this trope. On the one hand there is the “need for positive self-definition”(1993: 76) leading to the establishment of opposites like savage versus civilised. On the other hand “the accursedness of the other [...] has its origin in anxiety over the preservation of cultural order and in the need to designate the unknown by a set of signs which affirm, by contrast, the value of culturally established norms”(1993: 77).

The aim of the rhetorical strategy of debasement is to create a clear-cut division between coloniser and colonised. This wish to be apart from the natives has its physical counterpart in the policies of racial segregation. Behind this desire for strict boundaries hides the white man’s fear to be negatively affected by the indigenous people and their natural environment. “The ultimate horror is to ‘go native’, lose one’s sense of difference, superiority. [...] to regress, to revert to a savage past, [...] to descend the ladder of evolutionary progress, [...] to release the repressed self”(Jervis 1999: 66-67). This is what happens to Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*:

[...] the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. (HD: 95)

Moreover, Kurtz has an African mistress and he simply “forget[s] himself amongst these people”(HD: 93). Both natural environment and indigenous people are responsible for his regression. Africa liberates him from any moral restrictions and finally absorbs him. This identification with or even engulfment by the Other must by all means be resisted. Thus

⁷ Stanley, Henry Morton. [1890] 2001. *In Darkest Africa – Or, the Quest, Rescue, and Retreat of Emin Pasha, Governor of Equatoria, Volume 2*. Santa Barbara, California: The Narrative Press, 35. Subsequent citations within the text as DA II.

“the insistence on European standards of civility becomes an act of self-preservation”(Spurr 1993: 80).

If going native is the white man’s ‘ultimate horror’, what happens if the natives try to adopt some of the colonisers’ values and manners? One might expect a positive reaction on part of the European colonisers, yet, in “another paradox of colonial discourse, the natives are reviled for their non-Western otherness, yet ridiculed for their attempts to imitate the forms of the West”(Spurr 1993: 84). This can be illustrated with Marlow’s description of the native fireman on his steamer:

He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity – and he had filed teeth too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this – that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst, and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and fired up and watched the glass fearfully [...]. (HD: 63-64)

In one of the most racist passages of *Heart of Darkness*, the native fireman is ridiculed for his appearance and the education he has received. He is no longer in the state of utter savagery but has become a kind of “‘hybrid’ figure”(Jervis 1999: 70) who is all the more frightening for his “remote kinship”(HD: 63) with the white coloniser. “There is both contempt and fear in this writing, as though to be ‘half’-civilized is to be too close, becomes a form of mimicry, a perverse doubling”(Jervis 1999: 70). By making use of a debasing rhetoric, colonial discourse tries to renounce this closeness which is regarded as a potentially subversive element. The fireman is, therefore, compared to an animal and ridiculed because of his belief in the steamer’s magic. Once again this shows the contradictory nature of colonial discourse: “a colonized people is held in contempt for their lack of civility, loved for their willingness to acquire it, and ridiculed when they have acquired too much”(Spurr 1993: 86). According to Chinua Achebe, debasement is one of the fundamental characteristics of Western attitudes toward Africa. He states that the so-called dark continent is often seen “as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor, [...] as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity” and affirms that this attitude has prevailed for centuries and even today “continues to foster in the world”([1977] 1988: 8).

2.1.6 Negation

When Stanley set out on his first voyages to Africa maps of this continent were still incomplete. Many places remained to be explored and were simply represented as blanks. Marlow reflects about this time when talking of his boyhood dreams:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour's off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. [...] But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after.

'True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. (HD, 21-22)

According to this account, blank spaces exert a fascination on man's mind; they are a 'delightful mystery', awaiting exploration. The biggest of these unexplored territories is Africa; its attractiveness proportionate to its size. The supposed absence suggested by the blank space on the map seems to create an almost natural desire to go there and "fill the void left by Africa's essential nothingness" (Spurr 1993: 92). The deeper implication of this rhetorical strategy lies in the fact that it establishes Africa as a place without a pre-existing social order, which is only created by the presence of the European explorer and coloniser (1993: 97; 107).

Related to this is the notion of Africa's lack of history. As Kohl mentions, it was very common in the 19th century to distinguish between supposedly "geschichtslosen 'Naturvölkern'" and "geschichtsmächtigen 'Kulturvölkern'" (1993: 21). In accord with this view, the domination over nature is seen as proof for the adherence to the first category, while the 'natural peoples' are seen as being at the mercy of their environment. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's repeated description of the journey down the river as a voyage into some prehistoric past and the designation of the Africans he encounters as prehistoric men, point into the same direction:

The Africans lack a history because they have failed to leave a permanent mark on the landscape – no ancient architecture, no monuments or records – nothing to bring about the transformation and construction of the environment which provide the measure of civilization. (Spurr 1993: 99)

This view serves to confirm the white man's superiority and thus justifies his rule over the natives.

On the level of language non-Western peoples are also frequently characterised by an absence. Often the language of the Other is not acknowledged, or it is dismissed as an incomprehensible or even animal-like sound (Goetsch 1998: 517). This feature, which has also been called ‘linguistic colonialism’ (1998: 517), can be observed in Conrad’s novel where the African natives utter “strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language”(HD: 108). The faculty of speech and the richness of language are seen as yardsticks of civilisation, but whereas the coloniser’s language is considered as immensely rich, complex, and refined that of the natives often appears as an incoherent babble, so that one might almost assume that “where the Western style of speaking is not present, there is no language at all”(Spurr 1993: 107). The rhetoric of negation serves here, as in general, to create an absence on which the colonisers’ standards can be imposed. As it denies any prior history or meaningful language, the superimposition of colonial rule is seen as a creative act, rather than an act of violence.

2.1.7 Affirmation

Most people will agree with Marlow’s remark that the “conquest of the earth, [...], is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much”(HD: 20). Therefore, in order to legitimise its own authority colonialism faces a “perpetual need for self-affirmation”(Spurr 1993: 109). The justification of the colonialists’ presence and power in a foreign country is mainly achieved by idealising this project and its protagonists. Therefore, colonialist writers often invoke what they consider to be collective values and confirm the essential selflessness of the enterprise. When Stanley arrives with Emin Pasha at an English Mission Station he is delighted by the dedication of an English missionary called Mackay:

To see one man of this kind, working day after day for twelve years bravely, and without a syllable of complaint or a moan amid the ‘wildernesses,’ and to hear him lead his little flock to show forth God’s loving kindness in the morning, and His faithfulness every night, is worth going a long journey, for the moral courage and contentment that one derives from it. (DA II: 369)

Mackay is presented as a selfless, hard-working man, who leads the natives away from their heathen beliefs and brings them onto the right path by introducing them to Christianity. All in all, he is depicted as a representative of humanity, progress and civilisation bringing light into the dark regions of this earth. This idealisation of members of the colonialist enterprise and the resulting ‘obligations’ have come to be called – after an 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling – ‘the white man’s burden’.

Behind this concept lies the idea of the ‘civilizing mission’, a notion that is closely connected with the “Fortschrittsoptimismus”(Kohl 1993: 20) prevailing in the second half of the 19th century. As primitive peoples came to be considered imperfect and backward, it was regarded as the white man’s duty to help them improve their destiny. The colonisers’ assumed moral superiority makes them also responsible for those who are not equally far progressed on the evolutionary scale. This superiority is also marked by a sense of unity and order which is invoked again and again and set against “images of chaos and disintegration”(Spurr 1993: 121) on the part of the supposedly backward peoples.

Especially the English tradition of colonial discourse emphasises the “noble spirit of the colonial settler”(Spurr 1993: 115), and promotes ideas of a “natural aristocracy, a muscular Christianity, the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxons, and [...] ‘the trusteeship of the weaker races’(1993: 114). This is the tradition against which Conrad writes when he lets Marlow describe the motives of the members of the ‘Eldorado Exploring Expedition’. Their intention is to “tear treasure out of the bowels of the land [...], with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe”(HD: 55). Concerning the ‘civilizing mission’, Marlow leaves no doubt that “the great cause of these high and just proceedings”(HD: 33) is just a pretence for the white men’s greed and selfish interests. The rhetorical feature called affirmation serves to veil these egotistical pursuits and to give them an aura of philanthropic activity.

2.1.8 Idealisation

The idealisation of the Other is a tradition that can be traced back as far as antiquity. Tacitus idealises the Teutons and, simultaneously, criticises the Roman society of his days (Kohl 1993: 19). Centuries later, Montaigne is convinced that ‘cannibals’ live “in an Edenic state of simplicity and purity”(Spurr 1993: 126) in accordance with natural laws and not yet corrupted by civilisation. Rousseau’s ‘homme naturelle’ or – to use the more common term – the ‘noble savage’ is a widespread figure in the representation of exotic peoples.

This vision of the Other is almost always linked to the way in which the own society is seen, however. Jervis notes that “right from the start, the myth tells us more about the myth-makers”(1999: 57) than it does about the respective Other. The exotic stranger is not

seen as he⁸ is, but is rather a construct of Western imagination. He is a “Projektionsraum von Hoffnungen und Visionen persönlichen Glücks und der Selbstverwirklichung”(Wierlacher 1993: 76). These projections are mainly built around a nostalgic longing for the Golden Age, equated with the ease of life and the essential innocence of its people (Jervis 1999: 57). As these projections must be seen in relation to repressed desires on the part of members of Western cultures (Spurr 1993: 127), the content of these visions varies in the course of time. While in one age people may focus on the exotic Other’s closeness to nature, his gentleness, and innocence in another period the supposed sexual freedom of such peoples may be stressed. Similarly, different traits are emphasised by different cultures. The English tradition for example idealises mainly “die mannhaften und kriegerischen Tugenden der ‘Wilden’”(Kohl 1993: 19).

At first sight, the rhetorical feature of idealisation seems to be a rather sympathetic approach towards the Other. What harm is done by representing exotic strangers as innocent, pure, or close to nature? The problem with this kind of portrayal is that it refers to a construct which does not rest on empirical observations but on a compensatory desire. The latent danger of this rhetoric lies in the fact that it can easily change from the idealisation into the malediction of the Other (cp. Hammerschmidt 1997: 37). Thus, what is at one time seen as the Other’s closeness to nature can turn at an other time into his supposed viciousness, his lust, or even bestiality. Idealisation and malediction “are merely opposing principles of the same rhetorical operation”(Spurr 1993: 134). In one case the projected images refer to repressed desires, in the other hidden fears and anxieties come into play and create a need to debase the respective Other.

2.1.9 Insubstantialisation

In *Heart of Darkness* both the narrative itself and the hero’s adventures are presented as something not quite real. When reflecting on the possibilities of communicating his experiences to his friends, Marlow says: “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream”(HD: 50). Not only the country and its people but also the white men’s presence there is “as unreal as everything else”(HD: 46). Almost everything Conrad’s protagonist encounters seems uncertain and dreamlike. This hints towards an interpretation which asserts that the novel’s central point is to recount not a real journey but Marlow’s “journey toward and through certain facets or

⁸ Please note that the male form of the personal pronoun – here and elsewhere in this paper - is employed for reasons of simplicity and refers to both male and female.

potentialities of self”(Prescott 2001: 316). This places the story within a tradition of Western writing “which makes the experience of the non-Western world into an inner journey, and in so doing renders that world as insubstantial, as the backdrop of baseless fabric against which is played the drama of the writer’s self”(Spurr 1993: 142). This is precisely what Achebe criticises in Conrad’s novel when he asks: “Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?”([1977] 1988: 8).

The dissolution of all certainties and the dreamlike nature of the things Marlow encounters on his journey lead to a sense of profound disorientation. There is only one instance during his trip down the river when the protagonist comes across something ‘real’. Arriving at an abandoned hut, Marlow finds an old book called *An Inquiry into some points of Seamanship* which is about to dissolve but which makes him “forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real”(HD: 65). Reading in this book makes him feel like under “the shelter of an old and solid friendship”(HD: 66). It becomes a sign of his own culture in the middle of darkest Africa and allows him to recover his security for a short time. In other words, this small sign of European civilisation is the only real thing he encounters during his voyage whereas the African setting remains dreamlike and obscure⁹. Marlow’s Africa is very abstract, his description constantly undermines the reality of what he sees. His trip represents, in fact, an inner journey which serves to reproduce “the crisis of the Western subject in the non-Western world”(Spurr 1993: 151).

2.1.10 Naturalisation

In colonial discourse the concept of nature stands for “an empty space [...], ready to be charged with any one of a number of values: nature as abundance, as absence, as original innocence, as unbridled destruction, as eternal cycle, as constant progression”(Spurr 1993: 168). The term shifts in meaning according to the needs of those in charge of the discourse. Thus ‘primitive peoples’ who are seen as being closer to nature than the Europeans can be classified in one moment as ‘noble’ beings living a life that resembles that of the Golden Age and in another moment as sub-human creatures delayed in the development of their humanity. “‘The primitive’ offers a challenge to be overcome, but also a hope of escape from the artificial and the over-civilized”(Jervis 1999: 6). These op-

⁹ One might even call the book a sign of European imperialism since there is a hidden link between navigation and imperialism (Goetsch 1998: 526).

posing views have already been introduced as the rhetorical strategies of debasement and idealisation.

The rhetorical feature of naturalisation carries some further implications. 'Primitive peoples' are usually seen as living a 'natural' life in 'natural' surroundings. This leads to a view in which they are "seen as extensions of the landscape, as the wilderness in human form"(Spurr 1993: 165). When Marlow observes an African tribe, he notes that "the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement of retreat, as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration"(HD: 98). The Africans of this scene are inseparable from their natural surroundings. In a cyclical movement they are ejected and then drawn into nature's bosom again. They are a part of nature and, therefore, hardly distinguishable from it. Additionally, this view of primitive peoples as mere extensions of the landscape is essential in purveying images of violence and social unrest in the Third World as something natural. Since they are identified with nature, these peoples are also governed by its forces and outbreaks of violence and catastrophes appear more likely than anywhere else. Often this leads to a discourse that "represses historical perspective in favor of an apocalyptic imagery"(Spurr 1993: 166).

The natural environment in Third World countries is often considered as having a negative influence on people's character. This mode of thinking, which has also been called "Klimazonenlehre"(Stanzel 1987: 94), starts from the supposition of a close connection between the natural conditions in a country and its inhabitants' character. According to this reasoning, people living in a moderate climatic zone – generally simply equated with the 'West' – are all in all more virtuous than people in zones with a more extreme climate (Stanzel 1987: 94-95). This rhetoric offers itself to the colonisers as a natural argument for their superiority and as a justification for their 'civilizing mission'. On another level, this theory accounts for the Europeans' fear of degenerating in a foreign country, i.e. of going native¹⁰.

The rhetorical degradation of 'primitive peoples' because of their 'natural' way of life goes back to a conception that sees nature and natural instinct as "precisely what humanity must learn to discipline"(Spurr 1993: 159). This view sets up an opposition between nature and culture and classifies human societies "hierarchically according to how well they control external nature"(1993: 161). As civilisation is regarded as corresponding to the domination over nature, the supposed lack of this control serves as an argument for

¹⁰ Cp. Marlow's (ironical) description of the Company's chief accountant, who is trying to keep up appearances and guard against errors in the midst of a general demoralisation and an unfavourable climate (HD: 36-37).

the taking away of the ‘primitive people’s’ terrain: “the land shall belong by natural right to that power which understands its value and is willing to turn it to account”(1993: 156). Exploitation is thus legitimised by a rhetoric which affirms the colonisers’ ‘natural’ right to use the natural resources according to their wishes and by blaming the natives for their ignorance.

2.1.11 Eroticisation

For Stanley, Africa is “still a virgin locked in innocent repose”(DA I: 248). The tropical forest that surrounds him is interpreted as a woman’s loving embrace: “Nature did its best with her unknown treasures, shaded us with her fragrant and loving shades, and whispered to us unspeakable things sweetly and tenderly”(DA I: 248). This description represents a tradition marked by the overlapping of phallogentric and colonialist discourses (Spurr 1993: 170). According to this tradition, female qualities are assigned to the dark continent. It becomes the explorer’s mistress, both mysterious and tempting.

The eroticisation also extends to the exotic country’s inhabitants. Marlow’s description of Kurtz’ African mistress serves to illustrate this:

And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

‘She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; [...] bizarre things, charms, gifts of witchmen, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (HD: 99)

In her splendour, the African woman can be seen as a typical instance of the idealisation of ‘primitive peoples’. She serves “as a classic figure of sexual adventure”(Spurr 1993: 177) and as a mirror for a whole continent: “Africa the immense, prolific, fertile body, reflected in this figure of a woman, handsome, imperious – and voiceless”(Jervis 1999: 68). Again, the exotic Other is just an extension of the surrounding tropical forest. Both Africa and its indigenous peoples are characterised by images referring to the female body and its sexuality.

While Marlow’s is a more or less sympathetic description of the African woman as a ‘gorgeous apparition’ the sexuality associated with the colonial Other also carries its negative implications. “Die verführerische Komponente der [...] Erotik kehrt sich, sobald

die psychische Disposition von Sympathie in Antipathie und Abwehr übergeht, in den Vorwurf verwerflicher Triebhaftigkeit und Perversion”(Hammerschmidt 1997: 51). Thus the description of Africa’s and its inhabitants’ sexuality may easily veer from one pole to the other. Even in *Heart of Darkness* one can find the negative side of this discourse. Kurtz gives in to Africa’s temptations, he succumbs to the gratification of his lust which leads to the loss of all his restraints and finally to his destruction. Again, the ultimate fear behind this mode of thinking is that of going native.

The eroticisation of Africa and its inhabitants can also be observed in a series of other metaphors. Marlow emphasises Africa’s “mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life”(HD: 48) and its “impenetrable forest”(HD: 59). According to this description Africa’s real life is concealed as if behind a veil and is therefore mysterious. The colonial explorer’s aim is to unveil her by penetrating deeper into the still ‘virgin’, i.e. unexplored, territory. Thus colonial and sexual language coincide and are often employed to create an opposition between the colonisers and their subjects. While the colonialist usually presents himself as disciplined and rational, the exotic Other is characterised by an unrestricted sexuality. Moreover, the depiction of the Other and his world as feminine allows the colonialist to stress his male qualities. Consequently, in the rhetorical strategy of eroticisation “colonization is naturalized as the relation between the sexes”(Spurr 1993: 172). The introduction of this distinction serves as a starting point for many more prejudices, such as male rationality against a supposed female irrationality.

2.2 Resistance

The preceding chapters can be understood as an inventory of “various rhetorical configurations that language has stored up in the extension of modern technology known as the colonialist enterprise”(Spurr 1993: 184). This capacity of our language – to store up rhetorical configurations – has far-reaching consequences. First of all, it points to the fact that the reproduction of a discourse can be an impersonal activity. Racist stereotypes do not have to be invented by the individual, rather he can fall back upon a rhetoric that already exists and has originated far back in history (Bergmann 2001: 8). In Foucault’s terms, this store constitutes a “culture’s ‘archive’”(cited in Selden/Widdowson/Brooker 1997: 186).

Concerning literary representations of foreign countries and peoples, language’s capacity to store up images and rhetorical features has yet another implication. As Jervis

mentions, “representations refer to other representations”(1999: 75). This means that writers, and especially travel-writers, run the risk of simply reproducing the images of an exotic place or people they have in their mind and start looking only for those things that seem to confirm their pre-conceived image. Due to this mechanism the Other disappears behind the image that is handed down in Western literary tradition. He is interpreted according to the already existing stereotypes and subject to the author’s projections (Scherpe/Honold 1995). An awareness of these traditions in language and literature can be considered a first step towards a discourse that avoids the reproduction of stereotypes handed down from one generation to the next.

While there, undoubtedly, is a ‘passive’ element in the reproduction of stereotypical images, colonial discourse is also largely an active process of constructing one’s own culture and traditions in opposition to those of the Other (Bhabha 1992: 438). This is an intentional process, based on dualistic thinking, whereby the colonialist tries to weaken, pervert or eliminate the Other’s standing and ego and is always connected with questions of power (Wierlacher 1993: 74). Attempts to oppose this rhetoric have frequently led to a counter-discourse whose weakness is, however, that it very often reproduces “in inverted form those same distinctions - civilized versus savage, good versus evil - upon which the logic of power depends”(Spurr 1993: 189). The aim is, therefore, to produce a discourse about the Other that is “non-dominative and non-coercive”(Said cited in Selden / Widdowson / Brooker 1997: 223). Such a discourse would correspond to what Bhabha has called “the postcolonial perspective”(1992: 438).

A starting point for such a perspective would imply a positive evaluation of cultural fusions (Lützel 1998: 19). Dualistic thinking often goes back to an ideal of cultural purity and tries to establish clear-cut boundaries to keep different cultures separate from each other. A postcolonial perspective admits the constructedness of these boundaries, however, and emphasises the way in which cultures are intertwined with each other (Waldenfels 1997: 67). With his concept of ‘hybridity’, Bhabha stresses the non-monolithic nature of cultures, their plurality and ambivalence (1992: 439). The notion of hybridity is not restricted to cultures but is also a feature of colonial discourse itself. As Spurr points out, one can observe an “internal resistance”(1993: 185) within this discourse because it is “at some level, always divided against itself”(1993: 186). This ambivalence derives from the fact that the colonial Other can reappropriate the discourse and use it for purposes of mimicry and mockery. Thus colonial discourse and the order it tries to establish can be subverted by those it tries to suppress.

If mimicry and mockery mark possibilities of resistance on the part of the colonial Other, how can the Western journalist or novelist avoid falling back on the language and imagery of colonialism “without giving up the task of describing and representing a world that lies outside of Western subjectivity”(Spurr 1993: 189)? Lützeler suggests that any writer dedicated to this project tries not to view the other “mit dem überlegenen, besserwisserischen, ausbeuterischen und missionarischen kolonialen, sondern mit dem offenen, wißbegierigen, solidarischen und gleichwohl kritischen postkolonialen Blick”(1998: 29). Consequently, these writers are willing to admit their uncertainties and limitations of perception. They are ready to question the assumptions underlying their work and are aware of their Eurocentric view. This view is problematised, however, as they know that they cannot abandon it completely.

The writer’s questioning of his own assumptions should go hand in hand with an awareness of his position as observer. This implies a willingness to give up a position of superiority – the gesture described by Mary Louise Pratt as the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey-scene’ – and to acknowledge the fact that one is always both observer and observed. It implies also a self-critical consciousness concerning one’s way of perception, since “one sees what it profits one to see, what one has a share or stake in, a claim upon”(Spurr 1993: 192). It is therefore important to examine one’s interest in visiting and writing about a foreign country. As to the representation of the colonial Other, it is a striking feature of colonial discourse that “the voices of the dominated are represented almost entirely by their silence, their absence”(Brantlinger 1985: 167). Any writing concerned with the representation of the Other should therefore also report the views and voices of representatives of these non-Western societies. All these suggestions indicate the need of exposing the logic of one’s discourse and consider a high degree of self-reflectivity as a basic requirement to escape the reproduction of stereotypical images of the Other. The inventory of stereotypes and rhetorical features subsumed under the concept of colonial discourse will help to evaluate Naipaul’s perspective on the ‘Dark Continent’.

3. “In a Free State”

The analysis of Naipaul’s view on post-colonial Africa and its peoples will start with an examination of the fictional work “In a Free State”. The text lends itself as the point departure of this study for several reasons. It is the first of Naipaul’s texts dealing explicitly with Africa and the political and social consequences of a recently gained independence. Compared to the author’s later work on Africa, “In a Free State” is different in that it is Naipaul’s only fiction with white protagonists. All ensuing essays and fictive accounts that will be discussed here have either protagonists with an Indian background or Naipaul himself is the narrator. Besides the chronological aspect and the text’s exceptional status, there is a third reason for taking “In a Free state” as point of departure: its closeness to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The two main characters’ confrontation with Africa in many ways echoes Marlow’s journey in Conrad’s novel (Levy 1995: 70). In fact, “In a Free State” can be considered a rewriting of this classic of English literature and therefore Naipaul’s comment on Conrad’s view on Africa (Walder 1993: 104). Consequently, an analysis of the relationship between these two works may be helpful to an understanding of Naipaul’s outlook on the ‘Dark Continent’. The comparison will serve to elucidate Naipaul’s treatment of Africa and Africans, of its landscape, the people’s language and the violence he finds everywhere. Another focus will be laid on the representation of the white protagonists and their attitudes towards Africa. Finally, the question will be raised whether the views held by the characters and the narrator of “In a Free State” can be equated with those of Naipaul himself.

In a Free State is designated as a ‘novel with two supporting narratives’. Actually, the book contains five pieces of writing. Among these the novella “In a Free State” is the longest piece of fiction and the one which gives the work its name. The narrative “One out of many” relates the story of Santosh, a Hindu from Bombay, and his experiences in the United States, while “Tell me who to kill” focuses on the life of a West Indian in England. The three narratives are framed by a journalistic Prologue and Epilogue whose narrator is commonly considered to be Naipaul himself (Levy 1995: 66). This mixed mode of writing will be an important characteristic of Naipaul’s later work on Africa. From the description of the book’s composition it will be obvious that *In a Free State* is not a traditional novel. The book’s, at first sight disparate, parts are, however, linked and held together by unifying themes:

materialism, imperialism, cruelty and violence, the rootlessness and paradoxically, the confinement of modern life. Each of the five sections of the book presents individuals struggling unsuccessfully to find a place for themselves, release from their

sense of dislocation in a world through which people seem to move at random.
(Nightingale 1987: 147-148)

All the main characters in this fiction are travelling or have already undergone a journey, they are “outsiders, expatriates or alien minorities”(King 1993: 83) without a home to which they can easily return and they all live in a ‘free state’.

The nature of this freedom to which the title alludes has been the cause of much debate amongst critics of this work. Even if the interpretation of this freedom is limited to its significance to the title story, it remains highly ambiguous. This is due to the fact that it may refer to a country which is politically free or to a psychological state of mind. Moreover, it may be a scientific metaphor or be regarded as referring to the relation between the fictional work and its author (Wright 1998). On the political level, freedom refers to the newly gained independence of many African countries. It may also be an allusion to the ‘Congo Free State’ that existed between 1885 and 1908 and which, ironically, was the private possession of King Leopold II of Belgium.

The political interpretation is closely linked to the psychological dimension of this freedom. In an interview with Hamilton, Naipaul once stated that being a colonial is “to know a total kind of security. It is to have all decisions about major issues taken out of your hands, to feel that one’s political status has been settled so finally that there is very little one can do in the world”(1971: 897). The determinism experienced by the colonial subject is replaced by a sense of insecurity in the face of a ‘free’, post-colonial world. In this context, freedom acquires a negative connotation. It essentially means being disoriented and alienated from one’s environment. Thus the characters appear unattached to the culture and society in which they live, their freedom seems their “heaviest burden” and stands for “‘loose’, ‘lost’, ‘drifting’”(Thorpe 1976: 30). The amount of violence Bobby experiences during his journey and the rivalries between the different African tribes signal that political order in this supposedly ‘free state’ is disappearing and that this country is becoming more and more chaotic. In such situations “society often reverts to a Hobbesian jungle-like condition in which everyone is at war with everyone else and the strong are free to hunt and attack the weak”(King 1993: 87). Therefore, the result of this freedom is a new enslavement, but in contrast to the colonial situation, not one of blacks by white people, but that of black people by themselves.

The African natives seem to be lacking in self-control and similarly Bobby and Linda, the two white protagonists, appear less restrained than they were in England. They enjoy a sexual freedom that would not have been possible in their home country. Linda becomes a “man-eater”(FS: 108) and Bobby is not embarrassed to live out his (homo-)

sexual fantasies with African boys. All in all, the psychological and political freedoms alluded to seem to be rather negative, with inherent connotations of insecurity, alienation, chaos, violence and the loss of restrictions and morals. This leads to a situation where “everyone, Asians, Africans, Europeans, Indians are ‘on the run’ [and] no point of rest or home is [...] granted or guaranteed”(Singh 1998: 136). Only the compound to which Bobby and Linda resort at the end of “In a Free State” offers them a kind of safety and security. This is due to the fact that the compound is a relic from colonial days¹¹.

In order to complete this overview of the several possible meanings of freedom in the context of this novel, let it be mentioned that a ‘free state’ can also be read as a scientific metaphor. The reference is to the “random motion around the atomic nucleus of electrons whose speed and position can be measured, but never at the same time and which are said to be ‘in a free state’ since their movement is impossible to plot exactly”(Wright 1998). This notion can be linked to the main characters’ unconnectedness, to the different African tribes that are randomly flung together, or to the many seemingly arbitrary plot connections (Wright 1998). Additionally, Wright sees a kind of freedom that exists in the relation of the book’s characters to their author. This statement is backed by the fact that, unlike the other texts that will be discussed in this paper, “In a Free State” is a fiction with white protagonists.

3.1 “In a Free State” and *Heart of Darkness*

During their journey from the capital to the compound, Bobby and Linda are engaged in a conversation about Africa and their motivations for living there. At one point Linda remarks: “I feel that sort of forest life has been going on for ever”, and Bobby replies: “You’ve been reading too much Conrad. I hate that book, don’t you?”(FS: 159)¹². This passage is the only explicit reference to Conrad and his work to be found in “In a Free State”. Although not directly mentioned, it seems obvious that the book in question is *Heart of Darkness*. This can be deduced from the many allusions to Conrad’s novel that can be found in Naipaul’s text and from the author’s general evaluation of his literary forerunner’s writing. As already mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Naipaul considers Conrad to be the writer who has been everywhere before him, “offering [...] a vision of the

¹¹ On the other hand, the name suggests a “prison-camp rather than a residential area”(Nightingale 1987: 164).

¹² Bobby’s hatred of ‘that book’ has to do with the fact that Conrad’s novel repudiates the idea of service to Africa (Feder 2001: 202), an idea Bobby lays claim to for himself. This and other aspects of the male protagonist’s characterisation will be examined in chapter 3.4.

world's half-made societies as places which continuously made and unmade themselves”(CD: 216). Concerning Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Naipaul believes the novel's African background “to be the most effective part of the book”(CD: 215). This chapter will explore the relationship between Conrad's and Naipaul's text and compare their views on Africa and colonialism.

Although based on his own experience during a voyage up the Congo in 1890, Conrad's description of Africa remains both historically and geographically unspecific. Deliberately avoiding explicit references to place names, he describes the African country as a place that has long been a “blank space” on the map and that has in the meantime “become a place of darkness”(HD: 22). Its prominent feature is “a mighty big river [...] resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land”(HD: 22). On his way there Marlow passes “various places – trading places – with names *like* Gran' Bassam, Little Popo”(HD: 30, italics added) and other “places with farcial names”(HD: 31). The tendency to avoid specific place names is perpetuated in the account of the protagonist's journey through the African country. The Company Station, the Central Station and the Inner Station replace Matadi, Kinshasa, and Stanley Falls (Walder 1993: 105) and allow the author to make more general statements about the nature of European colonialism in Africa. Likewise, most characters have no proper names but are simply referred to as the Manager, the Director, savage, or pilgrims. This device enables Conrad to unfold his vision of the ‘condition humaine’ and makes *Heart of Darkness* a “moral fable”(Walder 1993: 105) rather than the relation of a ‘real’ journey.

Looking at the opening paragraph of “In a Free State”, a similar tendency can be observed:

In this country in Africa there was a president and there was also a king. They belonged to different tribes. The enmity of the tribes was old, and with independence their anxieties about one another became acute. The king and the president intrigued with the local representatives of white governments. The white men who were appealed to liked the king personally. But the president was stronger; the new army was wholly his, of his tribe; and the white men decided that the president was to be supported. (FS: 99)

In comparison with the realistic tone of the other narratives included in *In a Free State*, that of the title story's initial paragraph will at first be unexpected. As in Conrad's novel, the description avoids calling any person or place by its name and bears strong resemblance to a folk tale. This impression is reinforced by the simplicity of the language used, both on the stylistic and the syntactic level. While Conrad's African country can easily be recognised as the Belgian ruled Congo Free State, however, “Naipaul's central African

state is [...] an amalgam of Uganda, Zaire, Rwanda, and Kenya”(Wright 1998). While many characters are simply named after their role or ethnic origin – the Zulu, the Indian, the president, the king, the colonel – others like the politician Sammy Kisenyi or the painter John Mubende-Mbarara are given the names of towns in Rwanda and Uganda (Walder 1993: 106). This move away from authentic place and personal names aims at imparting to the narrative a symbolic autonomy comparable to that of Conrad’s novel¹³. As discussed with reference to *Heart of Darkness*, this strategy may lead to a representation of Africa as an insubstantial backdrop for the struggles of the narrative’s white protagonists.

One of the most striking similarities between Conrad’s book and “In a Free State” is the motive of the journey. Marlow is a far-travelled man who even after a six year’s voyage in the “Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas” soon gets “tired of resting”(HD: 21) at home and is incapable of shaking off the idea of becoming the captain of a small steamboat in Africa. For Bobby, one of the most exciting things in Africa is “the safe adventure of long fatiguing drives on open roads”(FS: 105). Consequently, most of the narrative’s action is taken up by his and Linda’s journey. While Marlow experiences his voyage up the Congo as a journey “back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings”(HD: 59), Bobby and Linda drive “away from a Europeanized world toward an increasingly challenging ‘primitive’ Africa”(Walder 1993: 105). On their way from the unnamed capital to their compound, they stop at colonial outposts such as the Hunting Lodge and the colonel’s hotel, comparable to Marlow’s stops at the Central and the Inner Station. Except for the different means of transportation, the journeys undertaken by the respective protagonists resemble each other even to the point of being extremely dangerous. While Marlow’s mission is threatened with shipwreck and endangered by African natives attacking the steamer, the two expatriates’ journey is rendered dangerous by the rain and the resulting road conditions and by the unpredictable behaviour of the African soldiers.

Furthermore, the two stories are similar to each other in that they present the events from the perspective of white protagonists. As has been mentioned before, Marlow is both central character and narrator of his own experiences in Africa. He is an ambiguous character revealing his disgust at the exploitation of Africans for the selfish interests of the

¹³ This strategy of blending incidents from the histories of various African countries into one fictional account has been criticised because it implies a move away from the ‘real’ to the ‘representative’ and liberates Naipaul “from any obligation to observe historical fidelity, or even to maintain plausibility”(Wright 1998). The lack of political analysis leads to a fiction whose “outcome is [...] tendentious and misleading”(Wright 1998) since the resulting impression is that Africans upon gaining independence, “naturally revert to primitive tribalism [...] and that they waste their independence, throw away opportunities for national unity in the postcolonial phase, and go back to the bush”(Wright 1998).

white colonialists and is at the same time caught up in a web of racist assumptions about the natives. He is not a romantic hero who returns to his home country essentially unchanged, however, but gains in self-knowledge as he experiences ‘the horror’ underneath man’s thin veil of civilization. The protagonists of Naipaul’s novella reveal themselves through conversation over the course of their long drive. They expose “the illusions and self-deceptions of the white expatriates they represent – although, unlike Conrad’s Marlow, neither of them gains any self-knowledge as a result”(Walder 1993: 105). The opposite seems true: “their own prejudices and inadequacies emerge more and more clearly until [...] they become hostile, even vicious, toward each other and so, inevitably, toward the Africans upon whom they project their own inner disorder (1993: 105).

Consequently, their view of Africa is characterised by many prejudices and misconceptions. Linda is fascinated by the “pre-man side of Africa”(FS: 116) and romanticises the simple life of native Africans. Bobby, though a liberal on the outside, frequently displays that he regards himself superior to the natives. The view of Africa and Africans offered by the story’s central characters is, however, often supported by the anonymous third-person narrator. His descriptions of “the immemorial life of the forest”(FS: 205) resemble Marlow’s likening of the ‘Dark Continent’ to a “prehistoric earth”(HD: 62); thus repeating the latter’s atavistic preconceptions. As in *Heart of Darkness*, nature is seen as a primeval force:

The stream roared there, its course marked by the bare white branches of those trees whose roots it had drowned.

A forest stream, it turned out, with the forest debris of collapsed trees. But from the high bank on which he stood Bobby saw flat stones and boulders below the raging red water [...]. A little way up there was the remnant of a retaining brick wall. The stream had long ago breached that and now in flood was making another channel through what had once been a garden. (FS: 128)

In the section on ‘naturalisation’ it has been noted that nature often stands for an empty space ready to be charged with various forms of value. In Naipaul’s fiction, nature is mostly seen as a destructive element. Like the stream of this example, nature is depicted as the opposite of culture, destroying the achievements of (white) civilisation. It is potentially dangerous and, as in Conrad’s text, threatens “to sweep every little man [...] out of his little existence”(HD: 54).

This notion of nature as a primeval, and therefore threatening, force essentially contributes to render Marlow’s journey into “a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares”(HD: 31). Danger lurks everywhere, at every bend in the river, and especially below the surface, in the shape of rocks threatening to sink the steamer. Similarly, one is left with a horrifying vision when looking at the truth beneath the surface. “In a Free State” shares

this general atmosphere, this “sense of nightmare”(FS: 221). The true nature of Bobby’s and Linda’s character, usually hidden behind a liberal or paternalistic attitude, is revealed during their discussions or in moments of crisis. This culminates in Linda’s exclamation: ““You should either stay away, or you should go among them with the whip in your hand. Anything in between is ridiculous.””(FS: 219), a statement comparable to Kurtz’ “Exterminate all the brutes!”(HD: 84). Apart from this display of the characters’ inner violence, there are the dangers that may lurk at every turning of the road. These consist of natural obstacles and barriers put in their way by hostile people. While soldiers are not to be trusted and turn out to be completely out of control when they assault Bobby for no obvious reason, they exhibit a cruelty and ruthlessness that is even worse when it comes to the treatment of prisoners of the king’s tribe:

Then they saw the prisoners. They were sitting on the ground; some were prostrate; most were naked. It was their nakedness that had camouflaged them in the sun-and-shade about the shrubs, small trees and lorries. Bright eyes were alive in black flash; but there was little movement among the prisoners. They were the slender, small-boned, very black people of the king’s tribe, a clothed people, builders of roads. But such dignity as they had possessed in freedom had already gone; they were only forest people now, in the hands of their enemies. Some were roped up in the traditional forest way, neck to neck, in groups of three or four, as though for delivery to the slave-merchant. All showed the liver-coloured marks of blood and beatings. One or two looked dead. (FS: 229)

This description can be seen as a cynical statement concerning the freedom that has supposedly been won by Africans through independence. According to the narrator’s vision, this scenery appears more like the beginning of a new enslavement. In *Heart of Darkness* one finds a similar description of enslaved natives:

‘A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing full baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. [...]; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain [...]. At last I got under the trees. [...] Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair.’ (HD: 33-35)

Both descriptions aim at presenting the dehumanising effects of violence and enslavement. They refer to different historical constellations, however. While Conrad’s is a description of the suffering endured by native Africans as a result of white colonial rule, Naipaul’s Africans experience violence that goes back to the outbreak of tribal conflicts in the post-colonial era. Thus he can show that the freedom in this African state really is an illusion, an impression increasing the ‘sense of nightmare’ which pervades the narrative. Besides the ‘real’ violence, represented by the hunting down of the king or the enslavement of the king’s people, there is the imagined violence waiting along the road, and the hostility triggered by Bobby’s behaviour. “The story plays on the prejudices and vulnerability of the

reader by blurring the distinction between the actual danger and a kind of violence that Bobby provokes, making them finally converge”(Levy 1995: 72-73). Consequently, the Africa of “In a Free State” becomes a place characterised by a bleak and menacing landscape; a place threatening those who go there with a violence and danger that seems to be essentially African. The effect of this representation may be a view which insists on the necessity of colonial intervention in order to protect the native Africans from their own ignorance and violence. Whereas the Africans in Conrad’s novel have to be freed from the hands of greedy colonialists, the African’s in Naipaul’s story have to be rescued from themselves.

In the section on ‘insubstantialisation’ it has already been discussed that Conrad frequently stresses the dreamlike nature of his experiences in Africa and insists on the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of its landscape and people. This strategy, fundamentally, helps Conrad to distance himself from ‘real’ Africa and leads to a representation in which Africa becomes the backdrop for the inner struggle of the story’s protagonist. Naipaul’s narrative seems to share this notion of presenting Africa as a the site of dreamlike occurrences. While driving towards the compound, Bobby suddenly has a vision:

Two men ran out into the road. But perhaps they were only boys. They were naked, and chalked white from head to toe, white as the rocks, white as the knotted, scaly lower half of the tall cactus plants, white as the dead branches of trees whose roots were loose in the crumbling soil.

Perhaps it was their colour, robbing them of faces and even of nudity, that had made them seem light-footed and insubstantial. Perhaps it was the noise of the car, killing the cries they might have made and the sounds of their feet. (FS: 211)

The two men resemble ghosts rather than real people. They are surreal apparitions vanishing immediately after they have emerged from the bush. Their whiteness can be interpreted both as a sign of their insubstantiality – since white is the “colour of the spirit-world”(Nightingale 1987: 148) - and their desire to mimic white civilisation¹⁴. Likening them to dead branches of trees no longer embedded in the ground is significant since it refers to their status of living ‘in a free state’: they are no longer rooted in their old society and are not able to enter into the ‘modern’, post-colonial world. For Bobby these two Africans are nothing but an apparition, however,. As with all events on his long drive, which often possess “the unreal quality of a colour photograph”(FS: 221), they are “like things imagined”(FS: 222). This tendency of viewing Africa as something insubstantial and unreal is a device of distancing himself from a reality that he would like to avoid; an inclina-

¹⁴ The scene might as well be considered an instant of ‘passing’, a phenomenon which frequently refers to the transgression of the colour line and “emerges in situations of economic, social, cultural, political, and racial inequality” and represents “an attempt to conceal and forget the discreditable sign”(Goetsch 1999: 479-480). This interpretation implies that European civilisation still is the model for the majority of people living in this ‘free state’.

tion that will be further examined in chapter 3.4. The image of Africa as lacking in substance is not limited to Bobby's perception, however, but is also the image presented by the story's narrator. Therefore, Naipaul's Africa frequently seems abstract and dreamlike.

An other interesting parallel between Conrad's and Naipaul's texts is the degree of 'verbal eloquence' granted to native Africans. When Bobby and Linda are passing the night at the colonel's hotel, the former suddenly hears a voice:

An African voice burred and boomed through the hollow wooden building, stumbling over the six o'clock news from the capital, or the comment that followed the news: a voice reading word by word, evenly, and sometimes syllable by syllable, often trapping itself and then impatiently eliding. '*Feu-dal ...ter'rists...se'ssionist...Ab'am Lincoln ...secu'ty forces ...exte'm'nated ...vermin.*' The words came up to Bobby like an angry stutter. Against the competition of the radio the hotel boys banged about more and laughed more shrilly and squealed harder and longer in their forest language. (FS: 168)

The news speaker on the radio obviously hardly knows how to read since he stumbles from word to word. Moreover, the correct pronunciation of the words seems to surpass his oral skills. Concerning the content of this transmission, one may infer from the kind of language used, that it has to do with some kind of (socialist) propaganda. Compared to the verbal 'proficiency' of this news-speaker – a job in which usually only the most talented speakers are employed - the hotel boys' utterances are more like squeals. They speak the "language of the forest" characterised as a "high-pitched chatter"(FS: 168) and therefore incomprehensible to everybody else. This resembles Marlow's description of the native African's language as "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language"(HD: 108). The natives have not many opportunities to demonstrate their oral skills but if they are allowed to speak they produce sentences like "catch 'im" or "Eat 'im"(HD: 69); phrases likely to prove their inferior intellectual and moral status. Similarly, the following example from Naipaul's narrative confirms the Africans' stupidity.

'You no have curfew?' Bobby said.
'Car-few,' the fat soldier said.
The soldier in the middle said, 'Car-few.'
'What time you have car-few? Four o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock?'
'Five o'clock,' the fat soldier said. 'Six o'clock.' (FS: 231)

The soldiers in this scene can only mechanically repeat what has been said to them. They are virtually unable to understand what Bobby asks them, even though he uses the simplest kind language¹⁵. All in all, the depiction of the natives' verbal skills serves two purposes. On the one hand it helps to create "the abiding aura of mystery, the incomprehensibility, of the forest people"(Walder 1993: 113). On the other hand, the disparaging treatment of their

¹⁵ This passage also serves as a first example of the way in which Naipaul evaluates the Africans' mimicry of Western products and skills. For him it is nothing but the adoption of traditions they fail to understand. This point will be further discussed in chapters 3.2 and 4.6.

native tongue establishes the superiority of the colonials' or expatriates' language, the command of which seems to be a prerequisite to be acknowledged as fully human.

In the section on 'affirmation' it has been shown that colonial discourse presents the colonialists' activity as a self-less service and insists on the noble spirit of those whose main task, or even duty, consists in promoting science, progress, and civilisation. The depiction of the European settlers in *Heart of Darkness* proves that Conrad is trying to write against this tradition. Thus, the manager of the Central Station is portrayed as a man who "had no genius for organising, for initiative, or for order even. [...] He had no learning and no intelligence"(HD: 42), thereby denying him exactly those qualities that are allegedly characteristics of European civilisation. His only job qualification is that he is unaffected by the country's hot climate. The worst representatives of Europe's supposedly superior culture are the members of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition who are "greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage"(HD: 55). The other settlers are ludicrous figures always carrying "absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence"(HD: 44). All in all, the average European in Africa is shown to be either corrupt and cruel, or ridiculous and intellectually inferior. Naipaul's narrative shares this anti-idealisation of white people in Africa. At one point Bobby states:

'I very much feel that Europeans have themselves to blame if there's any prejudice against them. Every day the president travels up and down, telling his people that we are needed. But he's no fool. He knows the old colonial hands are out to get any penny they can before they scuttle South. It makes me laugh. We lecture the Africans about corruption. But there's a lot of anguish and talk about prejudice when they rumble our little rackets. And not so little either. We are spending thousands on overseas baggage allowances for baggage that never went anywhere.'(FS: 121)

Bobby, an outsider within the white community, describes the practise whereby the Europeans manage to perpetuate the exploitation of this African state even after its formal independence from colonial powers. The ex-colonials, who seem to be needed for the country's modernisation, are only interested in their personal benefit and will, after they have gained enough, move somewhere else. Their greed and corruptness are supported by Naipaul's own experience. While working as lecturer at Makerere University in Uganda he once told his friend Paul Theroux: "the English here are shameless. They're inferior, you know. Most of the men are buggers. That's why they're here"(Theroux 1984: 446). 'Bugger' is a very strong and disparaging word used to describe homosexuality, however, the negative connotation may be understandable in view of personalities like Bobby, who come to Africa to live out their sexuality by exploiting young African boys. Apart from this, Europeans are characterised as being attracted by the opportunities offered them by coming to Africa. During one of her conversations with Bobby, Linda openly admits: "And surely the

point of coming out here and giving up the BBC was to do something a little better than that”(FS: 123). The prospect of a higher post is an important incentive for leaving their home country. Thus one gets the picture of white people coming to Africa mainly for financial and sexual reasons.

Related to the treatment of the two texts’ white characters is the representation of their country of origin. In Marlow’s as well as Bobby’s and Linda’s case this is England. The opening pages of *Heart of Darkness* are interesting examples of the anti-colonial tendencies of this novel. The story’s outer narrator seemingly evokes “the great spirit of the past” mentioning the heroes and adventurers, “men of whom the nation is proud”(HD: 17), who started their daring enterprises from where Marlow and his companions are positioned. These men are bearers of “the sword, and often the torch” and constitute “the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires”(HD: 17). This ostensibly romantic and patriotic view is ironically undermined, however, by Conrad’s use of ‘reader traps’. One of these traps can be found in his allusion to Sir John Franklin’s expedition in quest for the North-West Passage where the members of the crew finally resorted to cannibalism in a vain attempt to save their lives (Hampson 1995: XXIX). Even more explicit than this example is Marlow’s first remark within this text. Referring to the time when the Romans arrived on the British Isle, he states: “‘And this also,’ [...], ‘has been one of the dark places of the earth.’”(HD: 18). Marlow’s observation is echoed by Bobby in “In a Free State” when he relates to Linda that he has an old aunt living “in darkest England”(FS: 207)¹⁶. Bobby does not display the common tendency to idealise the life in his home country. This becomes obvious when he is confronted with nostalgic souvenirs in the Hunting Lodge:

There were old magazines: photographs of parties, dances, country houses, furniture: an England, as it were, for export, carefully photographed, with what was offending left out. The English countryside Bobby knew best was a spreading semi-industrial confusion of housing developments like tent-cities, old houses lost on busy main roads, railroad tracks, factory buildings; where what remained of Nature – a brook, it might be, with pollarded willows – looked only like semi-urban wasteland. (FS: 129)

The critique of England is not as powerful as in Conrad’s novel since the view promoted in the quoted passage can also be dismissed as the negative reflex of a character who has passed a hard and unsatisfactory time in England and has finally found a new life in Africa. Moreover, the critique does not go as far as equating Africa with England (even if it is only the England of 1800 years ago). Rather, the passage’s tendency is to create a contrast between an industrialised England, where ‘true’ nature can hardly be found anymore, and Africa, where nature is available in abundance.

¹⁶ Besides referring to Conrad’s novel, Bobby’s statement is also an allusion to William Booth’s book *In Darkest England* (1890) which, again, is, at least in part, a response to Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa*.

Summarising what has been said about the relationship between the two texts one can confirm that *Heart of Darkness* and “In a Free State” bear strong resemblances. This is true both for the representation of the stories’ white characters and for the way in which Africa and its native population are depicted. Concerning the latter, Naipaul’s “neo-Conradian”(Nixon 1992: 92) tendencies include the treatment of Africa as a dreamlike and insubstantial place, characterised by a primeval nature and by a violence threatening everyone. The Africans portrayed are uncivilised bush people, their language is that of the forest and therefore unintelligible. Both texts share the atmosphere of Africa as a place of darkness where one constantly gets a sense of nightmare. In this context, Gupta remarks that “Naipaul’s writings about Africa are similar to Conrad’s in regurgitating the familiar racial stereotypes and cultural evaluations, and differ from Conrad’s in not possessing the broader metaphoric connotations of African ‘darkness’”(1999: 50-51). Naipaul’s African ‘free state’ is dark, but not as a direct consequence of the presence of white settlers. The ex-colonials are criticised for their inferiority, their corruption and the prolongation of the exploitation of Africa and Africans. The real problems of this state have to do with old tribal conflicts, however, and the resulting new enslavement of a part of the society. Since they are people only recently flung out from the bush, they seem completely unfit for participating in a modern state. Both texts remain historically and geographically unspecific and aim at a symbolic independence that renders them a moral fable rather than an analysis of the political situation in a particular African country. Consequently, both Marlow’s and Bobby’s and Linda’s voyage can also be regarded as an inner journey. While in the first case this leads to a deepened self-awareness, Naipaul’s protagonists seem to learn nothing and only display the racism and violence inherent in their characters. All in all, one can state that the similarities between the two texts are so striking that Conrad’s novel might be called the palimpsest shining through Naipaul’s novella on almost every page.

3.2 The Effects of Decolonisation

The fundamental difference between Conrad's novel and "In a Free State" lies in the description of Africa at different points in history. While *Heart of Darkness* depicts the continent at a time when Europeans are still engaged in a violent scramble for resources and land, Naipaul examines the post-colonial Africa of the 1960s and 70s. Some of the most interesting observations are connected to the effects of the country's independence from colonial rule. This relates both to the heritage of European colonialism and the nature of this 'new' African society. The description of the country's capital already indicates some of the text's general tendencies. According to the story's narrator, the capital

remained an English-Indian creation in the African wilderness. It owed nothing to African skill; it required none. Not far from the capital were bush villages, half-day excursions for tourists. But in the capital Africa showed only in the semi-tropical suburban gardens, in the tourist-shop displays of carvings and leather goods and souvenir drums and spears, and in awkward liveried boys in the new tourist hotels, where the white or Israeli supervisors were never far away. Africa here was décor. Glamour for the white visitor and expatriate; glamour too for the African, the man flushed out from the bush, to whom in the city, with independence, civilization appeared to have been granted complete. It was still a colonial city, with a colonial glamour. Everyone in it was far from home. (FS: 99-100)

The unnamed capital remains a colonial city due to its flair and because it is an Anglo-Indian creation. The reference to an Indian presence in Africa is a persisting theme of all the texts that will be discussed in this paper. While the English and the Indians build cities, the appropriate housing of Africans, the men 'flushed out from the bush', seems to be a hut in a small bush village. The capital is an alien element in 'the African wilderness' and Africa is almost completely excluded from this centre of civilisation. It is only exotic decoration for tourists, expatriates and even the Africans living there. The liveried African boys in the new tourist hotels are supervised by Whites or Israelis, a fact which might hint at the prolongation of old power relations between the native population and the colonial rulers. In this still colonial place no one really feels at home. This introduces the theme of "displacement in the neo-colonial world"(Thieme 1975: 18) that pervades the text, and indeed most of Naipaul's work. Even in their own country, the Africans are 'far from home' in this Anglo-Indian place. The white expatriates living in the capital, and in Africa in general, neither belong there nor can they easily return to their home countries. Thus, everybody seems to live in a 'free state', uprooted from their original culture, with no securities left, not tied to any specific culture or value system.

Colonialism has left behind an African society strangely split between a desire to return to its origins and the wish to live in a modern state. Thus, the country's president is characterised as "the man of the forest with his hair now in the English style"(FS: 129).

This shows that he is a person striving to be acknowledged as a moderniser. Since he is only a forest man, his adaptation of English cultural values can only be superficial, however. It is reduced to his hair style and indicates that he cannot be taken seriously. The average Africans are virtually unable to comprehend the white man's heritage. Many of the houses, that after independence had been abandoned by the colonialists, are now occupied again "by Africans who had come in from the forest and had used the awkward, angular objects they had found, walls, doors, windows, furniture, to re-create the shelter of the round forest hut"(FS: 170). The relics of Western civilisation serve only to re-create the atmosphere of African forest life. African culture and European civilisation seem to be incompatible and when Africans try to imitate the white men they render themselves ridiculous. This applies not only to the country's president but also to the 'new men' of the country, which Bobby encounters in the New Shropshire, the "capital's interracial pick-up spot"(FS: 100) where all the Africans are wearing their hair in the 'English style':

The Africans were young, in their twenties, and plump. They could read and write, and were high civil servants, politicians or the relations of politicians, non-executive directors and managing directors of recently opened branches of big international corporations. They were the new men of the country and they saw themselves as men of power. They hadn't paid for the suits they wore; in some cases they had had the drapers deported. They came to the New Shropshire to be seen and noted by white people, however transient; to be courted; to make trouble. (FS: 100)

The new men of this country seem hardly qualified for their posts as high civil servants or managing directors since their only qualification consists in being able to read and write. They imitate white businessmen and want to be seen by them. Cudjoe observes that these Africans "are a new variation of the mimic men. They create nothing and possess no identity independent of that of their white benefactors. [...] They are the parasitical elements par excellence of the twentieth century"(1988: 152). In the section on 'Resistance', mimicry was introduced as an essentially subversive element in the relationship between coloniser and colonised. In Naipaul's text this concept carries exclusively negative connotations, however. As discussed in relationship to the treatment of the Africans' verbal skills, mimicry here means the inability to understand, it is the stupid aping of styles and ideas and the lack of own concepts. When applied in Africa, European concepts are often perverted (Pyne-Timothy 1985: 252) as for instance when European technology, in the shape of a helicopter, is used to hunt down the king.

The end of colonial rule seems to bring about many negative changes. Apart from the country's capital – which is still a colonial place, however – Bobby and Linda encounter decay and destruction wherever they go. When arriving in the town where they will spend the night, they observe that

the town that had looked whole showed its dereliction. The drives of villas were overgrown, disgorging glaciers of sand and dirt through open gateways. The park was overgrown. The globes and imitation coach-lamps in walls had been smashed and were empty. Metal was everywhere rusty. The boulevard was more than bumpy. It was cracked and fissured; the concrete gutters were choked with sand and dirt and weeds; the sidewalks were overgrown. The roofs of some villas had broken down. One veranda roof, of corrugated iron, was hanging like a bird's spread wing. (FS: 165)

The general impression one gets is that with decolonisation the achievements of civilisation are lost. The narrator emphasises that nature is claiming back more and more ground. His repeated use of the word 'overgrown' – three times in this short passage – indicates both nature's force and a lack of care on the part of the African natives. Although the tone used to describe the town's derelict state is factual and dispassionate, the minuteness of these observations seems to entail a sense of sadness in view of these ruins of civilisation. A look at an other passage confirms this and adds a new idea:

The stream raged on. On the other bank tree trunks were black in the gloom; leaves and branches hung low. The wood of a fairy-tale, far from home: what was so recently man-made, after the forests had been cut down and the forest-dwellers flushed out and dismissed, what had perhaps been intended only as an effect of art in a landscape made secure, had become natural. It spoke of an absence of men, danger. (FS: 128)

Again there is nature as a primeval force destroying what has been built by the white colonialists. Whereas the white men's activity is depicted as 'an effect of art' in a landscape they have carefully managed to control, their departure has negative consequences and even renders this place dangerous. The Africans, characterised as 'forest-dwellers' living in fairy-tale woods, are contrasted with these Europeans and their ability to dominate nature and its destructive forces. The language used to describe them even deprives them of their humanity, since only a flight of birds can be 'flushed out' from the forest. Thus the colonialists' absence often implies chaos and danger. This notion is confirmed a little later in the text. While taking a walk in the above-mentioned town, Bobby and Linda are threatened by dogs that have gone wild because their white owners have left. Upon Bobby's remark that "They brought these dogs here to attack Africans", Linda replies "All right, Bobby. They're attacking everybody now." (FS: 189). Although this statement can be considered a hint at the colonisers' brutality and inhumanity, the stress of this remark seems to be on the chaos and lack of orientation resulting from decolonisation. This independent 'free state' is full of dangers for everyone, not only for the native Africans but also for white expatriates like Bobby and Linda. After a short period of civilisation, nature has won the upper hand again, threatening everyone alike with its destructive primeval power.

3.3 Africans

The analysis has already touched on some points concerning the text's treatment of native Africans (see chapter 3.1). In compliance with the rhetoric of colonial discourse, these Africans appear to be bush people and as such almost indistinguishable from nature surrounding them; they possess only minimal verbal skills and are incapable of understanding even the easiest questions. The ensuing paragraphs will explore other important aspects of their characterisation and oppose them to the depiction of the narrative's main white characters. Among the Africans one can distinguish between several social groups. At the top of the social hierarchy there is the country's president, slightly Europeanised in his appearance, who is hunting down the king and does nothing to prevent his soldiers enslaving the members of the latter's tribe. Besides these opposed parties there are the "blank-faced"(FS: 119) masses, two Africans whom Bobby gives a lift in his car, and four Africans introduced with their proper names. All these groups have in common that they are presented shallowly from the outside. None of them is a fully developed character and neither of them is given a voice to report his own views on the country's development after independence. Thus, these Africans remain "featureless"(FS: 119), "[b]lack, emblematic"(FS: 136).

The natives' predominant physical characteristic seems to be their horrible smell. When Bobby stops for a native hitch-hiker "[t]he African opened the door himself" and immediately "filled the car with his smell"(FS: 133). Linda relates this to the Africans' eating habits when she states that "You can smell the filth they have been eating."(FS: 136). According to her view, even Africa itself seems to possess a distinctive odour: "It is a smell of rotting vegetation and Africans. One is very much like the other."(FS: 137). While, at first, it seems possible to dismiss these observations as just one character's private obsessions, the issue of the Africans' stench is taken up on many other occasions and, frequently, in narratorial parts. The characterisation of Timothy, one of the waiters in the colonel's hotel, may serve to illustrate this. "The boy was big and he moved briskly, creating little turbulences of stink. The cuffs and collar of his red tunic were oily black"(FS: 174). When he comes to clear away Bobby and Linda's plates, he leaves "a little of his stink behind"(FS: 177). Timothy's description is limited to his smell and to the dirtiness of his clothes. Thus, through mere repetition of these descriptions, the reader gets the impression that this smell is a typically African characteristic. This portrayal of the African natives certainly falls under the category of 'debasement' and has led to vehement protests from the text's critics. Cudjoe is sure that "the narrator has a great aversion for African

society”(1988: 154) and Adewale Maja-Pearce shows her annoyance at these descriptions in a direct attack on the author and his brother Shiva Naipaul¹⁷:

They despise Africans with a passion and they make no secret of it. Take V.S. Naipaul’s short novel, *In a Free State*, which deals with the problems of expatriates in a newly-independent African state. Africans appear in only very minor roles (not necessarily a criticism) but he leaves us in no doubt of the physical distaste the arouse in him. (Maja-Pearce 1985: 111)

Apart from the fact that Maja-Pearce suppresses the other narratives included in Naipaul’s book and simply equates its author and narrator – a matter that will be discussed at the end of this section (chapter 3.5) – it is difficult to deny her conclusion that the text ultimately portrays Africans as physically distasteful. This impression is enhanced and generalised by the lack of a more positive or sympathetic description.

The depiction of the colonel’s two other domestics is in line with the hitherto made observations. Peter, who is not black but dark brown and looks “less like an African than a West Indian or American mulatto”(FS: 178), has fourteen children with different women and his quarters look disgusting. Carolus, the hotel’s barboy, learns French and geometry because he wants to get a “big job”(FS: 191) but does not understand anything when Bobby tries to teach him. The boy, who is “fresh from the bush”(FS: 196), only mechanically repeats Bobby’s words. Just like Carolus, many other Africans in Naipaul’s text are people of very low intelligence. After Bobby has paid for his petrol at a gas station, the African serving him “counted out the change coin by coin into Bobby’s hand. It was too much; it was more than Bobby had given”(FS: 143). The African’s mental abilities seem limited to the point that he is even unable to count money and do his job properly. Stressing their stupidity, the narrative reduces Africans to an inferior status. The natives’ degradation is reinforced further in the ensuing passage:

At a twist in the road ahead, where the bare verge widened and rose and fell away, half a dozen small domestic animals stood together silhouetted against the sky. But two turned out to be naked children. Dull-eyed, disfigured with mud, they stood where they were and watched the car pass. (FS: 205)

‘Delayed decoding’ is the narrative technique Naipaul uses here, a method frequently employed in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Prescott 1999: 304). Two of the observed animals suddenly turn out to be naked children. Even after the narrator has realised his error, he does not distance himself from his former statement but continues his description in a way that seems to confirm his earlier assumption. The dull-eyed and mud-covered children resemble rather animals than human beings.

¹⁷ According to Maja-Pearce, Shiva Naipaul depicts Africans in his novel *North of South – An African Journey* (1978) in much the same way as his older brother (Maja-Pearce 1985).

Another group repeatedly mentioned throughout the text are the president's soldiers. They stand out in their violent treatment of the members of the king's tribe and the assault on Bobby. They burn down the king's palace, thus creating the country's "first true ruin"(FS: 237). Generally, they are unpredictable and dangerous, especially when they are far away from their head-quarters and instructors. But even there they seem to be lacking in discipline, as can be seen in the following account of the Israeli instructor's effort to train the African soldiers:

[...] the Israeli was doing one thing, the Africans another. The Israeli was using his body, exercising, demonstrating fitness. The Africans, their eyes half closed, had fallen into a trance-like dance of the forest. Their knees hardly rose; their faces were blank with serious pleasure; [...]. The Africans had grown fat and round-armed on the army diet; the Israeli instructor was small, slender, fined down. (FS: 171)

The fact that the Africans have an Israeli as their instructor is once again a hint at the country's need for foreign specialists in order to improve their situation. The quoted passage opposes the Africans and their trainer. Whilst the latter is slender and refined and demonstrates his physical fitness, the Africans seem not to understand what is expected from them. They mistake the exercise for their 'trance-like dance of the forest' and are satisfied with the army diet, which has made them fat and round-armed. The soldiers' "fat faces"(FS: 201) and their obesity in general, are a recurring theme and may be interpreted in two ways. Their corpulence might be an indicator for the army's importance in a country with rivalling tribes where power can only be maintained through force. It can also be interpreted as another repugnant feature of the Africans' physical appearance, however.

The only African group the text's narrator seems to esteem are the king's people. They are depicted as "a people who lived, vulnerably now, in villages along their ancient straight roads: roads that had spread their power as forest conquerors, until the first explorers came"(FS: 235). Here, for the first and only time, an African history prior to that of colonialism is mentioned. The king's people have been the builders of roads, a cultural achievement that has enabled them to spread their power and acquire the fame of 'forest conquerors'. The text laments their present vulnerability and the new enslavement suffered by them through the president's army. Even the members of this tribe are not exempt from negative and stereotypical descriptions, however. Both the African at the gas station who is unable to count money and Bobby's servant Luke are members of this tribe. When the latter sees Bobby after he has been assaulted by the army, his "red eyes stared; his nostrils widened and his long, thin face quivered. He sniffed; his pulled-in lips flapped open. With a snort, and with swift little stamps of his right foot, he began to laugh"(FS: 239). Again, the description would be more fitting for an animal than for a human being. Thus, ultimately all African groups are subject to negative and humiliating characterisations. Nai-

paul's text reproduces many typical features of colonial discourse. Among these are especially debasing strategies like the reduction of natives to an animal-like status and the ridiculing of Europeanised Africans.

3.4 White Expatriates

Concerning the text's treatment of white ex-colonials and expatriates, it has already been mentioned that this group is not exempt from criticism (chapter 3.1). In fact, Naipaul's novella conveys the impression that many white people living in Africa are corrupt and selfish and do not care about the development of the African state in which they live. The narrator leaves no doubt that most of these white expatriates will move southward – i.e. to South Africa – as soon as they have exploited the country's resources and gathered enough money for themselves (FS: 159). Nevertheless, the text is not restricted to the harsh criticism of this *de facto* prolongation of colonial practices. The colonel, Bobby and Linda are the novella's most fully developed characters. Through them the text "explores three attitudes toward Africa: reactionaryism or old-style colonialism, cooperation, and separatism"(Weiss 1992: 172). All of them are constantly trying to define their relationship to Africa in a time of enormous changes, thus displaying their obsessions, illusions and prejudices.

The colonel, who owns the hotel where Bobby and Linda are stopping for the night, can be regarded as a prototype settler. Almost all of his statements about Africa and Africans are in keeping with the rhetoric of colonial discourse. When talking to Bobby and Linda about Peter, he makes no secret of his attitudes about his African servant:

'He has fourteen [children]. He's living with three of those animals right now. So polished. So nice. So well-spoken. You wouldn't believe he doesn't even know how to hold a pen in those hands. You wouldn't believe the filth he comes out of. But you like dirt, don't you, Peter? You like going in to some black hole to eat filth and dance naked. You will steal and lie to do that, won't you?'(FS: 180)

According to the colonel, Peter's 'polished' outward appearance has nothing to do with his 'true' nature. In reality he is utterly uneducated and participates in nauseating rituals. He comes out of dirt, likes to eat filth and his children are not human beings but animals. The colonel's degrading language aims at reducing his black servant to an animal-like status. His sense of superiority is backed by a belief in the importance of his own presence: "If I die you will starve, Peter. You will go back to bush"(FS: 181). Corresponding to the rhetorical strategy of appropriation, the colonel regards his presence as necessary for the African's own good. Left to himself, his servant would not even be able to sustain himself and

probably become a ‘forest-dweller’ again. The colonel’s use of pidgin in the last sentence, after speaking normal English the rest of the time, is symptomatic, as it anticipates Peter’s regression to savagery. During this conversation the colonel demonstrates his abhorrence of Africans, and reveals his inherent brutality when he lets Peter recount stories of whippings and other cruelties committed by colonialists. All in all, the colonel denies the Africans’ humanity. While talking to Bobby and Linda, he states: “‘They say there’s good and bad everywhere. There’s no good and bad here. They’re just Africans’”(FS: 185).

One might be tempted to argue that since the novel clearly exposes the colonel’s prejudices and racist rhetoric, the views he holds can be automatically dismissed as the obsessions of an individual character or a group of characters. This is not the case, however. “Although the novella portrays the colonel as an unlikable racist, it supports his attitude toward Africa and Africans through the events of the plot”(Weiss 1992: 173). As has been shown in the previous section, the tendency to reduce Africans to an inferior, even animal-like status pervades the whole text. Concerning the colonel, another aspect may be of importance. When Bobby sees him for the first time he realises that the colonel’s hands “were blotched, the skin loose; they trembled as they pressed against the counter. Bobby was also aware that the colonel was smelling. He saw that the colonel’s singlet was brown with dirt; he saw dirt in the oily folds of skin on the colonel’s neck”(FS: 167). The colonel is already very old; moreover he is dirty and smells. This lack of care in the physical appearance is usually a description ascribed only to the text’s African characters. Therefore, the fact that this old settler has stopped keeping up appearance can be considered a hint that he has finally gone native. Lacking the other colonialists’ support he has been unable to maintain his level of civilisation and has – like Kurtz in Conrad’s novel– given in to the African temptation.

Linda, the wife of a BBC reporter, has already been described as a ‘man-eater’ and as a woman proud of her improved status due to their residence in this African state. She is a conventional colonial wife with atavistic fantasies about life in Africa. In her conversation with Bobby, she recounts how she thought Africa would be like:

I somehow imagined they would all be living in the jungle. When Martin said we were being posted to the Southern Collectorate I imagined the compound would be in a little clearing in the forest. I never thought there would be roads and houses and shops. (FS: 111)

Before coming to Africa Linda believed it to be a place where nothing has ever happened and where everyone is still living in a little clearing in the forest. But even after she has spent a couple of years there, her view of Africa is unchanged. She states that “‘nothing that happens here is more interesting than any other thing that happens. Perhaps in a place

like this there isn't any news. Sammy Kisenyi can put out the Lord's prayer every day and call it the news"(FS: 141). Real news and important historical events can only take place outside Africa, i.e. in the Western world. Although she has found life in Africa to be different from that of her imagination, Linda still denies Africans a proper history and thus refers indirectly to the notion of the 'immemorial life of the forest'. Moreover, she romanticises and exotises certain African groups. The following passage from her dialogue with Bobby is revealing in this respect:

'If I weren't English I think I would like to be a Masai. So tall, those women. So elegant.'

It was a compliment to Africa [...]. But he said, 'How very Kenya-settler. The romantic blacks are the backward ones.'

'Are they backward? I was thinking of the *manyattas* or whatever they are. Like the drawings in a geography book. You know, your little hut, your tall fence, and bringing home your cattle for the night to protect them against marauders.'

'That's what I meant. Peter Pan in Africa.'

'But doesn't the pre-man side of Africa have this effect on you sometimes?' (FS: 116)

Linda believes in the romanticism of a simple life as a Masai woman living in a small manyatta¹⁸. This effect which she attributes to the African natives' 'pre-man side' is due to her wish to escape the complexity of modern life and may be called a pastoral fantasy. Her longing for a 'Golden Age' and the subsequent idealisation of the simplicity of African life are contrasted with her obsession about strange African customs. She tells Bobby: "They are going to swear their oaths of hate. You know what that means, don't you? You know the filthy things they are going to do? The filth they are going to eat? The blood, the excrement, the dirt"(FS: 119). She is sure that somewhere "up there they've taken off their nice new clothes and they're dancing naked and holding hands and eating dung"(FS: 163). In view of the mechanisms of the rhetorical strategy of idealisation this seemingly strong contrast between the first passage and the two latter quotes is hardly astounding. While at one time Linda expresses her repressed desires for a natural and simple life, at another she displays her hidden fears and anxieties. This shows again that idealisation and malediction are just opposing principles of the same rhetorical operation.

During the whole narrative, interaction between her and black Africa does not take place. The only time she ever talks to an African is when she orders the black hitch-hikers Bobby has allowed into the car, to get out immediately. Due to this lack of contact with natives she has no need to examine her attitudes toward them and can maintain her idealising, and at the same time debasing, stance. As to her motives for living in Africa, it has

¹⁸ Manyattas are traditional "huts with pole sides and pole roofs, chinked all over with cattle dung"(Brown 2001).

already been mentioned that the perspective of a higher social status has been a decisive incentive. Bobby is sure that there is yet another reason. He tells her: ““You came for the freedom, though””(FS: 219), referring mainly to the sexual freedom Linda enjoys in Africa. The general atmosphere in this country promotes this kind of freedom since everybody seems to have lost their moral restrictions. On the other hand, Linda can be considered an example for Naipaul’s observation that most of the English expatriates in Africa are somehow inferior. In Linda’s description, positive traits are completely missing and, when deeply enraged, Bobby shouts at her that there are ““millions like you, millions, and there will be millions more””(FS: 220). Like many others, Linda belongs to that inferior type of settler coming to Africa for the freedom, status, and sexual opportunities it offers.

Bobby is the story’s most fully developed character. Unlike the other white expatriates, he clearly disapproves of colonialism. When passing by some army lorries packed with Africans, he tells Linda: ““I must say I didn’t like the looks we got there [...]. For a minute it made me feel we were back in the old days. I would’ve hated to be here then, wouldn’t you?””(FS: 120). He repudiates the idea of the white man’s superiority. With great conviction he declares: ““I am here to serve [...]. I’m not here to tell them how to run their country. There’s been too much of that. What sort of government the Africans choose to have is none of my business””(FS: 115). Bobby’s self-assessment has led some critics to believe that “he is genuinely committed to the society through an ideal of modest, unmeddlesome service”(Thieme 1975: 20). Moreover, he seems to be trying to adapt to this culture. He wears a ‘native shirt’ which is supposed to express his admiration for Africa and Africans and tells a Zulu, whom he is trying to seduce: ““If I come into the world again I want to come with your colour””(FS: 103). This evaluation will not bear closer examination, however. A comparison between his claim of serving this newly independent African state and the events of the story will reveal his self-deception.

Bobby has come to Africa after a nervous breakdown at Oxford. “Africa saved my life”(FS: 113), he tells Linda and is convinced that he has begun a new kind of life. The text does not present any reasons for Bobby’s breakdown but one may guess that it had to do with his sense of being unimportant. In Africa Bobby derives all his pride from being a government officer and the knowledge that he, and the other white bureaucrats, are needed for the functioning of the state. Thus one might say that, ultimately, Bobby is “someone who could not make it at home”(King 1993: 82) and came to Africa for personal salvation and the opportunities offered on the labour market and not for selfless and philanthropic reasons. Besides using Africa for his personal benefit he regards it as the site of all kinds of adventures.

Africa was for Bobby the empty spaces, the safe adventure of long fatiguing drives on open roads, the other Africans, boys built like men. 'You want lift? You big boy, you no go school? No, no, you no frighten. Look, I give you shilling. You hold my hand. Look, my colour, your colour. I give you shilling buy schoolbooks. Buy books, learn read, get big job. When I born again I want your colour. You no frighten, You want five shillings.' Sweet infantilism, almost without language: in language lay mockery and self-disgust. (FS: 105-106)

Despite his supposed liberalism and the empathy with the plight of Africa, Bobby "uses the continent as a setting for a personal adventure, thus perpetuating the colonial perception of Africa as exotic playground for Europeans"(Weiss 1992: 174). His use of pidgin makes him appear ridiculous, while his friendly pose is sharply contrasted with his wish to exploit and abuse young African boys. Surely, a fundamental reason for Bobby's wish to stay in Africa is that he can freely pursue his sexual interests. In most cases five shillings suffice to buy him little favours from African boys he meets along the road, in hotels or in bars. On a closer look, Bobby shares many characteristics that have been discussed in relation to Linda and colonial settlers in general. Like these, Bobby is an inferior personality coming to Africa for egotistical reasons and for the prospects concerning his status and (sexual) freedom this offers. He is different from these groups, however, in that he fails to admit these motives to himself.

In the course of the story Bobby's self-deception is more and more clearly exposed. The narrative's action almost seems an illustration of Linda's husband's statement that "the only lies for which we are truly punished are those we tell ourselves"(FS: 159). With assertions like "I feel all this' – he indicated the great valley – 'belongs to me'"(FS: 114) or "My life is here"(FS: 159), Bobby displays his belief that he has assimilated himself to his new culture and that he understands Africa and Africans. This conviction is undermined, however, by hostile reactions and the wrong assessment of situations during his journey. He is spat upon, the windscreen of his car is damaged, he misinterprets the bar-boy's behaviour and, finally, he is assaulted by African soldiers. While the wrong estimation of many situations signals the protagonist's tendency to avoid Africa (Feder 2001: 199), his journey leads to a confrontation with 'real' Africa and it also reveals Bobby's 'true' nature. When infuriated by the African's behaviour at the gas station, he suddenly assumes a pose of authority and superiority. He shouts at the African: "How dare you turn your back on me while I'm addressing you?"(FS: 146). After he has been battered by the president's army, his houseboy Luke's sole reaction consists in bursting out in a fit of laughter. This makes his further presence unbearable for him and Bobby comes to the conclusion that Luke will have to be sacked. "When his facade shatters, his initial impulse is to escape; but when he cannot run he relinquishes his greatly prized liberal ideals and be-

comes the colonial master”(Hamner 1977: XX), who can easily dismiss the objectionable subordinate. Bobby thus becomes a representative of a “peculiarly English blend of liberal openness and master racism”(Thorpe 1976: 31). He cannot leave – e.g. to South Africa, like the other ex-colonials – because he needs to maintain his belief in the importance of his ‘service’ for this African country, at the same time as he needs this feeling of superiority in relation to the natives.

All in all, the description of the text’s main white characters is negative. Almost no positive traits are mentioned, whereas the negative characteristics are strongly emphasised; the expatriates are corrupt and selfish, and most of them belong to that inferior type of settler attracted to Africa mainly by the opportunities offered by living there. All three expatriates introduced in this chapter share common prejudices about Africans. While Linda both idealises the natives’ simple life and debases them because of their supposedly nauseating customs, the colonel employs, above all, the latter device to ascertain his superiority. Although outwardly protesting his will to serve, Bobby, too, believes in his racial superiority. Moreover, the expatriates are depicted as potentially violent: the colonel in relation to the treatment of his servant Peter, Bobby toward the African boy who has scratched his windscreen, and Linda in her statement that one should either stay away, or go among them with a whip in one’s hand. In one way or another, all the white characters seem interested in the continuation of a situation of racial inequality and thus, ultimately, in the perpetuation of colonialism.

3.5 Black Flaws and White Deficiencies

In view of the text’s emphasis on the white characters’ negative traits one might be led to ask whether this is the author’s means to undermine the mostly pejorative characterisation of the African natives. The aim of the ensuing chapter is, therefore, to examine how Naipaul has distanced himself from the stereotypical and negative representation of his African characters. Is it correct to assume that, since the depiction of the novella’s white protagonists aims at revealing their prejudices and racism, his portrayal of Africans is an ironic play with the reader’s expectations? Finally, what is the relationship between the protagonists’, the narrator’s and the author’s views concerning this question?

One of the text’s narrative techniques seems to consist of contrasting Africans’ and white men’s behaviour. While at one point in the text the African soldier’s fatness is re-

peatedly mentioned, some pages later the colonel relates the Flemings' revolting eating habits:

The Flemings should be thin ,but they are fat. Ever seen a party of Flemings at the trough? They would order dinner for ten o'clock and get here at seven. At *seven*. They would start drinking. Just to make themselves hungry. By eight they would be hungry and nibbling at everything and getting the boys to run back and forth with more and more savouries. [...] Then at ten they would come in and eat solidly for an hour and a half. Grunting and snorting together. Mother, father, child. Everyone a little ball of fat. (FS: 177)

The Flemings' behaviour is far from civilised and the colonel laments: "That was the sort of example they were setting. You can't blame the Africans. The Africans have eyes. They can see"(FS: 177). Thus, ironically, it is the old colonial racist who introduces the idea that the natives' negative traits may, at least partially, be traced back to the white men's own deficiencies. If the Whites regard themselves and their civilisation as the model, the Africans cannot be blamed for imitating them. The colonel's mention of the Africans' eyes is significant in this context and recurs also in some other situations. Having allowed an African hitch-hiker into his car, Bobby is constantly aware of the "African's gaze"(FS: 134). When he looks back he catches "the African's smiling eyes"(FS: 134). This scene indicates an awareness of the reciprocity of observation. Bobby realizes that he is not only observer but always also the object of observation. Seen from this angle, many of the Africans' negative characteristics can be excused. The description of the colonialists and white expatriates stresses their corruption and selfishness, and their desire to prolong the exploitation of the natives. In view of the destruction of African culture and the subsequent loss of the natives' traditional way of life, the white men's manners clearly constitute a point of orientation. Thus there is not much difference between the expatriate's desire to get as much money as possible out of this African state before moving south and the 'parasitical' existence of the country's 'new men'. Similarly, the enslavement of the members of the king's tribe refers back to that of many Africans by their colonial masters. In any of these cases, the example set by the Europeans illustrates a lack of civilised behaviour and, consequently, undermines the fundamental assumptions of their moral and cultural superiority.

This rhetorical strategy of contrasting black and white characters is limited in scope, however, and fails to account for many of the disparaging features attributed to the African natives. Whereas the Europeans are builders of great cities, the Africans are generally bush people, talking in their incomprehensible forest language and are endowed with very low intelligence. Many of them appear physically distasteful or even animal-like. None of them is depicted in depth and none of their views are reported, leaving them enigmatic and mysterious. Despite the fact that all three white protagonists display a certain

amount of brutality, the violence associated with Africans is of a different nature. This violence is presented as a typically African characteristic. It is not only connected to the natives but also to the African landscape and general atmosphere. Violence may be expected at every turning in the road. This notion links the novella to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The latter's African background, considered by Naipaul as the book's most effective part, has surely served as a model for "In a Free State". Thus, Africa is portrayed as a place of darkness, leaving everyone with a sense of nightmare. Although Naipaul is aware of the tradition of writing on Africa, and at one point even explicitly mentions Conrad's novel, his view does not diverge much from that of his literary forerunner. From his statements in "Conrad's Darkness" one can deduce that his valuation of Conrad and the latter's writings on Africa is genuine and honest. Therefore, it is hardly credible that Naipaul's description of Africa and the African natives should be ironic.

Many of the novella's critics believe that "the imperial sentiments and prejudices expressed at different times by the expatriate characters – Bobby, Linda, the Colonel – reflect almost identical views stated baldly by the autocratic third person narrator" (Wright 1998). With the exceptions mentioned above, the validity of Wright's argument cannot be challenged. Frequently, the narrator fails to distance himself from the white character's statements or even openly supports them. Moreover, he does not admit any limitations or uncertainties of perception. His account of the Africans' horrible smell or their stupidity is presented in a matter-of-fact style and leaves no room for a questioning of his assumptions. Naipaul's failure to distance himself from his narrator's opinions has led many reviewers to suppose that "the relationship between the protagonist, the narrator and the author is of no consequence for the vision projected is a single one; the awareness of the protagonist growing into that of the narrator and the artist" (Kamra 1990: 147). Critics trying to defend the author, tend to argue that "In a Free State" is only one of the five stories of Naipaul's novel *In a Free State* and usually refer to the Epilogue (Walder 1993: 114ff). There the narrator, who is commonly considered to be Naipaul himself, intervenes on behalf of some Egyptian children suffering under a cruel practise: European tourists sitting in a rest-house throw pieces of their food in the direction of these hungry children who try to gather them. The waiter lets them come close and then chases them away with his whip. Having observed this 'game' for a while, the Epilogue's first-person narrator is so enraged that he intervenes and stops these brutal proceedings. The book's closing narrative has no direct connection with its title novella, however, and it is hard to see, how the author's interven-

tion here may have an impact on the stereotypical descriptions of “In a Free State”¹⁹. Thus, the impression remains that the depiction of Africa and the African natives ultimately represent the author’s own vision on the ‘Dark Continent’.

¹⁹ On the contrary, one can argue that despite the evident brutality portrayed with this ‘game’, the Epilogue shares many of the stereotypical forms of characterisation to be found in “In a Free State”. Thus, the children are depicted in accordance with the rhetoric of naturalisation as mere extensions of the landscape and, therefore, as wilderness in human form.

4. Important Issues

4.1 The Narrators

In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech Naipaul remarked that each of his books “stands on what has gone before, and grows out of it”. Therefore, the “last book contain[s] all the others”(quoted in: <http://www.caribvoice.org/naipaul.html>). This statement may help explain one of the particularities of Naipaul’s writing, namely the recurrence of similar motives, topics and situations. Although the action of the two novels and the three shorter narratives that will be dealt with in this section takes place in four different black-African countries, the descriptions of these countries’ inhabitants, of the effects of decolonisation or of the developments in the educational sector bear strong resemblance to each other. This characteristic facilitates a comparison of the author’s work by means of an analysis which does not attempt to deal with each text exhaustively but focuses on those issues relating to the treatment of Africa and Africans.

As to the mode of narration, Naipaul’s narratives display a similar tendency. While “In a Free State” is told by a heterodiegetic narrator, the remaining texts’ narrators are autodiegetic²⁰. Frequently, Naipaul’s narrators are travellers and exiles. Salim in *A Bend in the River*, Willie Somerset Chandran in *Half a Life* and Naipaul himself in “A New King for the Congo”, “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” and “Home Again” all have an Indian background. With the exception of Salim, they all stem from former colonies and have been educated in Europe. The ensuing chapter will try to analyse the narrators’ special position as both exiles and travellers and attempt to determine in how far their role as observer is affected by their particular background.

4.1.1 Indian Exiles

Naipaul was born in Trinidad into a family of Indian Brahmin origin which he left in 1950 when he won a scholarship for study at Oxford. Since then, England has been his permanent residence. Many of his fictional narrators share their creator’s life in exile. Willie, who has grown up in Southern India, receives a scholarship for a university college in London. After he has spent several years there, he falls in love with Ana, a woman of “mixed African background”(HL: 126) and decides to move with her to an unnamed coun-

²⁰ *Half a Life* is not a ‘first-person account’ throughout. The text is divided into three parts with different narrators. The longest section of the novel’s third part – dealing with life in Africa – is narrated by Willie Chandran in the ‘first person’. Using Genette’s terminology, one may therefore call him an intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator (Genette (1994)).

try on the African east coast²¹. Salim's situation is more complex. At the beginning of *A Bend in the River* he describes his background:

Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the east coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back. Many miles of scrub or desert separated us from the upcountry people; we looked east to the lands with which we traded – Arabia, India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we could no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa. My family was Muslim. But we were a special group. [...] we were closer to the Hindus of north-western India. (BR: 11)

Salim and his family belong to a small Indian community on the east coast, who have been living there for centuries without losing their Indian roots and beliefs. The process of identification is a difficult one, however, since in comparison with 'real' Indians he feels like someone of Africa, whereas to Africans he will infallibly appear as someone from the Indian Ocean. The issue of identity is rendered even more complicated by Salim's move to a country in the centre of the African continent.

Salim's description illustrates the hybrid nature of his background and of many societies in the modern world: His home is an 'Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place', when he comes to London he finds it full of migrants "out of places you've never heard of"(BR: 234) and in the African town at the bend in the river where he has his little shop, there are European teachers, businessmen and settlers and an Indian community. Willie Chandran, too, is a hybrid character. While his father is a Brahmin, his mother belongs to the socially stigmatised backward caste. Even his name suggests a cultural mixing – his second name 'Somerset' can be traced to the English writer Somerset Maugham, whom his father got to know. Keeping the narrators' background and experience in mind, it seems natural that cultural and racial mixing should play an important role in these texts. On the personal level the narratives describe relationships between members of different races; on the political and economic level, they discuss the adaptation of European ideas by African politicians and the import of European goods and technology.

The narrators of the two novels, and especially Salim, are also hybrids of another type. Often they appear to be unreliable. Feder remarks of Salim that "at times he seems to change his minds about issues without sufficient reason and, at others, his convictions seem to bare the authority of the trained, sophisticated intelligence of his creator"(Feder 2001: 226). While at one time his perspective is clearly limited and prejudiced, at other times he has deep and complex insights into the nature of human life and society. There-

²¹ The descriptions – Portuguese rule, secessionist wars – suggest that the country in question is Mozambique.

fore, one might say that Salim is “a hybrid of ‘voices’ and attitudes”(Weiss 1992: 185) that are frequently contradictory. This may also be one of the reasons for the persisting controversies around Naipaul’s novel.

The protagonist and narrator of *A Bend in the River* describes his qualities as an observer with the following words: “So from an early age I developed the habit of looking, detaching myself from a familiar scene and trying to consider it as from a distance. It was from this habit of looking that the idea came to me that as a community we had fallen behind”(BR: 15-16). Detachment from one’s surroundings thus seems to be a prerequisite for a realistic evaluation of one’s own position in the world. Salim remains detached from the society he lives in throughout the whole text. In the town at the bend in the river he has “nothing like a social life”(BR: 27) and he and the other Indians are “outsiders, but neither settlers nor visitors, just people with nowhere better to go”(BR: 85).

His detachment can also be seen from a different angle, however. Salim is no neutral observer, but a character who is almost completely cut off from his surroundings. Frequently he falls back into the ways of his ancestors: “We simply lived; we did what was expected of us, what we had seen the previous generation do. We never asked why; we never recorded”(BR: 11). It is the fatalism of his family which he has inherited and which leads him to an unthinking acceptance or even avoidance of reality. Willie Chandran shares these characteristics. He is able to “watch without seeing and hear without listening” and often reads “the newspapers without taking in the news”(HL: 54). He is convinced that he has inherited this “habit of non-seeing”(HL: 54) from his father. In Mozambique he leads a quiet and, apart from some contacts with other settlers, isolated life. This has led Theroux to criticise: “Eighteen years teaches Willie nothing of the country, nothing of the language. He dislikes the Africans, who are unremarkable and stinky, no more than props and shadows”(Theroux 2001). The question here is, how much insight into a foreign society can be obtained by living in this way. Willie and Salim have little contact with the native population since they mostly remain within their own community. Thus, they stay outsiders and can offer only a limited perspective on the society they are trying to describe.

As things get worse, Salim realises that “[w]e stood for ourselves. We all had to survive. But because we felt our lives to be fluid we all felt isolated, and we no longer felt accountable to anyone or anything”(BR: 191). Survival has become the primary concern of the members of the Indian community. In this situation, social commitment seems to be impossible. Salim does not consider himself a part of the society in which he lives, nor does he feel responsible for anything or anyone. He is unaffected by wars or violence unless it concerns him and his profit. Whereas Willie sometimes feels compassion for the

suffering of native Africans - though only until local people make him think differently (HL: 143) - Salim seems to have no such feelings. His detachment from society can also be described as a lack of insight and interest.

4.1.2 Journey

Voyages can take on many different forms and the incentive to travel can go back to manifold motivations. A journey can be undertaken for reasons of education, relaxation, or in order to break away from oppressive and unbearable circumstances. Likewise, the mode of travel can vary: journeys can be made by car, bus, steamer or airplane, travellers may want to stay apart from the natives or try to discuss with them, they may be able to speak the native language or try to get on without this capacity. Furthermore, travellers rarely arrive without preconceived notions about the places they are visiting or intending to live in. All these different methods and purposes affect the way in which foreign places are perceived. The narrators of the texts under consideration are all in some way travellers, who leave their homes for various reasons. Whereas the two novels have fictional narrators, the three other texts are narrated by Naipaul himself. This chapter will attempt to analyse Naipaul's and his fictional narrators' aims and methods as travellers in Africa and examine the way in which their perception of reality is shaped by this.

While his fictional narrators often seem rather indifferent to the events around them, Naipaul claims to be extraordinarily interested in what he sees. When asked to compare himself to British travel writers of the 1930s, he states: “The primary difference between my travel and theirs is that while they travel for the picturesque, I'm *desperately* concerned about the countries I'm in”(cited in: Korte 2000: 165). In fact, journeys have often been the starting point for Naipaul's novels and essays. His voyage through the Congo in 1975 first led to the publication of his essay “A New King for the Congo” and was fictionalised four years later in *A Bend in the River*. As he writes in the “Author's Foreword” to *Finding the Centre*, travel “soon became a necessary stimulus for me. It broadened my world view; it showed me a changing world and took me out of my colonial shell”(12). Moreover, it becomes a substitute “for the mature social experience – the deepening knowledge of a society – which my background and the nature of my life denied me”(12). Similarly, in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” he locates the purpose of his

journey in the discovery of “other states of minds”²². Thus for Naipaul, travel fulfils many functions: it is an incentive for new stories, a substitute for a lack of insight into the society in which he lives, and a possibility to enlarge his knowledge of the world.

As narrator he wants the readers to be able to share his own experience and tries to disclose his mode of travel:

I would have liked [...] to take the reader through all the stages of my adventure in the Ivory Coast. I would have liked to begin at the very beginning, with the blankness and anxiety of arrival. But it didn't work as a narrative. And narrative was my aim. Within that, my travelling method was intended to be transparent. The reader will see how the material was gathered; he will also see how the material could have served fiction or political journalism or a travelogue. ('Author's Foreword', *Finding the Centre*: 13)

These remarks draw attention to the self-reflexivity of “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”. Naipaul intends to reveal both his aims and methods of travel while shaping his experience into a narrative. The diversity of the materials he has gathered could have served for different literary genres. “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” is typical for Naipaul, however, in that it contains elements of various genres. It is a literary hybrid, just like “A New King for the Congo” and “Home Again”.

Concerning the method of his travels, Naipaul has developed his own preferences: “I go to places which, however alien, connect in some way with what I already know”(CoY: 103). These places – mainly India, Africa, and South America - have in common that they have all been European colonies. They connect with his own experience because he can meet people with a background similar to his own. His attention is not equally distributed, but clearly focuses on a special group:

I can move only according to my sympathy. I don't force anything; there is no spokesman I have to see, no one I absolutely must interview. This kind of understanding I am looking for comes best through people I get to like. And in the Ivory Coast I moved in the main among expatriates, white and black. I saw the country through them and through their varied experience. (CoY: 104)

Expatriates are at the centre both of his novels and many of his travel accounts. Bobby and Linda in “In a Free State”, Salim and the Indian community in *A Bend in the River*, Willie Chandran in *Half a Life* and Andrée and Arlette in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”. Frequently they are “doubly displaced” characters “having grown up as a transplanted minority in a colonial society, and then again by removing themselves from that society”(Levy 1995: 93). During his journey in the Ivory Coast, Naipaul moves mainly among these expatriates and relies on their judgment and guidance. He sees the country with their eyes, like the reader sees Mozambique or the Congo with the eyes of narrators who are

²² Naipaul, V.S. 1984. “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”. In: *Finding the Centre – Two Narratives*. London: A. Deutsch, 103. Subsequent citations within the text as CoY.

themselves expatriates. This movement in accordance to his sympathy often prevents a direct contact between Naipaul and Africans and may thus be considered to be a factor restricting his perspective on these societies.

In his narrative “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” his outlook is further limited by other factors. Mickelsen remarks that:

Naipaul rarely manages to get outside the narrow, upper-class, intellectual/expatriate world bounded by the five-star Forum Gulf Hotel, the American embassy, and the French-run Brasserie Abidjanaise. He stays mostly in Abidjan, the capital (the ‘centre’), and meets people like himself, or those who try to shape themselves to his preference (Andrée, Djédjé). (1987: 273)

Naipaul leaves the capital only to visit the crocodiles of Yamoussoukro (a tourist attraction, stylised by him into a symbol of African magic) and a village near Abidjan where mysterious fires have been discovered in a schoolteacher’s house. Besides this restriction to relatively few places, Naipaul’s view is further limited by his “poor French”(CoY: 118) and the brevity of his visit to the Ivory Coast. This has led Mickelsen to conclude that as a picture of the country, “this essay is to the ‘real’ culture as airport art is to tribal sculpture”(1987: 269). While in his foreword to *Finding the Centre* Naipaul states that ‘The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro’ is supposed to be a portrait of the Ivory Coast, a closer look at his methods of travelling reveals that he is primarily interested in meeting people with a similar background as his own and that his perspective on this country is limited as result of a lack of linguistic competence, the shortness of his visit and his own confinement to five-star hotels and foreign restaurants.

While Naipaul seems to travel mainly to broaden his knowledge and to find inspiration for his stories, the journeys of his characters and narrators have various reasons. Willie Chandran’s decision to go away from India and take up a bachelor degree course in London goes back to his wish to leave his old life behind and start afresh in a place that offers him better opportunities. Similarly, Salim’s voyage by car to the town at the bend in the river is an attempt to break out of the ways of his Indian community on the African east coast and is triggered by the conviction that their way of life is doomed. His passage also reminds of other journeys that have been made decades and centuries ago:

As I got deeper into Africa [...] I thought: But this is madness. I am going in the wrong direction. There can’t be a new life at the end of this. [...] And I couldn’t help thinking that that was how it was in the old days with the slaves. They had made the same journey, but of course on foot and in the opposite direction, from the centre of the continent to the east coast. (BR: 4)

His journey makes him think of the fate of many African slaves who were led from central Africa to the coast and then shipped to far-off places. Though seemingly unconnected events, both journeys can be contrasted. Whereas Salim’s trip is undertaken as the result of

a voluntary decision, the slaves were forced to leave their homes. Both Salim and the slaves have no reason to be hopeful, however: the ‘new life at the end of this’ is only an illusion.

Frequently, a character’s passage to an other place can be considered a metaphor for an inner process. In Salim's case the “pénétration au sein du continent n'est autre que la métaphore spatialisée d'un processus d'exil intime”(Naugrette 1986: 304-305). The spatial journey visualises his attempt to break away from a doomed lifestyle and his inner predispositions, such as the fatalism of his Indian community. It is a wish to escape, to re-create himself somewhere else. In view of the amount of people running away from their homelands, it would be restricting to consider voyages as a purely metaphorical device, however. When he arrives in London, Salim soon learns that there are “hundreds of thousands”(BR: 229) of immigrants:

Koreans, Filipinos, people from Hong Kong and Taiwan, South Africans, Italians, Greeks, South Americans, Argentines, Colombians, Venezuelans, Bolivians, a lot of black people who’ve cleaned out of places you’ve never heard of, Chinese from everywhere. All of them are on the run. They are frightened of the fire. You mustn’t think it’s only Africa people are running from. (BR: 234)

These people are refugees and migrants and their sheer number seems to suggest that journey and exile are a universal condition of human life. Everyone seems to be on the run in search for a better life, a search that – as Naipaul’s texts bring to mind – often results in loneliness and the loss of one’s roots.

Travel between different places can also assume the form of a voyage between different worlds. The African ‘marchande’ and sorceress Zabeth undertakes such a passage once a month: “What journeys Zabeth made! It was as though she came out each time from her hidden place to snatch from the present (or the future) some precious cargo to take back to her people”(BR: 9). Her spatial journey is interpreted by Salim as a time journey. The implication is that the life of her tribe has not changed for centuries, so that the products Salim is selling her - simple and old-fashioned as they are - must appear to belong to a different age, namely the future. This notion is symptomatic for the narrator’s atavistic ideas about Africa and Africans, placing their culture and achievements at the earliest stage of the history of the evolution of mankind.

Seen from its practical or physical side, travel in Africa can be hard and fatiguing. On Zaire, Naipaul remarks that it “is not yet a land for the casual traveller – the harassments, official and unofficial, are too many”²³. Moreover, the “roads of the country have decayed; the domestic services of Air Zaire are unreliable”(NKC: 181). Therefore, he uses

²³ Naipaul, V.S. [1975] 1980. “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa”. In: *The Return of Eva Perón*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 188. Subsequent citations within the text as NKC.

the steamer which is a travelling market where “every little service requires a ‘sweetener’”(NKC: 182) and where one has to put up with the “damp smell of salted fish and excrement and oil and rust”(NKC: 184). On this steamer he remembers Conrad’s and Marlow’s voyage down the Congo and remarks that “in 1975, the journey - one thousand miles between green, flat, almost unchanging country – is still like a journey through nothingness”(NKC: 181), thus repeating Conrad’s rhetoric of negation.

In Naipaul’s texts travel serves many functions. It represents both a movement in time and space and an inner process. Journeys are often undertaken in search of a new life and identity. In this context they are both real, as illustrated by migrants to London and elsewhere, and metaphorical. They can be the result of a deliberate decision, or be forced upon the people by intolerable circumstances or even violence. Naipaul’s incentive to travel relates a wish to broaden his understanding of the world. His mode of travel, illustrated in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”, is limited by various factors, including his focus on a special group of persons through which, rather than through direct contact with the native population, he sees the country. Generally, he seems to be repelled by the physical aspects of his journeys – bad smells, harassment, unreliable services – and displays a tendency to confine himself to expensive foreign restaurants and hotels. Whilst there is nothing wrong with this kind of behaviour it should be stated, however, that the view of places visited in this way will invariably be a restricted one.

4.2 African Culture

4.2.1 Magic

According to the vision promoted by Naipaul’s texts, magic seems to be an important component of the African day-to-day life. People are shown to believe in sorcerers, witch-doctors and the performances of ‘féticheurs’. Even presidential authority is to a great extent dependent on magic (CoY: 100). This notion of magic at the bottom of African life and experience is most fully developed in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”, although it can be found in most of the texts discussed here.

In *A Bend in the River* African magic is represented by Zabeth, the ‘marchande’ who belongs to a small fishing community and comes to the town once a month in order to supply her tribe with new products. Although the journey is very long and dangerous “Zabeth travelled without fear”(BR: 9) because she is no ordinary person: “Zabeth was a magician, and was known in our region as a magician”(BR: 10). She can travel without fear

because of her reputation and because she creates “protecting ointments” which produce a “strong and unpleasant”(BR: 10) smell and keep people away from her. Since, apart from the casual visits to the town she remains within “the timeless ways of village and river”, hers is “a purely African life”(BR: 36) of which magic is an integral part.

In the Ivory Coast Naipaul finds magic everywhere and in everything. In the newspapers he reads an article about “a schoolteacher’s house which from time to time blazed with mysterious fires”(CoY: 101) which is, in fact, about “the war of true religion and good magic against sorcery and bad magic”(CoY: 103). Soon he realises that “[s]orcery was no joke”(CoY: 103) and that the people of the Ivory Coast “knew another reality; they lived easily in a world of spirit and spirits”(CoY: 106). This idea of a separate world of spirits derives from Naipaul’s knowledge of blacks from Trinidad:

In the slave plantations of the Caribbean Africans existed in two worlds. There was the world of the day; that was the white world. There was the world of the night; that was the African world; of spirits and magic and the true gods. And in that world ragged men, humiliated by day, were transformed – in their own eyes, and the eyes of their fellows – into kings, sorcerers, herbalists, men in touch with the true forces of the earth and possessed of complete power. A king of the night, a slave by day [...]. To the outsider [...] the African night world might appear a mimic world, a child’s world, a carnival. But to the African [...] it was the true world: it turned white men to phantoms and plantation life to an illusion.

Something of this twin reality existed at Yamoussoukro. The metropolis, the ruler’s benefaction to his people, belonged to the world of the day, the world of doing and development. The crocodile ritual [...] was part of the night, ceaselessly undoing the reality of the day. One idea worked against the other. (CoY: 162)

Naipaul’s perception is clearly led by what he already knows. He tries to transfer the situation of the black slaves in the Caribbean to that of the Africans in the post-colonial Ivory Coast. This has occasioned Mickelsen to state that Naipaul “has been disposed from the outset to see (and find) this mysterious spirit world”(1987: 271). Moreover, he criticises the author’s “stereotypical, even cliché conception of a black night-world of magic”(1987: 271). With his distinction between a ‘world of the day’ and a ‘world of the night’, Naipaul sets up a strict dualism between Africans and Europeans. While Europeans construct – the building of Yamoussoukro, its streets and hotels and golf-course have been planned by European architects – Africans live in a kind of dream world that makes them “indifferent to their material circumstances”(CoY: 186). The so-called crocodile ritual, which according to Naipaul symbolises the African night world, should really be considered a tourist attraction. The ‘ritual’ consists of the feeding of the presidential crocodiles near his palace. It is only a recent invention, however, since crocodiles did not live in Yamoussoukro until the president brought them there. Moreover, natives are almost completely excluded from this ‘ritual’ as the feeding site is far away from the town and can only be reached by car. Therefore, mainly tourists attend this ‘symbolic action’. Consequently, Naipaul’s insis-

tence on the magic at the bottom of all he sees must, at least in part, be considered as a tourist's fascination with exotic practices and beliefs and as an expression of preconceived notions rather than an unprejudiced perception of a strange culture.

4.2.2 Rituals, Religion and Art

In Africa, rituals, religious art and magic seem to go hand in hand. On his voyage in the Ivory Coast Naipaul learns that:

At certain ceremonies of welcome a chief or an important man had to have his feet washed in blood. Usually it was the blood of a chicken or an animal. But to do a chief the highest honour, his feet should be washed in human blood, the blood of a sacrificed person, a child. And the child could be eaten afterwards. (CoY: 166)

African burial customs seem to be similarly inhuman since "when a chief or an important local man died, the man's servants and his wives were buried with him. If the servants had run away at the time of the death, then heads were bought"(CoY: 166). The source of this information is a middle-aged European who has been working and living in the Ivory Coast for many years. Naipaul never questions any of these reports and simply states: "I believed what this man said"(CoY: 166), thus presenting these practices as facts. It never occurs to him that these descriptions – human sacrifices, cannibalism – which aim at debasing the African natives might be shaped by their teller's prejudices or might be rumours circulating among the expatriates. This is not to deny that such practices may still exist in parts of Africa. Naipaul's unquestioning acceptance of what he hears as true is, however, highly dubious. He seems to be only too willing to believe in those aspects that confirm his expectations.

Half a Life presents the reader a different kind of ritual. One night Willie Chandran accompanies Álvaro, one of the overseers of his estate, to a nightclub. There he observes some girls who start dancing as soon as the new visitors have arrived.

Immediately these girls began to dance they were touched by a kind of grace. The gestures were not extravagant; they could be very small. When a girl danced she incorporated everything into her dance – her conversation with her partner, a word spoken over her shoulder to a friend, a laugh. This was more than pleasure; it was as though some deeper spirit was coming out in the dance. This spirit was locked up in every girl, whatever her appearance; and it was possible to feel that it was part of something much larger. (HL: 185-186)

Their dance is not interpreted as what it is – a performance in order to draw attention to themselves and to entice customers into sexual contact – but as a show of natural grace, revealing a spiritual element. Thus, the interpretation turns the dance of prostitutes into the performance of a quasi-religious ritual.

Modern African art is seen as defective: “art that no longer serves a religious or magical purpose attempts an alien representationalism and becomes mannered and meaningless, suggesting a double mimicry: African art imitating itself, imitating African-inspired Western art”(NKC: 192). It takes the form of “standard African artefacts”, such as “drums, spears, shields, zebra-skin pouffes, carved figures” and is simply “rubbish”²⁴. ‘True’ and ‘authentic’ African art, however, “served a specific religious purpose, and could only be made once. Copies were copies; there was no magical feeling or power in them”(BR: 61). At least for Father Huismans, who, in *A Bend in the River*, is the head of the town’s lycée and often spends weeks in the bush in order to collect masks and carvings, the value of African art consists in its magical and religious qualities.

Rituals and religious practices are subject to historical changes. When Salim accompanies Ferdinand to the steamer, he observes people sitting on its floor and eating. Suddenly he has a vision of the historical dimension of rituals: “that was how, in our ancestral lands, we all began – the prayer mat on the sand, then the marble floor of a mosque; the rituals and taboos of nomads, which, transferred to the palace of a sultan or a maharaja, become the traditions of an aristocracy”(BR: 161). This description of the mutability of traditions is, however, ambivalent. On the one hand, it relativises even sophisticated traditions in that it presents them simply as transformations of ‘rustic manners’. On the other hand, it establishes an evolutionary perspective which places the African traditions at the starting point of the time scale. While such transformations as described above may even in the African context be theoretically possible, they have not yet started. Thus, African culture and religion are characterised mainly by archaic and cruel practises which are a sign of the natives’ backwardness.

4.2.3 Play

It has already been mentioned that during his journey to the Ivory Coast, Naipaul displays a tendency to stay and eat in foreign-run places. In “The Crocodiles of Yamousoukro” he relates that one day he takes a taxi to drive to a French-style beach restaurant at the other end of the city. When he gets there, his expectations are disappointed. “The waiters, impeccable the day before, were casual, vacant. There were long delays, mistakes; some of the portions were absurdly small; the bill, when it came, was wrong”(CoY: 153).

²⁴ Naipaul, V.S. 1994. “Home Again”. In: *A Way in the World – A Sequence*. London: Heinemann, 360. Subsequent citations within the text as HA.

He concludes that someone must be missing, probably “the French or European manager”(CoY: 153). Due to his absence “the whole restaurant-idea had vanished. An elaborate organization had collapsed”(CoY: 154). This little anecdote is symptomatic for many other descriptions in Naipaul’s texts. As soon as the Europeans leave, or absent themselves for some time, everything seems to break down. Naipaul is very explicit on this point and seems to agree with a European expatriate who states: ““All that you see here in Abidjan is make-believe. If the Europeans were to go away it would all vanish””(CoY: 166). It is this idea of ‘make-believe’ that this chapter will try to explore. Frequently, Africans are described as only playing, as acting out certain roles which they forget in the absence of Europeans. The lacking service in the French-style restaurant can also be explained by this phenomenon.

A comparison with a similar scene in *A Bend in the River* will help to elucidate this further. One day when Salim comes to his Indian friend Mahesh’s Bigburger restaurant, he observes that Ildephonse, the restaurant’s African manager who is usually keen and attentive, is unexpectedly absent-minded and careless. Salim ruminates:

It was strange about Ildephonse, though. He loved his Bigburger costume and he loved his new job. No one was quicker and more friendly and more anxious to please than he was, when Shoba or Mahesh was around. [...] Yet as soon as he was left alone he became a different person. He went vacant. Not rude, just vacant. I noticed this alteration in the African staff in other places as well. It made you feel that while they did their jobs in their various glossy settings, they were only acting for the people who employed them; that the job itself was meaningless to them; and that they had the gift – when they were left alone, and had no one to act for – of separating themselves in spirit from their setting, their job, their uniform. (BR: 98)

Salim depicts this behaviour as a common phenomenon among the African staff in many places. Their jobs seem to have no meaning at all for them and their service is just show, an act for the people who employ them. The gift of ‘separating themselves in spirit’ from their environment once again evokes the idea of an African world of spirits, a night world clearly distinct from the European world of the day. Since Africans seem to be mainly living in this other world, the European ‘real’ world must for them be less consequential and important and, therefore, their activity in this world is but play.

Another passage from *A Bend in the River* may serve to emphasise this point. Toward the end of the novel, Salim is arrested and thrown into the local jail, on whose outer wall the letters ‘DISCIPLINE AVANT TOUT’ have been inscribed. During his incarceration, he is tries to detect a meaning behind these proceedings:

If there was a plan, these events had meaning. If there was law, these events had meaning. But there was no plan; there was no law; this was only make-believe, play, a waste of men’s time in the world. [...] It had never seemed like a real jail. There was something artificial and even quaint about it: this new jail in this new settlement, all so rough and temporary-looking, in a clearing in the bush. You felt that the

people who had built it – village people, establishing themselves in a town for the first time – were playing at having a community and rules. (BR: 267)

In his thoughts he sets up an opposition between meaningful events which conform to plans and regulations of law and the actions of the African natives which constitute ‘make-believe’ and ‘play’. He concludes that the people who have built the prison and are living in this area are only ‘playing at having a community and rules’. One might argue that as cruel, inhumane, and unjust as this society may be, the fact that they have built this prison should be reason enough to assume that they are at least trying to establish something like law and order. The narrator’s insistence on the play-character of these institutions and the Africans’ actions seems to support Maja-Pearce’s perception that in Naipaul’s texts “Africans can’t be taken seriously: in an insidious way they don’t exist for [him] as real people”(1985: 115).

This perception of Africans playing or acting can also be found in *Half a Life*. One night Willie is driving with one of the overseers of his estate through some of the villages close by. In one village he sees:

a kind of night market, with petty stalls in low open huts, lit by a hurricane lantern, selling matches and loose cigarettes and small tins of various things, and with a few improvident people, men or women or children, finding themselves penniless that day and sitting at the roadside with candles in paper bags beside very small heaps of their own food, sticks of dried cassava, or peppers, or vegetables. Like people playing at housekeeping, and playing at buying and selling [...]. (HL: 180)

The Africans trying to sell the few things they have to offer, seem to suffer from privation and want. However, Willie’s description compares their activity to that of children on a playground. According to this view, the Africans are only ‘playing at buying and selling’ and the few products they possess are their playthings. Certainly, this portrayal prevents that the Africans and their plight are taken seriously. In accordance with the rhetorical strategy of insubstantialisation, Willie’s perception of the Africans’ activity as play can also be considered a means of distancing himself from their suffering.

Only once the protagonist’s perception deviates from this scheme. Reflecting on the fundamental changes colonialism has effected in this part of Africa, Willie remarks that “somehow the Africans had stayed themselves, with many of their traditions and much of their own religion, though the land around them had been parcelled out and planted with crops they were required to tend. [...] They had social obligations which were as intricate as those I knew at home”(HL: 151). In this passage one may, for the first time, discern an awareness of the existence of an African culture that is in its own way as complex as that of the Indian narrator. The ensuing description of these traditions and obligations actually undermines the afore made statement, however, as it focuses exclusively on seemingly

irrational eating and drinking habits and insists that “the African world” is “less consequential”(HL: 152) than that of the narrator and the other expatriates.

In this way, both texts convey the view that everything that has to do with law, order, rules, and business – in other words, the essentials of societal organisation – is alien to the African world. Therefore, the Africans’ actions in these areas can only be considered as play and make-believe. Although they try to mimic the European world – e.g. by building a jail – their deeds remain inconsequential. The ‘real’ African world is the night world of magic and spirits which they resort to as soon as the Whites are absent. This view betrays a strictly dualistic thinking and, ultimately, prevents Africans and their activities from being taken seriously.

4.2.4 Alcohol

Some of the texts mention the Africans’ relationship to alcohol. In *A Bend in the River* alcoholism is presented as a severe problem: “Beer was part of people’s food here; children drank it; people began drinking from early in the morning”(BR: 39). Many of the characters are conspicuous in their abuse of alcohol. Like Ildephonse, who is officially manager of a Bigburger restaurant, many Africans need alcohol in order to be able to go to work: “as with most Africans, he needed just a little of the weak local beer to top up and get high”(BR: 222). Théotime, who becomes the manager of Salim’s little shop, is “about forty, undistinguished in appearance, with a broad, dark-brown face beaten up and spongy with drink”(BR: 255). When he comes to the shop he is drunk, “[b]ut only on beer; he hadn’t yet moved on to whisky”(BR: 255). It seems only a matter of time until he will require stronger liquors to satisfy his addiction.

In “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” Naipaul is asked to offer a bottle of whisky to a village chief whom he would like to meet. This request lets him conclude that alcohol has “‘a special value’ for Africans”(CoY: 115). Thus, both in his novels and his autobiographical narratives, the author presents Africans as severe drinkers. Even if, in Africa, alcoholism must be considered a real problem it can be doubted that Naipaul’s generalisations are justified. His statements imply that virtually all Africans are addicted to alcohol and miss any differentiation. Rather, his Africans seem to lack any restraint and control over themselves. Ultimately, the descriptions are in tune with the rhetorical strategy of debasement as they reduce Africans to an inferior status.

4.2.5 Sex

Sexuality is another important topic in Naipaul's description of Africans. In *A Bend in the River* Salim is amazed at the Africans' "sexual casualness"(BR: 39). Shortly after he has arrived in the town at the bend in the river a friend tells him "that women slept with men whenever they were asked; a man could knock on any woman's door and sleep with her"(BR: 39). Although he usually pays for his sex with local prostitutes he is convinced of the African women's "free ways"(BR: 32). In *Half a Life* Willie learns from Álvaro that Africans typically start having sex at an early age: "That girl is about eleven. She's had her first period, and that means that she's ready for sex. The Africans are very sensible about these things. No foreign nonsense about under-age sex. That girl who looks like nothing to you is screwing every night with some man"(HL: 181). When Ana tells him that her mother once took a lover in the capital, this behaviour is quite naturally attributed to "her African blood"(HL: 154) that has taken over.

Africans' sexual habits are most explicitly described in "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro". The topic comes up in a conversation with Arlette, a black woman from Martinique, who acts as one of Naipaul's guides to the country. Again, the author uncritically accepts her account and presents it as his own opinion:

More interesting – because it was practised as a sport, rather than out of real need – was student prostitution. Girls at the university didn't sleep with boys at the university. They slept with men in the government, men who had big jobs and could make gifts suitable to a girl who was at the university. It was left to the Abidjan school-girls, the *lycéennes*, to sleep with the poor *étudiants*; and since an *étudiant* had only his grant, a *lycéenne* might have an arrangement with two or three *étudiants* at a time, sleeping with each once or twice a week, and collecting her accumulated gratuities at the end of the month.

This kind of behaviour was acceptable because Africans believed in the independence in relationships [...]. They didn't look for or expect sexual fidelity. (CoY: 126)

By describing prostitution as a 'sport' among Africans, which is considered as 'acceptable behaviour' for high school girls and government officials alike, Naipaul "consigns African society to a state of degradation which recognizes no scruple or taboo in its limitless corruption of desire"(Spurr 1993: 182). Rather, this representation of an African society as one that is prepared to accept prostitution as 'independence in relationships' "revives the myth that either idealizes African sexuality as 'natural' and unfettered by social constraint or execrates it as a sign of bestiality"(1993: 182). Both cases construct African sexuality in opposition to civilisation, however, and thereby place sexuality outside of "a social order which commands the observance of things like sexual fidelity"(1993: 182).

4.2.6 Violence

The history of post-colonial Africa is rich in violent and bloody events. Coups d'Etat, tribal warfares, and ethnic cleansing are but some of the terrible problems Africa has had to contend with over the last few decades. By examining the reasons for these problems one can distinguish between views which attribute these occurrences to essentially African problems and developments and others which consider them the after-effects of European colonialism. Violence is a topic in many of Naipaul's texts. Especially in his novel *A Bend in the River* both individual actions and the Big Man's general political course betray a high degree of violence. The ensuing chapter is an attempt to analyse whether the violence in *A Bend in the River* should be viewed as an inherently African characteristic or whether it is necessitated by factors lying outside the Africans' personality.

Salim, who several times witnesses acts of violence and has to live through two rebellions, is frequently amazed by "the depth of that African rage, the wish to destroy, regardless of the consequences"(BR: 26). The rage of the rebels, who try to lay the town low again, is like "a rage against metal, machinery, wires, everything that was not of the forest and Africa"(BR: 81). Their acts of violence are directed against everything that can somehow be brought into connection with colonialism. There is a second reason for their aggressiveness, however: "At independence the people of our region had gone mad with anger and fear – all the accumulated anger of the colonial period, and every kind of reawakened tribal fear. The people of our region had been much abused, not only by Europeans and Arabs, but also by other Africans"(BR: 67). The Africans have not only suffered under – both European and Arabian – colonial rule but also from tribal conflicts with other Africans. These ancient conflicts are at the bottom of many wars in post-colonial Africa.

The Africans' violence has also another dimension, however. It is "like a forest fire that goes underground and burns unseen along the roots of trees it has already destroyed and then erupts in scorched land where it has little to feed on, so in the middle of destruction and want the wish to destroy flared up again"(BR: 67). This description reveals African rage as something elemental; a hidden force which can erupt at any time. This already brings it closer to being an essentially African characteristic. On another occasion Salim remarks that in the history of this land "men had always been prey"(BR: 55). He concludes that the people here "were *malins* the way a dog chasing a lizard was *malin*, or a cat chasing a bird. The people were *malins* because they lived with the knowledge of men as prey"(BR: 56). The animal imagery is important in this connection since it "conveys the

mindless, inhuman cruelty inherent in African personality, the lack of appreciation or understanding of other people as human beings”(Pyne-Timothy 1985: 256). The description reduces Africans to an inferior, animal-like status. The assumption seems to be that as many Africans are still living in small forest villages, they are living in accord with the laws of nature.

The people of the region of the town at the bend in the river are mostly small and slightly built.

Yet, as though to make up for their puniness in that immensity of river and forest, they liked to wound with their hands. [...] More than once, at night, outside a bar or little dance hall, I saw what looked like a drunken pushing or shoving [...] turn to methodical murder, as though the first wound and the first spurt of blood had made the victim something less than a man, and compelled the wounder to take the act of destruction to the end. (BR: 56)

Compared with the immensity of surrounding nature, the African natives are small and unimportant and have to assert themselves through acts of violence. Once they have started wounding their enemy, they lose all restraint and have to take ‘the act of destruction’ to the very end. The latter examples show that Africans’ violence and rage are to a great extent attributable to their inner predispositions. One can therefore conclude that violence is “both historically necessitated [...] and part of, ‘some old law of the forest, something that came from Nature itself””(Kanneh 1997: 268).

On the whole, the five texts offer a highly reductive view of African life and culture and frequently present biased descriptions. Thus, the African natives believe in sorcerers and ‘féticheurs’ and live in a ‘night world’ of spirits and magic which is set up against a European ‘world of the day’ and accounts for their indifference for worldly affairs. Their actions in this world are only ‘make-belief’ and ‘play’. Therefore, Africans can not be taken seriously. The description of their archaic rites suggests the natives’ backwardness, while their supposed alcoholism and casualness in sexual affairs are signs of their lack of self-control. Similarly, the African natives’ violence is only partly related to social problems or historical developments. To a great extent it can also be traced back to an African essence. In neither of Naipaul’s texts is this strict dualism dissolved and positive descriptions of Africans and their culture are missing completely.

4.3 Racial Mixing

In chapter 4.1, the narrators' hybrid background has been described. They all have Indian ancestors and are travellers or residents in an African country. They are not racially mixed, but one of them – Willie Chandran – derives from a marriage of members from different castes. This chapter is concerned both with the way in which different cultures and peoples are shown to live together and explores the representation of unions between members of different races, particularly those between blacks and non-blacks. Special focus will be laid on the description of the effects of such unions and on whether it is possible to observe a development between Naipaul's early and later texts. For this purpose the ensuing analysis will examine the treatment of these issues in *A Bend in the River* and *Half a Life*.

A narrator's own mixed background does not necessarily imply that he himself is a supporter of cultural fusions. In *A Bend in the River* Salim seems to be very sceptical about the possibilities of a union between different peoples. This is illustrated by the motto on a colonial monument and Salim's clear disapproval of these words. On the monument near the river, which has been put up in remembrance of sixty years of steamer service from the country's capital, the Latin words "*Miscerique probat populos et foedera jungi*" (BR: 26) have been inscribed. Since Salim does not understand Latin he has to have the words and meaning of this inscription explained by Father Huismans:

'He approves of the mingling of the peoples and their bonds of union': that was what the words meant, and again they were very old words, from the days of ancient Rome. They came from a poem about the founding of Rome. The very first Roman hero, travelling to Italy to found his city, lands on the coast of Africa. The local queen falls in love with him, and it seems that the journey to Italy might be called off. But then the watching gods take a hand; and one of them says that the great Roman god might not approve of a settlement in Africa, of a mingling of peoples there, of treaties of union between Africans and Romans. That was how the words occurred in the old Latin poem. In the motto, though, three words were altered to reverse the meaning. (BR: 62)

The motto is actually taken from the *Aeneid*. It refers to a line where "Venus tells Juno that she is uncertain as to whether Jupiter would approve of the blending of the peoples (Tyrians and Trojans) and their being joined in a union" (Feder 2001: 227). The reversal of the meaning is highly significant and can be considered a symbol of the colonialists' arrogance. Almost as soon as it has been put up, the monument is destroyed "leaving only bits of bronze and the mocking words" (BR: 63). The destruction is an ironical comment on the vanity of European ambitions and raises doubts as to the positive effects of 'the mingling of the peoples'. Accordingly, Salim simply characterises the monument and its inscription as a "hoax" (BR: 103).

Salim has his own inter-racial affair with Yvette, the wife of an important Belgian historian. It is his first sexual experience with someone other than a prostitute, and to a great degree his fascination with this affair derives from the new perspectives he obtains from it. Yvette and her husband live in the 'Domain', which is a world completely different from what Salim has ever experienced. It is due to this affair that he closes his eyes to the changes happening around him, however, and even neglects his business. King states that the implication here is that "[i]nvolvement with women of other communities prevents a man from following his own destiny"(King 1993: 124). Salim should have drawn the consequences of the country's deteriorating situation and nationalistic politics much earlier and gone somewhere else.

The novel's central mixed character is Metty whose name derives from "the French word *métis*, someone of mixed race"(BR: 33). His whole life he has been the slave of Salim's family on the east coast, and shortly after Salim leaves for the town at the bend in the river, Metty decides to join him. Though they get on very well, Salim is convinced from the beginning of Metty's "wild and unreliable nature"(BR: 33). Despite his reliability in matters concerning Salim's shop, Metty is unreliable in that he completely conceals his private life. In the town he lives a second, separate life and has an African family. Notwithstanding his supposed unreliability, Metty remains a sympathetic character and in the end it is Salim who proves to be undependable; leaving Metty behind in the misery and chaos of the town. The general impression remains, however: the mingling of peoples is not desirable and creates many problems.

Half a Life seems to share many of the preoccupations concerning issues of racial mixing, that can be found in the previously discussed novel. It is the text with the highest number of characters with a mixed background in it. Many characters living in Mozambique are of mixed Portuguese-African parentage, but also in London racial mixing is an important issue. Even there, the members of different cultures seem to be unable to live peacefully side by side. Willie is shocked when he hears about the race riots that have begun in some areas of London, and hides in his room in the college for some time. At a party he gets to know Marcus, the "son of a West Indian who went to live in West Africa as part of the Back to Africa movement"(HL 89). Marcus is "dedicated to inter-racial sex"(HL 89) and has two great ambitions: he wants to have a grandchild that "will be pure white in appearance"(HL 89) and he wants to be the first black man to open an account at Coutts, the Queen's bank. Regarding his first wish he is very optimistic since he already has "five mulatto children, by five white women"(HL 89-90) and because he believes that the "Negro gene is a recessive one"(HL: 95). To back this theory he gives an example from

recent history: “In the eighteenth century there were about half a million black people in England. They’ve all vanished. They disappeared in the local population. They were bred out.”(HL: 94-95). Marcus’ theory is repeated several times, also by other characters, and could be considered a genetic proof of the superiority of the white race. Marcus does not see it that way, however. Rather, he is quite happy about this fact, since it enables him to fulfil his greatest, personal desire: to have white grandchildren. None of the other characters questions this wish or is astonished about it; instead, it seems to be a very ‘natural’ desire.

In Mozambique, the Afro-Portuguese mulattos are generally not the most pleasant characters. Júlio, a carpenter, is “a man of mixed race with smiling unreliable eyes”(HL: 142). He lives in the servants’ quarters and regularly beats his daughter. Moreover, he is a drinker. Most of the estate’s overseers are mixed-race people. Although they have concrete houses, they really live an ‘African life’ “with any number of mistresses or concubines or pick-ups within reach in the surrounding villages”(HL: 182). At one time Willie feels compassion with a mulatto who works as a tiler and is abused by his boss: “when I remembered the big sweating man with the abused light eyes, carrying the shame of his birth on his face like a brand, I would think, ‘Who will rescue that man? Who will avenge him?’”(HL: 166). Willie’s compassion is counter-balanced by his assessment of the tiler’s mixed parentage as ‘the shame of his birth’. This evaluation can be traced back to Willie’s own background as son of parents of different castes. He is in some way divided against himself in that he loves his mother, who belongs to the backward caste, but has at the same time inherited his father’s disgust for members of that caste. This thinking in terms of caste can also be seen in his division of colonialists into ‘first-’ and ‘second-rank’ people and is eventually transformed into an obsession with race.

Willie spends more than eighteen years with Ana, who is the daughter of a mulatto mother and a Portuguese father. Overall, her characterisation is very positive. In all those years she is faithful and loving, while Willie betrays her with other women. Although Willie acknowledges her love and devotion, he finally concludes that it will be better for him to leave. Just as with Salim and Yvette, Ana has prevented him from following his own destiny and leading his own life. Thus, in his opinion, he has led only half a life, in Mozambique, “a ‘half-and-half’ society”(Wood 2001), with a half-and-half woman at his side. The treatment of racially mixed characters in *Half a Life* remains ambivalent. On the one hand, Willie unwillingly uncovers his own obsession with race and caste. On the other hand, co-existence with other peoples is difficult, as can be seen in the London race riots, and his union with a woman of mixed race prevents him from living a ‘real’ life. All in all,

it may therefore be possible to admit some development from the utter scepticism of *A Bend in the River* to the descriptions in *Half a Life*, although the latter is still far from being an appraisal of cultural fusions.

4.4 Politics

While working as a lecturer at Makerere-University in Uganda in 1966, Naipaul makes his first experiences with politics in post-colonial Africa. He describes the country's president as a tyrant trying "to build socialism"(HA: 352) and reveals the excesses of his rule: "the cruelties in the villages, the harassment of the Asian community, the censorship of the press, the regimentation of the students in the university"(HA: 350). In his essay "Home Again" neither the president's nor the country's name are mentioned, however. Therefore, the description of the politics in this "black African country [...] in East Africa"(HA: 343) becomes representative for developments that can be observed in many African countries after gaining independence. The actual events in many African countries – dictatorial presidents, (tribal) wars, corruption – seem to back Naipaul's critical view of politics and politicians in Africa. For the subsequent analysis it will therefore be extremely important to distinguish between justified critique and an evaluation based on the rhetoric of colonial discourse. The ensuing discussion of this problem will focus mainly on "A New King for the Congo" and "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro", since they depict contrasting developments: while the Ivory Coast's president Felix Houphouët-Boigny has made his country rich, the politics of Zaire's president Mobutu aim mainly at enriching himself and have led to his country's bankruptcy.

When Naipaul visits the Ivory Coast in 1981, the president who has been ruling the country for more than twenty years is already a "very old man"(CoY: 89). Naipaul points out that Felix Houphouët-Boigny "has ruled well"(CoY: 89). This is attributed to the fact that he "has used the French as technicians, advisers, administrators; and [...] he has made his country rich. So rich, that the Ivory Coast imports labour from its more depressed or chaotic African neighbours"(CoY: 89). This reliance on French experts and advisers certainly was an important factor underlying the "Ivoirian Miracle"(Heath). It is far from the only reason for the Ivory Coast's economic success, however, which owed much to the stable world markets for the country's main export crops, coffee and cocoa (Heath). Naipaul states that democracy is an "imported idea"(CoY: 99) and is in conflict with tribal traditions. A man who has been elected deputy, automatically becomes an elder and cannot

accept defeat at the next elections since “in the African tradition an elder remained an elder till he died. A man stripped of authority couldn’t simply go back to being an ordinary villager; he had been personally degraded”(CoY: 99). Therefore, it seems natural that the Ivory Coast, despite of its supposed liberalism has its “own cult of the leader”(CoY: 95).

Houphouët-Boigny’s great ambition is the building of Yamoussoukro, “a monumental city meant to make an African ruler immortal”(CoY: 100). It is a project of “pharaonic scale”(CoY: 100) and “one of the wonders of black Africa”(CoY: 89):

The power and wisdom of the chief have caused the forest around Yamoussoukro to disappear. Where once were African fields, unused common land, and wild trees there are now ordered, mechanized plantations. For square mile upon square mile mangoes, avocados or pineapples grow in straight lines, the straight lines that are beautiful to people to whom nature is usually formless, unfriendly bush. (CoY: 90)

Naipaul’s rhetoric circles around the opposition between nature and civilisation. Wisdom and progress are contrasted with the African bush. What has been ‘unfriendly’, ‘unused’, and ‘formless’ has been ordered and made beautiful. Thus, the overall view of Houphouët-Boigny purveyed in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” is that of a benevolent old man who has made his country rich and stable. In view of these successes, the president’s darker sides, like the employment of “patronage, and low-key repression – primarily the jailing of dissident party members – to quell any serious opposition”(Heath), remain unmentioned.

On the other hand, Naipaul’s criticism of Zaire’s dictator Mobutu is very harsh. In “A New King for the Congo” he traces his development from 1965, when General Mobutu seized power, to 1975 when Mobutu has already changed his name from Joseph to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga. Just like his name, so his style has changed: “As General Mobutu he used to be photographed in army uniform. Now, as Mobutu Sese Seko, he wears what he has made, by his example, the Zairois court costume”(NKC: 174). This new style consists of a leopard-skin cap and a carved stick which are “the emblems of his African chieftaincy”(NKC: 174). Mobutu is a jumble of “imported glamorous ideas”(NKC: 176) and personalities:

He is citizen, chief, king, revolutionary; he is an African freedom fighter; he is supported by the spirits of the ancestors; like Mao, he has published a book of thoughts [...]. He has occupied every ideological position and the basis of his kingship cannot be questioned. He rules; he is grand; and, like a medieval king, he is at once loved and feared. (NKC: 176).

Mobutu seems to be mimicking ideological positions and lacking orientation. This makes him unpredictable and dangerous for everyone. His power is so absolute that like “Leopold II of the Belgians, in the time of the Congo Free State [...] Mobutu owns Zaire”(NKC: 176).

The chief point of Naipaul's criticism relates to Mobutu's politics of radicalisation and nationalisation. In the early 1970s, all businesses and plantations belonging to foreigners were 'nationalised' and given to Zairois. Just a year later, Mobutu decided "to take back these enterprises, many of them pillaged and bankrupt, and entrust them to the state"(NKC: 177). Closely connected with this is the president's "especial illumination: the need for 'authenticity'"(NKC: 196). 'Africanness' becomes the new slogan of Mobutu's vision for his country. This concept is at the bottom of the Africanisation of his name and clothes and his use of Lingala, "the local lingua franca"(NKC: 202) in his speeches. Naipaul exposes this talk of Africanness as a myth many African leaders "use to strengthen their own position"(NKC: 199)²⁵. With the many images distributed all over Zaire and the statues erected in honour of his "glorious mother, Mama Yemo"(NKC: 197), the cult of the leader assumes almost religious dimensions.

Another example from Zaire's recent political history related in "A New King for the Congo" is Pierre Mulele's attempt to start a maoist revolution near Stanleyville. Mulele established a "reign of terror. Everyone who could read and write had been taken out to the little park and shot; everyone who wore a tie had been shot. [...] Nine thousand people are said to have died in Mulele's rebellion"(NKC: 195). Naipaul wonders about Mulele's motivations and comes to the conclusion that he was simply "against *everything*. He wanted to start again from the beginning"(NKC: 195). Since Mulele seems to be without any clear aims, the uprising must be considered a 'nonsense' rebellion and proof of "African nihilism"(NKC: 199). Naipaul compares him to Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

Seventy years later, at this bend in the river, something like Conrad's fantasy came to pass. But the man with 'the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear' was black, and not white; and he had been maddened not by contact with wilderness and primitivism, but with the civilization of those pioneers who now lie on Mont Ngaliema, above the Kinshasa rapids. (NKC: 196)

While Kurtz loses his restraint and reason as a result of his exposure to the African wilderness, Mulele loses his senses due to his contact with the kind of civilisation established by the Belgian colonialists. This specification, frequently left out in reviews of "A New King for the Congo", is important because it implies a critique of Belgian colonial rule and gives reasons for the Africans' anger. These Belgian 'pioneers' were "too simple for an outpost

²⁵ In "Home Again" Naipaul describes his own experiences with politics based on myths of race in Trinidad: "The almost religious exaltation of the early days of the black movement had given way very quickly to the simplest kind of racial politics. In Trinidad that meant anti-Indian politics and constant anti-Indian agitation; it was how the vote of the African majority was to be secured"(HA: 355). These experiences may be an explanation for his extreme dislike of all politics based on ideas like blackness or Africanness. That such politics eventually lead to the harassment of members of other communities is taken up again in *A Bend in the River*.

of progress”(NKC: 193)²⁶. They were mainly interested in their own profit and have thus unleashed the Africans’ rage which is “the rage of primitive men coming to themselves and finding that they have been fooled and affronted”(NKC: 195). Still, Naipaul’s description leaves no doubt that for him Africans are ‘primitive men’, who have still to be civilised. The Belgian pioneers might have simply been the wrong agents for the realisation of this task.

On the whole, Naipaul’s representation of politics in post-colonial Africa is quite realistic. His portrayal of Mobutu, “the great African nihilist”(NKC: 196), as a “a quintessentially African phenomenon”(Gupta 1999: 53) is somewhat one-sided, however, since it omits the responsibilities of other nations in the prolongation of Mobutu’s power and Zaire’s role in international Cold War politics. Nixon states that as “early as 1961, the United States had singled out Mobutu for support; ever since then Zaire has been a client autocracy under American patronage. Mobutu simply could not have sustained his lengthy rule without American funds”(1992: 101-102). Similarly, Singh stresses the CIA’s role as a supporter of Zaire’s dictator (1998: 173). It is difficult to determine to what extent foreign influence contributed to Mobutu’s lengthy rule – he remained in power until 1997 – or to speculate about what would have happened without this support. The history of many African states after their independence seems to back Naipaul’s ideas about the African cult of the leader and the difficulty of democratic elections. A thorough analysis of this issue should not exclude the history of the Western world’s responsibility concerning the support of such dictators in order to secure its own interests, however. Otherwise it runs the risk of being one-sided.

²⁶ The last quote is, again, an allusion to the work of Naipaul’s literary predecessor Conrad. In this case, the reference is to Conrad’s short story “An Outpost of Progress”, where two (inferior) Belgians are left in charge of a company station. They are proud of their civilisation but, unable to cope with the climate and the wilderness, they become mad and finally kill themselves.

4.5 Education

Education is an issue that symbolises Africans' search for new ways, for a new identity. Ideological indoctrination, westernisation, or an orientation 'back to the roots' are, therefore, central subject matters in this connection. Frequently, foreign teachers and lecturers are employed in schools and universities and are supposed to play a decisive role in the creation of the 'new men' of Africa. Naipaul himself has been lecturer at Makerere-University in Uganda. Of his time there and of his feelings toward educated Africans, Paul Theroux tells the ensuing anecdote:

'Those are the ones that frighten me,' I heard him say one day to a Makerere lecturer. He pointed to a long-legged African walking on flapping sandals under the blue gum trees.

'What about him?' the lecturer asked.

'He's carrying a book,' Naipaul said. 'The ones that carry books scare the hell out of me, man.' (Theroux 1984: 447-448)

The evaluation of Naipaul's fear of Africans who 'carry books', i.e. of Africans who are educated, will be a central issue in this chapter. It will attempt to uncover the reasons for this fear, and examine whether Naipaul's frequently negative characterisation of African students can be seen in connection with a rhetoric that ridicules Europeanised Africans out of a fear of closeness. For this purpose the analysis will focus mainly on the characterisation of Ferdinand in *A Bend in the River* and the descriptions of university life that can be found in "Home Again".

Ferdinand is probably the most closely depicted African character in Naipaul's texts. He is Zabeth's son, and when he enters the town's lycée, the sorceress asks Salim to keep an eye on him. Therefore, Ferdinand comes regularly to Salim's shop, where Salim can observe his development from a young lycée boy to a university student. He has no easy time with his 'ward' and from the beginning he detects "something distant and slightly mocking in his eyes"(BR: 36). For Salim, Ferdinand is a typical African in whose face he can see "the starting point of certain African masks, in which features were simplified and strengthened"(BR: 37). For Ferdinand the situation is not easy either and soon he does not know which role to play:

He was of mixed tribal heritage, and in this part of the country he was a stranger. He had no group that was really his own, and he had no one to model himself on. He didn't know what was expected of him. He wanted to find out, and he needed me to practise on.

I could see him now trying on various characters, attempting different kinds of manners. His range was limited. [...] He would pretend to be my business associate [...]. Then he might become the young African on the way up. (BR: 46-47)

Ferdinand assumes different roles because he has no clear idea of his identity. Although his predicament is worsened by the fact that he is a stranger in this part of the country, his problems can be considered to be symptomatic of many Africans. Throughout the whole text Africans are depicted as characters who can only mimic different styles and attitudes without understanding them completely. One possible explanation for this phenomenon may lie in the loss of their old way of life which has not been replaced by something else (Updike 1993: 45). Another reading is offered by Salim, who traces Ferdinand's development with the words:

You took a boy out of the bush and built a polytechnic and you sent him there. It seemed as easy as that, if you came late to the world and found ready-made those things that other countries and people had taken so long to arrive at – writing, printing, universities, books, knowledge. The rest of us had to take things in stages. [...] Ferdinand, starting from nothing, had with one step made himself free, and was ready to race ahead of us. (BR: 102-103)

In this passage Salim clearly clings to the conception of Africans as having no proper knowledge and culture. Pyne-Timothy remarks that the narrator conveys the idea that “Africans have truly dwelt for centuries in darkness where no societal organization, no cultural continuity has been etched on their minds”(1985: 257). In compliance with the rhetoric of negation, Salim describes Ferdinand's mind as a kind of ‘tabula rasa’ where, prior to his contact with Western civilisation, nothing existed. Therefore, as nothing is proper to himself, he can possess no own identity and can only mimic the ideas and styles conveyed to him by his teachers.

Ferdinand will never completely understand all these things or race too far ahead of anyone since his mental capacities are limited. He does not understand irony (BR: 52) and his mind is “a jumble, full of all kinds of junk”(BR: 54). Although he sees himself as one of the new men of Africa, he is unable to comprehend the world he is living in:

Ferdinand could only tell me that the world outside Africa was going down and Africa was rising. When I asked in what way the world outside was going down, he couldn't say. And when I pushed him past the stage where he could repeat bits of what he had heard at the lycée, I found that the ideas of the school discussion had in his mind become jumbled and simplified. Ideas of the past were confused with ideas of the present. (BR: 48)

He is a confused young man who can neither repeat the school discussions correctly nor think for himself. Even some years later at university, complex issues have to be simplified since, among the students, ‘complex’ is “a word of disapproval”(BR: 122). The quoted passage also alludes to the kind of issues discussed in African schools and universities, however. The ideas he gets about an Africa on the rise are clearly contradicted by the events in the novel and in real history. Consequently, they must be seen as a part of the ideological indoctrination in support of the ‘Big Man's’ political ambitions and doctrines.

Salim is worried by his ward's development. His fear derives from the fact that Ferdinand's "personality had become fluid. I began to feel that there was nothing there, and the thought of a lycée full of Ferdinands made me nervous"(BR: 48). There is nothing behind the poses and attitudes Ferdinand assumes, no firm identity, just mimicry without a solid base. Salim's fear is increased by Ferdinand's "idea of his importance. It unsettled me – there wasn't going to be security for anyone in the country"(BR: 48). Ferdinand is one of the new men of Africa and his prospects are good, since he will one day be a government official. Whilst he considers himself as an essential part of Africa's future, Salim observes that he has "reduced Africa to himself; and the future of Africa was nothing more than the job he might do later on"(BR: 48). The combination of all these factors – the fluidity of his character, the idea of his importance, and the ideological indoctrination he receives at the lycée – make him dangerous. While these aspects all relate to Ferdinand's background and the kind of education he receives, something else contributes to Salim's fears. When he scolds Ferdinand for having stolen a book at the lycée, Salim observes a special expression on Ferdinand's face and thinks: "This is how he will look when he sees his victim's blood, when he watches his enemy being killed"(BR: 59). Salim is afraid of the violence he detects in Ferdinand's eyes, which he regards as a specifically African characteristic. Although it is Ferdinand who rescues Salim at the end of the novel, the general developments in this African country seem to support this perception. Even though Ferdinand has "leapt centuries"(BR: 158), he and the rest of the students are at least potentially dangerous.

While in *A Bend in the River* the political and ideological indoctrination of the students can frequently only be derived indirectly from Ferdinand's statements, in "Home Again" Naipaul is very explicit concerning his view of this issue:

In fact, some of the students brought fresh and sharp minds to the university. It was at the university they learned to be dull, through the political training they received: learning about the president's thought and the principles of his African socialism. It was as though they had been brought from their villages to the university to be re-initiated, re-tribalized, given new taboos and made narrowly obedient again. At the end the successful ones were fit and ready to serve the president and the state; and this was just as well, because there was for them no other way of earning a livelihood. (HA: 351)

The students learn nothing except obedience to their president and their intellectual capabilities are purposely restricted to parroting his thoughts and principles. In this way, the new men of this African state will be unable to create a better future for their country. The main difference between this representation and the depiction of Ferdinand in *A Bend in the River* is that Naipaul admits that 'some students' are not stupid by nature but have been made dull by the educational system and the ideological indoctrination. That this indoctrination has been successful can be seen in the students' habit of "walking out on foreign

lecturers”(HA: 351) and in the frequent demonstrations “against those African countries whose rulers were critical of the president”(HA: 352).

After close consideration of the treatment of African students in two of Naipaul’s texts, it should be possible to determine whether the author’s fear of educated Africans is justified or whether it is really the colonialist’s fear of primitive people coming too close, which often results in the ridiculing of evolved Africans. On the one hand, Naipaul’s fear seems to have good reasons. The students depicted in “Home Again” and *A Bend in the River* will after their education be unable to take on other jobs than those offered to them by their president on whom they are completely dependent. They have not learned to think for themselves and can only mechanically repeat their presidents’ doctrines. The descriptions imply that most of the students can only mimic styles and attitudes without understanding them completely and do not possess an identity of their own. Such students can be considered dangerous and explain Naipaul’s fears. Some aspects of Ferdinand’s representation clearly fall under the category of colonial discourse, however. Among these are the negation of African culture and the view of violence as something inherent in the African character. Even though these statements are made by Salim and not by Naipaul himself, they seem to be representative of the author’s view, since they are in tune with statements on Africans and their culture in basically all the texts discussed here (see chapters 4.2 and 4.6.2).

4.6 Europe and Africa

4.6.1 Europe in Africa

Historically, the European presence in Africa has taken many forms. Missionaries, explorers, settlers, and soldiers are but a few of the different groups of people who came to Africa for various reasons. With them they brought their own culture and language, their ideals and their goods. Their presence has brought about many changes, amongst which the construction of European-like towns may be one of the most visible signs. Even in post-colonial times, the European presence in Africa continues. In many African countries the former colonialists’ language is still in (official) use. Frequently, European experts and technology are imported in order to build modern cities and roads, or to help in the administration or educational sector. Similarly, political ideas and ideologies are imported and adapted to the African context. Finally, the Europeans themselves are present in the form of settlers, teachers, or soldiers. All of Naipaul’s texts consider the nature of European

presence in Africa and are concerned with an evaluation of this phenomenon. The ensuing chapter will depict the way in which this influence is seen, describe the Africans' reaction to it, and examine how 'African' and 'European' culture are contrasted with each other. For this purpose the analysis will use examples from all five texts under discussion here.

When Naipaul visits the Ivory Coast, he is led by a particular motivation. In "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro" he states:

I wanted to be in West Africa, where I had never been; I wanted to be in a former French territory in Africa; and I wanted to be in an African country which, in the mess of black Africa, was generally held to be a political and economic success. African success, France in Africa – those were the glamorous ideas that took me out. (CoY: 93)

Naipaul wants to examine how the French presence has influenced this society and how these two cultures have become intertwined. His expectations are soon disappointed, however, because he has to realise that in the Ivory Coast, France and Africa are still "like separate ideas"(CoY: 94). This impression is supported by his idea of an African night world which is contrasted to the white world of the day. Consequently, whilst Africans are seen as living in a world of spirits and magic, Europeans are the ones that create and construct. Standing in front of the window of his hotel room in Yamoussoukro, Naipaul surveys the recently built town:

The great window, of very thick glass, was sealed. It gave a view of the enormous swimming pool, around which, on a wide paved area, lounge chairs were set in a large circle.

Beyond that, and beyond the buildings of the older Hotel President [...] was parkland: parkland created out of the African bush. It was the famous golf course, landscaped, with planting: a foreign eye had drawn out the picturesque possibilities of what to an African would have been only bush. [...].

It was a great creation, the golf course, perfection in a way. It represented prodigious labour. Yet it was only a view: one look took it all in. And soon it wasn't enough. Splendour on this scale, in this setting, [...], only created an appetite for more: the visitor began to enter the ambition and fantasy of the creator. There was a main street, very wide; there was a market; there were workers' settlements. Something like a real town was attaching itself to the presidential creation. But the visitor, always quickly taking for granted what had been created, continued to be distracted by the gaps, the scarred earth, the dusty vacancies. And, if you didn't want to play golf, there was nothing to do. (CoY: 156)

Marie-Louise Pratt points out that in contemporary travel accounts, "the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene gets repeated, only now from the balconies of hotels in big third world cities"(1992: 216). Though Naipaul is not standing on a balcony, his position in front of the window amounts to much the same thing, and his description contains many of the features which characterise this scene. His hotel room is the vantage point from which

his eye travels steadily outward in a progressively expansive movement, arranging and dividing the field of vision. This visual survey carries with it an assessment of aesthetic and economic value: the golf course is beautiful, thanks to the skill of a

‘foreign eye’. The city itself is ambitious but empty and incomplete, marked by gaps, vacancy, absence. (Spurr 1993: 19)

Naipaul’s description suggests that the ‘perfection’ of the golf course has only been achieved by employing foreign experts and that an African would not even have been able to discern the ‘picturesque possibilities’ of this piece of earth. The town Naipaul observes is somehow incomplete, it is only ‘like’ a real town. This may be due to a perception which considers European constructions in Africa as always being mere imitations, incomplete copies.

In Africa, a place like Yamoussoukro seems to be something artificial, and so are the government compounds, presidential domains and foreign-style hotels described in many of the texts. Naipaul himself has lived some time “in a little low bungalow in the landscaped grounds of a government compound”(HA: 343) in east Africa. This compound “still had a colonial feel”(HA: 343) and its setting suggests “separateness and privilege”(HA: 343). He is embarrassed by the fact that he has to have a houseboy and a driver, but this belongs to the “style”(HA: 344) of the place and cannot be avoided. Many of these personal experiences have been taken up in the description of the ‘Domain’ in *A Bend in the River*. Based on the Western model, the Domain is the symbol of “modern Africa”; it is supposed to by-pass “real Africa” and to “astound the rest of the world”(BR: 100). The people who live there are privileged and “in touch with the world”(BR: 118). Among them are characters like Raymond, who is the “Big Man’s white man”(BR: 125) and the only historian whose books the president reads, and Salim’s friend Indar, who is employed as a lecturer. Several miles separate the Domain from the town at the bend in the river, but the gap between the people living there and the actual life in the town, is even bigger. In fact, a passage between those two places seems to correspond to a journey between two different worlds. While Salim and the Africans try hard

to survive [...] in the Domain it was different. There they could scoff at trade and gold, because in the magical atmosphere of the Domain, among the avenues and new houses, another Africa had been created. In the Domain, Africans [...] were romantic. They were not always present at the parties or gatherings; but the whole life of the Domain was built around them. In the town ‘African’ could be a word of abuse or disregard; in the Domain it was a bigger word. An ‘African’ there was a new man whom everybody was busy making. (BR: 119)

Obviously, the inhabitants of the Domain display a tendency to romanticise Africans. They are busy creating “the Africa of words”(BR: 124) but in the ‘magical atmosphere’ of this artificial place they seem to have lost their grip on reality. While they are supposedly ‘in touch with the world’, they are out of touch with ‘real’ Africa. Just as the people of the town know nothing about the “parallel life developed there”(BR: 102), the intellectuals seem to

know nothing of Africa's real problems and have become "locked in an idea of glory and newness"(BR: 120).

Although he feels attracted to its glamour, Salim's evaluation of the Domain is unequivocal: he considers it a "hoax"(BR: 103). This assessment is supported by the Domain's physical decline. It has been built very fast, "and in the sun and the rain decay also came fast"(BR: 102). When Salim gets there one afternoon, he realises that the "plaster on the walls had cracked in many places"(BR: 171). After Raymond and many others have had to leave, the Domain loses "it's modern, 'showplace' character. It was scruffier; every week it was becoming more of an African housing settlement"(BR: 260). The decay comes fast and natural. It is as if there was no place for something like the Domain in the middle of the African bush. The decay can therefore be considered a symbol for the insubstantiality of an 'Africa of words', for the difficulty of applying Western traditions to Africa and for the impossibility to create something like a 'modern Africa'.

While the European teachers in this Domain seem to romanticise Africa and the life of its inhabitants, this tendency can also be observed among African intellectuals. In the Ivory Coast Naipaul meets Ebony, a young African poet who wants to try out his ideas on the famous author. Ebony is convinced that "Africans live at peace with nature" whereas "Europeans want to conquer or dominate nature"(CoY: 152). This sounds familiar to Naipaul, who states that he has "heard similar words from young Muslim fundamentalists in Malaysia: ecological, Western romance bouncing back like a corroborating radio signal from remote, inactive worlds"(CoY: 152). The example shows that stereotypical patterns of perception are not only common amongst Europeans but are symptomatic of a more general human phenomenon. In this case an African intellectual uses the idealising rhetoric of colonial discourse to create a positive image of his own culture. Naipaul's rejection of such ideas is plain: he likens the poet's rhetoric to that of Muslim fundamentalists. Moreover, he portrays Ebony as a person who is unable to lead a conversation since he cannot stay with a topic and accuses him of being a plagiarist (CoY: 152). The implication seems to be that Africans can only echo Western slogans without understanding them in any deeper way.

Besides teachers and ideas, Europe also exports goods. Salim's stock consists of wares produced mainly "in Europe and the United States and perhaps nowadays Japan"(BR: 40). For the Africans, but also for himself, these products are "magical things"(BR: 88) whose principles they are unable to understand. The country Salim lives in seems to be to a great extent dependent on these products. Indar once complains:

‘Everything in the shops is imported and expensive. And in the market, apart from the grubs and things that people pick up, all you have are two sticks of this and two ears of that. And people are coming in all the time. How do they make out? You have all this bush, all this rain. And yet there could be a famine in this town.’ (BR: 164)

Even though potentially a rich country, this society seems unable to use its resources adequately, so that there might even be a famine²⁷. The products that can be found in Salim’s stock are frequently put to uses which the workmen producing them have probably not even dreamt about. “The smaller basins, for instance, were in demand because they were good for keeping grubs alive in, packed in damp fibre and marsh earth. The larger basins [...] were used for soaking cassava in, to get rid of the poison”(BR: 40). On another occasion, Salim notices an elderly man “with a grey felt hat and a blue bathrobe of towelling material over his suit. No one paid him too much attention. I just noted his oddity, and thought: He’s using a foreign thing in his own way”(BR: 252). Without knowledge of the usual application of these products, the Africans natives manage to adopt European goods for their own purposes and needs.

The depiction of the Europeans coming to Africa is in line with that of “In a Free State”. Most of them decide to come “only for the money”(NKC: 194). They fill the night-clubs and “keep the prostitutes [...] busy”(NKC: 193). Frequently, they are inferior, ‘second-rank’ personalities and flat characters, like people “in a play [...] with everyone a ‘character’, and every character reduced to a few points”(HL: 161). Some live as if they were “on an extended safari”, while others tend to “pretend that they were Africans”(HA: 360). There is one notable exception to these rather negative characterisations, however. During one of the rebellions Salim has to live through in *A Bend in the River*, the president decides to call in white soldiers to establish order again. This decision is welcomed by Salim, who feels that “for the first time since independence there was some guiding intelligence in the capital, and [...] the free-for-all of independence had come to an end”(BR: 77). He is relieved when he hears gunshots as “[i]t was the sound of the weapons of the President’s white men, the promise of order and continuity; and it was oddly comforting, like the sound of rain in the night”(BR: 79). The white soldiers bring order and security and even when they kill, the sound of their weapons is comforting. Salim is clearly biased in his perception, since his primary aim is to increase the value of his shop. To achieve this, he needs order and security. In view of the negative characterisations of many European characters, the welcoming tone in the description of these soldiers might, on first

²⁷ In “A New King for the Congo” Naipaul remarks: “But this vast green land, which can feed the continent, barely feeds itself. In Kinshasa the meat and even the vegetables have to be imported from other countries. Eggs and orange juice come from South Africa, in spite of hot official words; and powdered milk and bottled milk come from Europe”(NKC: 186).

sight, be astonishing. There seems to be a more general pattern behind this evaluation, however. While the individual Europeans described in Naipaul's texts are mostly unlikable, flat characters they can nevertheless be relied on in functions such as experts and soldiers. For all their individual faults they seem to be the only ones capable of bringing order to Africa²⁸. Thus ultimately, their presence is for the Africans' own good.

4.6.2 'Real' Africa

The colonialists' departure coincides with developments which, finally, lead to the decay and destruction of the achievements their presence in Africa has brought about. The troubles after independence remind the narrator of *A Bend in the River* of "the miraculous peace of the colonial time, when men could, if they wished, pay little attention to tribal boundaries"(BR: 34). The disorder and decay frequently leads to a kind of "colonial nostalgia"(Berger 1995 / Naugrette 1986: 307) which can best be illustrated with a passage from "A New King for the Congo". Naipaul, who takes a steamer down the River Congo, is seemingly disappointed by the desolate state of its 'cabine de luxe':

The curtains of the *cabine* hang ringless and collapsed. "*C'est pas bon,*" the *garcon* says. Many light bulbs are missing; they will now never be replaced; but the empty light brackets on the walls can be used to hang things on. In the bathroom the diseased river water looks unfiltered; the stained and leaking wash basin has been pilled out from the wall; the chrome-plated towel rails are forever empty, their function forgotten; and the holes in the floor are mended, like the holes in a dugout, with what looks like mud. The lavatory cistern ceaselessly flushes. "*C'est pas bon,*" the *garcon* says, as of an irremediable fact of life; and he will not say even this when, on an overcast afternoon, in a temperature of a hundred degrees, the windows of the *cabine de luxe* sealed, the air-conditioning unit fails. (NKC: 182)

His choice of words is highly significant: everything is 'collapsed', 'missing', 'empty', 'diseased', 'unfiltered', 'stained', and 'leaking'. The original state will not be established again; the level of decay is final and unchangeable. This can be deduced from the adjectives and adverbs employed in this passage, like 'never', 'forever', 'ceaselessly', and 'irremediable'. Remarkable in this context is also that Naipaul displays a nostalgia for a state of the steamer he himself has not known.

As a direct result of the European colonialists' absence, the African 'bush' is claiming back its ground. In *A Bend in the River* Salim remarks that "the town [...] had returned to the bush"(BR: 25). This statement has to be understood as a comment both on the physical appearance of his town and on the moral state of its inhabitants. It relates that the Euro-

²⁸ As has been shown in chapter 4.2.3, societal organisation and order are presented as typically Western features whereas the African natives' actions in this field are seen as 'make-belief' and 'play'.

pean suburb has been burnt down and grown over by bush and that the town's inhabitants live without the securities of law and regulations. Instead of these, "there were now only officials who could always prove you wrong, until you paid up"(BR: 58). In such a situation moral behaviour cannot be expected, rather, the town's return to the bush can be understood as the return to a situation where moral values are utterly useless.

In Naipaul's texts, 'bush' is not simply a synonym for shrub, thicket, or jungle, but is used both literally and symbolically. "The bush is a way of life"(NKC: 186) and Naipaul leaves no doubt that he considers it to be *the* African way of life:

The inherited modern state is being dismantled, but it isn't important that the state should work. The bush works; the bush has always been self-sufficient. The administration, now the court, is something imposed, something unconnected with the true life of the country. The ideas of responsibility, the state and creativity are ideas brought by the visitor; they do not correspond, for all the mimicry of language, to African aspirations. (NKC: 204)

The bush represents the country's 'true life' and is endowed with purely negative attributes. It is in contrast with ideas like 'responsibility' and 'creativity', it is "frightening, destructive"(HL: 129) and threatening. "Everyone feels the great bush at his back. And the bush remains the bush, with its own logical life"(NKC: 187). This 'logic' is exposed as an "illogicality"(NKC: 186), however, accounting for the Africans' irrationality. One might even go as far as Berger who states that, in fact, the Africans "*are* also the bush", they "are the human (or really subhuman) agents of a malevolent Nature – they complete the process of destruction begun by the bush"(Berger 1995: 149). This view is supported by the depiction of the Africans' violence as being, at least in part, something elemental, something in accord with the laws of nature. While the Europeans brought order and modernity to Africa, the Africans are led by "a perverse and inevitable desire to revert to the bush"(Pyne Timothy 1985: 254).

Due to its destructive energies, the bush obliterates everything. It "grows fast over what were once great events or great disturbances. Bush has buried the towns the Arabs planned, the orchards they planted, as recently, during the post-independence troubles, bush buried the fashionable eastern suburbs of Stanleyville"(NKC: 190). Besides towns and orchards the bush also "covers all kinds of violence"(Prescott 1984: 557). It muffles "the sound of murder, and the muddy rivers and lakes wash[ed] the blood away"(BR: 53). Moreover, the bush can be considered a symbol for the intractability of the 'African way of life'. River and forest are powerful presences that take "you back to what was there a hundred years ago, to what had been there always"(BR: 8-9). It seems as if there was simply no place for new things in the bush.

At first sight, the appearance of mysterious water hyacinths in *A Bend in the River* seems to contradict this notion:

Always, sailing up from the south, from beyond the bend in the river, were clumps of water hyacinths, dark floating islands on the dark river, bobbing over the rapids. [...] The tall lilac-coloured flower had appeared only a few years before, and in the local language there was no word for it. The people still called it ‘the new thing’ or ‘the new thing in the river,’ and to them it was another enemy. Its rubbery vines and leaves formed thick tangles of vegetation that adhered to the river banks and clogged up waterways. It grew fast, faster than men could destroy it with the tools they had. The channels to the villages had to be constantly cleared. Night and day the water hyacinth floated up from the south, seeding itself as it travelled. (BR: 46)

At closer inspection it becomes evident that this ‘new thing in the river’ is not really new. Rather, it exemplifies the essential characteristics of the African bush. The water hyacinth which is “produced somewhere in the dark heart of the continent, appears to be self-generating and sustaining, mocking all efforts at regulation as it proceeds, swamping and swallowing everything”(Samantrai 2000: 59). It grows so fast that soon all waterways will be clogged and will thus prevent the people from leaving their forest villages and coming into contact with modernity²⁹. Africans seem imprisoned by the bush, i.e. their surroundings and their own nature, and are, therefore, incapable to improve their situation. In Naipaul's texts, African nature, symbolised by the bush, is loaded with negative connotations and set up to contrast with ideals like progress, responsibility and creativity. There is no doubt that for Naipaul ‘real’ Africa is the bush.

4.7 History

History is one of the most important topics in Naipaul's texts. “In every country he visited, Naipaul was concerned with the relation of the historical past – even in its seeming absence – to the present”(Feder 2001: 13). His treatment of this subject takes place on two different levels. On one level, the texts are concerned with real historical events. These include “the situation of the Indian diaspora in African countries”(Korte 2000: 165) and developments in post-colonial Africa. Frequently, one gets the impression that Naipaul has “lost interest in factual representation, preferring, instead, to emphasize the historical contours”(Chauhan 1992: 15). This has to do with the second level, from which Naipaul is trying to formulate a theory of history where real events assume a more symbolic charac-

²⁹ It should be noted that the emergence of the water hyacinth can be seen in connection with the motto of the town's lycée – ‘semper aliquid novi’, “out of Africa there was always something new”(BR: 61). Certainly, in *A Bend in the River* there is not much enthusiasm for the new developments in this African country. So, just like the lycée's motto is an ironical comment on these developments, the appearance of the ‘new thing in the river’ shows that these changes bring nothing new but are, in fact, a reversion to the past.

ter. The 'factual' and the 'symbolic' level are equally important. The two novels tend to focus more on the latter, however, while the historical descriptions in the shorter narratives are usually more factual. Both levels are intimately intertwined with each other as Naipaul's perception of historical events is also always shaped by his theoretical assumptions. The ensuing chapter will analyse Naipaul's vision of history and examine the role Africa and Africans play within it. The analysis will focus mainly on *A Bend in the River*, but will also include examples from *Half a Life* and "A New King for the Congo".

Naipaul's theory of history is complex and built around issues like determinism and individuality, linearity and cyclical change, historiography and ignorance of historical developments, and the 'energy' of different cultures. In *A Bend in the River* Salim makes the following observation:

If you look at a column of ants on the march you will see that there are some who are stragglers or have lost their way. The column has no time for them; it goes on. Sometimes the stragglers die. But even this has no effect on the column. There is a little disturbance around the corpse, which is eventually carried off – and then it appears so light. And all the time the great busyness continues, and that apparent sociability, that rite of meeting and greeting which ants travelling in opposite directions, to and from their nest, perform without fail. (BR: 85)

His observation can be considered an allegorical statement on the nature of historical developments. In the great "flow of history"(BR: 63) there is no place for those who veer out or fall behind. Moreover, such behaviour does not even cause a great disturbance since the others move on, and have to move on. The stragglers die and are carried off by others. The parable suggests a linear development to history since all the ants are moving in one line and every ant leaving the formation is considered to have lost its way. On the level of the fictional characters, members of both the Indian and African communities are such stragglers. This is due to their lack of historical knowledge and the resulting inability "to comprehend their place in the world and the meaning of their fate"(Chauhan 1992: 15). For Salim's Indian community, "the past was simply the past"(BR: 11), something that is "dead and gone, part of the world of our grandfathers, and we didn't pay too much attention to it"(BR: 181). Even Indar, who has travelled a lot and has studied in London, is overwhelmed by his own ignorance (BR: 144). He relates his background as such:

I hadn't understood to what extent our civilization had also been our prison. I hadn't understood either to what extent we had been made by the place where we had grown up, made by Africa and the simple life of the coast, and how incapable we had become of understanding the outside world. We have no means of understanding a fraction of the thought and science and philosophy and law that have gone to make the outside world. (BR: 142)

The simplicity and backwardness of their life on the east coast renders an understanding of the modern world impossible. Moreover the statement brings up issues of determinism.

According to this view, everybody is shaped by the conditions in which they have grown up and, hard as they may try, will not be able to free themselves from this 'prison'. Ignorance is also an important issue in *Half a Life*. Willie's mother and her family, who are members of the backward caste, know "nothing about anything. [...] They had lived in ignorance, cut off from the world, for centuries"(HL: 39). The protagonist's main ambition is to free himself from the negative influences he has inherited and to find his own place in the world.

In Africa, the absence of historical knowledge is not due to a lack of interest but the result both of an active policy and a (quasi-)natural phenomenon. All the great events of the past, all settlements, both European and Arab, are buried by the great African bush. Naipaul reports that most "people under thirty, breaking out of the bush into teaching jobs and administrative jobs in Kinshasa, said they had heard nothing about the Belgians from their parents or grandparents"(NKC: 191). Concerning the active side of this process, Naipaul remarks that the "Belgian past is being scrubbed out as the Arab past has been scrubbed out"(NKC: 189). Even "Stanley, who pioneered the Congo route, who built the road from Matadi to Kinshasa, has been dethroned. [...] the statue of Stanley that overlooked the rapids has been replaced by the statue of a tall anonymous tribesman with a spear"(NKC: 189). Similarly, schoolbooks are being rewritten and adapted to the president's politics:

In the colonial days [...] the school histories of the Congo began with the late-fifteenth-century Portuguese navigators, and then jumped to the nineteenth century, to the missionaries and the Arabs and the Belgians. African history, as it is now written, restores Africans to Africa, but it is no less opaque: a roll call of tribes, a mention of great kingdoms. (NKC: 190)

Thus, an essential part of the country's history is left out. Consequently, people will be unable to understand their past and find their place in the world.

The entire concept of historiography seems to be strange to both Africans and the members of the Indian community. Salim states that without Europeans the whole "past would have been washed away, like the scuff marks of fishermen on the beach outside our town"(BR: 12). Furthermore he remarks: "All that I know of our history and the history of the Indian ocean I have got from books written by Europeans"(BR: 11). King rightly observes that Salim's statement is ambiguous: "It could point to the Eurocentric basis of colonial education, to the failure of non-Europeans to write realistic history or to the way the decolonised learned to become conscious of themselves through Western knowledge" (1993: 122). The last two of these options seem to be the ones which are given the most weight in *A Bend in the River*. European historiography seems to play an essential part in

the establishment of a perspective that enables non-Europeans to understand their own position.

In *A Bend in the River*, Raymond exemplifies one type of European historian. As the 'Big Man's white man', he is an important personality and he supposedly "knows more about the country than anyone on earth"(BR: 125). In spite of his good reputation, Salim has many doubts about the validity of Raymond's historical work. When reading some of the historian's articles, Salim realises that they are simply "a compilation of government decrees and quotations from newspapers"(BR: 180). Moreover, Raymond's work does not "give the impression that he had talked to any of the people involved, though many would have been alive when he wrote"(BR: 181). Therefore, Salim concludes that in spite of all the research and diligence that have entered into these articles, Raymond has "less true knowledge of Africa, less feel for it, than Indar or Nazruddin or even Mahesh"(BR: 182). Raymond's predicament is that he is completely dependent on the favour of the country's president. There is no direct pressure on him, but he tries to anticipate any critique by defending the president and his politics in anything he says and writes. Therefore, on one level, Raymond's representation "raises the question of the validity of historical documents and sources and unveils the link between power, ideology and historical representation"(Slepoy 2000). On another level, Raymond's problems have to do with the nature of his subject. His great model is the important German historian Theodor Mommsen, who wrote a history of the Roman Empire. According to Raymond, "Mommsen had the comfort of knowing that his subject was a great one"(BR: 137). Raymond has no such assurance and doubts the importance of his work. A closer look at the vision of history promoted by the text and the nature of historical development in Africa seem to confirm Raymond's doubts, since they contradict his fundamental assumptions about the course of history.

Salim's parable about the ants suggests a linearity to history where everyone is determined to follow the general course. Paradoxically, this view is both confirmed and subverted by another statement - the novel's opening line: "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it"(BR: 3). Like the stragglers in the parable, men or even whole societies who veer out of the general course of history are doomed to fall behind or even be eradicated, since there is no place for them in this world. At the same time, the sentence introduces the possibility to become active. Only men who *allow* themselves to become nothing have no place in this world. This opens up the field for active intervention, for "individualism and will"(Weiss 1992: 186). Salim's and Indar's escape from their Indian community have to be understood in

this way. They do not want to allow themselves to become nothing and leave their community which, as a group, has fallen behind.

On a larger scale, the reduction of cultures to nothingness has to do with their level of 'energy'. Salim illustrates this with reference to the history of the Arabs on the east coast. There the "the Arabian race of the master"(BR: 12) has disappeared in the native population:

Once, great explorers and warriors, the Arabs had ruled. They had pushed far into the interior and had built towns and planted orchards in the forest. Then their power had been broken by Europe. [...] They ceased to be driven on by their idea of their position in the world, and their energy was lost; they forgot who they were and where they had come from. They knew only that they were Muslims; and in the Muslim way they needed wives and more wives. But they were cut off from their roots in Arabia and could only find their wives among the African women who had once been their slaves. Soon, therefore, the Arabs, or the people who called themselves Arabs, had become indistinguishable from Africans. They barely had an idea of their original civilization. [...] The authority of the Arabs [...] was only a matter of custom. It could be blown away at any time. The world is what it is. (BR: 12-13)

Due to their mixing with the local population, the Arabs lose the idea of their place in the world and their energy. 'The world is what it is' – the Arabs have allowed themselves to become indistinguishable from the Africans and are consequently reduced to nothingness. In this model the Europeans are the culture which disposes of the highest amount of energy:

the Europeans could do one thing and say something quite different; and they could act in this way because they had an idea of what they owed to their civilization. It was their great advantage over us. The Europeans wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else; but at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves. Being an intelligent and energetic people, and at the peak of their powers, they could express both sides of their civilization; and they got both the slaves and the statues. (BR: 17)

Again, the idea of one's own civilization and of one's own place in the world is the essential criterion that determines the amount of energy cultures are equipped with. This energy seems to manifest itself primarily in the ability to conquer other countries and to achieve ones aims - slaves, gold and statues. While the Europeans dispose of a very high degree of energy, the Arabs and the members of the Indian community have lost theirs completely. Just like the Arabs, the latter group was once "supported by their idea of their high traditions" but "now they were empty in Africa, and unprotected, with nothing to fall back on. They had begun to rot"(BR: 228). Therefore, a "tide of history"(BR: 20) can easily wash them away. The energy level is changeable and cultures who have crossed 'the peak of their powers' can easily be reduced to nothingness. This introduces the idea of the 'rise and fall of empires' and accounts for a cyclical element in this model of history. The model is, however, also deterministic and linear since it insists that it is impossible to go against the

tides of history without the loss of one's cultural energy and since the change involved in this model always also implies progress.

It is significant that the Africans do not appear in this model, or if they do, then only to highlight other cultures' loss of energy. Thus, the Arabs' reduction to nothingness is equated with their absorption by the native African population. The Africans themselves seem to possess no energy at all, nor is it mentioned that they ever had any. In Africa, history seems to follow other rules. It passes in "repetitious cycles of half-making and unmaking"(Weiss 1992: 162) and progress is therefore not possible. This notion can be observed in Salim's description of the site on which the Domain is built: "This piece of earth – how many changes had come to it! Forest at a bend in the river, a meeting place, an Arab settlement, a European outpost, a European suburb, a ruin like the ruin of a dead civilization, the glittering Domain of new Africa, and now this"(BR: 260). All achievements are cyclically unmade both by the overwhelming African bush and by Africans themselves. Therefore, Samantrai may be justified in claiming that if the Africans are presented as having any energy at all, this can only be a "destructive anti-energy"(2000: 53).

Due to this endless cycle of 'half-making' and 'unmaking' there can never be anything new in Africa. In contrast with the lycée's motto – *semper aliquid novi* – this seems to be at the core of the text's statements about historical developments in Africa. Consequently, Raymond's doubts concerning the value of his work as a historian in Africa are justified. His subject can offer him nothing new. The standards set by his famous model Theodor Mommsen cannot be applied to the African context since historical perspective in Africa is a lie (Duyck 1986: 90).

Concerning the country's future, *A Bend in the River* predicts the completion of another destructive cycle. Ferdinand, who frees Salim from his imprisonment, has no hope at all and suggests to him to leave the country immediately. He tells him: "They're going to kill everybody who can read and write, everybody who ever put on a jacket and tie [...]. They're going to kill all the masters and all the servants. When they're finished nobody will know there was a place like this here. They're going to kill and kill"(BR: 275). At the end of this killing another cycle will be completed. Just as it has no real history, Africa can have no future. At the end of the novel, Salim leaves the town on board of the steamer. After the steamer has been attacked, the lights are turned off. The steamer continues its journey in utter darkness.

5. Conclusion

“And this also [...] has been one of the dark places of the earth”(HD: 18), Marlow tells his friends on board the *Nellie*, referring to the time when Romans first came to the British Isles. His narrative aims at exposing that the darkness his contemporaries usually associate with Africa is, at least in part, a direct result of the colonialist enterprise and the lack of moral ideas or principles behind this undertaking. Naipaul’s writing shares this anti-idealisation of Europeans in Africa. The European colonialists and expatriates figuring in his texts are not led by philanthropic reasons but by the desire to enrich themselves, to improve their societal status and to enjoy the liberties offered by a life abroad. As individuals they are people of second rank and not representatives of civilisation and progress.

Concerning the Europeans’ responsibility for transforming Africa into a place of darkness, Naipaul’s texts are not as unequivocal as those of his literary predecessor. While he admits that colonialism has left behind a “great wound”(NKC: 200) and that Africans had to suffer under their colonial masters (BR: 67) – a fact which partly explains the Africans’ rage and violence – his narratives leave no doubt that the Africans themselves are to be blamed for the troubles after independence. Against this view Weiss argues that

We need to separate the myth from the reality: historically, the plight of Africa originates not in a debilitating Africanness, but in colonialism; today that plight has worsened because of a postcolonial, economic order that virtually assures that the continent will remain indebted and underdeveloped. Similarly, tribal warfare [...] may be ancient, but today’s wars in Africa, although they often have an ethnic dimension, are rooted in today’s political and socio-economic problems, not in an endemic Africanness. (1992: 191)

Even if one does not share Weiss’ view and acknowledges that not all of Africa’s problems can be explained by reference to the damages done in the history of European colonialism, many of Naipaul’s ideas are problematic. Foremost among these is the mystification of African nature and the role of Africans themselves as agents of cyclical destruction. Thus, Naipaul portrays violence as an essentially African characteristic, and fails to examine its social and political causes. This notion is illustrated most explicitly in *A Bend in the River*, but seems to be implied in other texts as well. In “In a Free State” nature is experienced as a menacing and destructive force that, with the help of African natives, unmakes everything colonialism has left behind. Successes of the Ivory Coast in terms of modern buildings, golf-courses, and the relative wealth of its inhabitants, related in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro”, are due to the ‘power and wisdom’ of the country’s president who, with the help of French advisers, has managed to tame nature. This success is constantly threatened, however, by nature intent on gaining back ground. In *Half a Life*, Willie Chandran

wonders “that the land had been tamed in this way, that such a reasonable life could be extracted from such an unpromising landscape, that blood, in some way, had been squeezed out of stone”(HL: 149). This short passage, which refers to the colonialists’ activities in Mozambique, sums up many of the views expressed by Naipaul. Nature, in the sense both of Africans themselves and that of the African bush, is seen as a force that has to be tamed in order to achieve progress. This task is so difficult that the narrator compares the activity to squeezing blood from a stone. Such imagery illustrates both the difficulty of achieving progress and the violence which has accompanied this enterprise. Shortly after the Europeans’ departure, that which has been suppressed comes to light again and the natural cycle of unmaking begins. Thus, the mystification of the African landscape and its inhabitants is not restricted to the perception of individual characters or narrators but can be considered a general theme in Naipaul’s writing on Africa. According to this view, Africa has no real history, since all events are ‘muffled’ and ‘buried’ by the ‘great African bush’ and there is no hope for any development or progress.

Observations with respect to the African natives’ physical appearance and their culture are to a great degree influenced by preconceived notions and by the rhetoric of colonial discourse. Especially debasing and naturalising descriptions occur frequently. Thus, Africans are often characterised by their revolting smell or fatness. They are alcoholics, their native language is an incoherent babble and they are utterly stupid. Their sexual habits reveal that they do not possess any inhibitions or obey any obligations other than the gratification of carnal desires. They are indifferent to the world around them since they live primarily in their night world of spirits and magic. The scholar Janheinz Jahn once remarked that

Only the most highly cultivated person counts as a ‘real European’. A ‘real African’, on the other hand, lives in the bush ... goes naked ... and tells fairy stories about the crocodile and the elephant. The more primitive, the more really African. But an African who is enlightened and cosmopolitan ... who makes political speeches, or writes novels, no longer counts as a real African. (quoted in: Achebe 1988: 18)

Naipaul’s Africans are not portrayed as romantics relating fairy tales to each other. Such views are only held by a certain type of European expatriate who has no insights into African ‘reality’. Jahn’s other statements, however, seem to be in line with the representation of African culture in Naipaul’s texts. ‘True’ African life is associated with a bush which is both a place and a ‘way of life’. Both in “In a Free State” and in *A Bend in the River* it is often impossible to distinguish between Africans and the landscape surrounding them. Through this device the natives are seen as ‘wilderness in human form’. Enlightened or cosmopolitan Africans do not occur in any of the texts. The ‘new men of Africa’, who have received some kind of education, are unable to understand the modern world. They are

‘parasites’ that can only ape foreign styles and ideas without understanding their basis. Similarly, poets like Ebony in “The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro” are plagiarists, parroting slogans they have heard elsewhere and cannot lead a proper conversation. Educated Africans are ‘mimic men’ who are unable to think for themselves.

The depiction of evolved African natives is rather pejorative and, at least in part, based on the rhetoric of colonial discourse. With Ferdinand, Naipaul’s most fully developed African character, the author illustrates the negative effects of the ideological indoctrination of students and the dangers of a loss of origins which leads to a ‘fluid’ identity. While this part of the explanation is persuasive other, apparently prejudiced, ideas frequently enter the description of the students. Thus, most of them seem to be stupid and violent by nature since these are considered to be essentially African characteristics. The idea that students entering a school or a university start from ‘nothing’ denies them a proper culture and is in tune with the rhetoric of negation.

Naipaul’s political analysis is, generally, rather one-sided. Considering the wealth he has brought to his country and the difficulties of establishing democracy in Africa, the Ivory Coast’s president Houphouët-Boigny has ruled well. Since he has listened to foreign advisers he has been able to tame the African bush and to bring prosperity and wealth to his country. The president’s overall image is that of a benevolent old man who in the midst of the surrounding ‘chaos and nullity’ has managed to maintain his country’s order and stability. In view of these successes Houphouët-Boigny’s darker sides remain unmentioned. On the other hand, Zaire’s dictator Mobutu and his politics of nationalisation based on the idea of African authenticity are heavily attacked both in “A New King for the Congo” and *A Bend in the River*. The illustration of Mobutu’s changing roles and of his adoption of different strategies and poses in order to secure his power is very forceful. The stylisation of this dictator into a symbol of an essentially African nihilism is, however, problematic as it asserts, once again, the author’s belief in Africans’ violent nature and will to destroy. Moreover, it fails to take other reasons, like Zaire’s role in international Cold War politics, into account.

Naipaul’s texts are pessimistic in their view of the possibilities of peaceful co-existence or even personal unions between members of different races or cultures. ‘*Misericordie probat populos et foedera jungi*’ – the reversal of the meaning of these old Latin words is a sign of both colonialist arrogance and ignorance since such unions only create problems and are therefore not to be desired. In Salim’s and Willie’s case, affairs with members of other cultures prevent the protagonists from following their own destiny. Racially-mixed characters, like Metty, have a difficult position in the world and are without

social security. They are frequently characterised as unreliable. On the whole, cultural fusions are undesirable and, at least in Africa, they do not take place. In all of his texts, Naipaul sets up a clear distinction between an atavistic 'African world' and the modern world of Europeans.

While most of Naipaul's narrators, including the author himself, have a mixed background, their view of Africa is not very complex, sometimes even monolithic. In Salim's and Willie's case this can be attributed to their limited perspective and their preoccupation with finding their own way of life. In the autobiographical fictions and essays, the narrator's perspective on Africa is limited by his mode of travel, his interests and by preconceived notions about Africans and their culture. In contrast with this lack of complexity in the descriptions of Africa and African culture, Naipaul's depiction of the conditions of a life in exile, of the history of the small Indian community in East Africa and of the personal consequences of displacement and migration are multifaceted and compelling. While the reader gets deep insights into their fears, their suffering and loneliness, the African natives are seen almost exclusively from an external perspective and without much depth. Within the thirty years between the publication of "In a Free State" and *Half a Life* Naipaul's "vision of Africa remains remarkably constant, one might even say rigid" (Coetzee 2001: 10). Although Willie Chandran seems to have a slightly more sympathetic attitude towards Africans, his general perception of their life and culture is in tune with that of the unnamed narrator in Naipaul's earliest text on Africa. Ultimately, all of the texts discussed in this paper purvey the myth of Africa as the Dark Continent.

In view of the abundant evidence supporting this conclusion it seems astounding that there are such severe controversies about Naipaul's work. These debates are frequently occasioned by the fact that the texts do not fulfil certain expectations. One of the critics who condemns Naipaul for political reasons is Edward Said who considers him to be "a third worlder denouncing his own people" (cited in: Wise 1996: 59-60), as if the author had to comply with an unwritten rule stipulating that any writer from the Third World has to have a certain political opinion and programme. This kind of criticism is widely spread among reviewers of Naipaul's writings, however, and frequently critics direct their attention to biographical information on the author in the belief that this focus can explain everything. Lilian Feder states that "[a]t worst, such approaches dehumanise Naipaul: they strip him of his ambivalence, his spontaneity, his 'eye', the immediacy of his experience, and his ever-changing reactions, and they recreate him as the offspring of their own formulas" (2001: 5). Feder is right in claiming that biographical and ideological criticism are not appropriate ways to approach Naipaul's work. After the examination of the author's rigid

perspective on Africa, her remarks about Naipaul's supposed 'spontaneity' and his 'ever-changing reactions' have to be doubted. Rather, Naipaul's view on Africa is fixed and his perception determined by preconceived notions.

Feder is part of that faction of critics trying to defend Naipaul's work from revilement by the author's "detractors"(Feder 2001: 2). The choice of words is suggestive of the trench warfare fought out between these groups. According to the members of this second group, Naipaul does not provide "a model of the way things should be, but an account of the way they are"(Gorra 1991: 384). Moreover, he is seen as a "disinterested 'truth-seeker' who impartially criticizes nearly everyone he writes about"(John Lukács cited in Wise 1996: 60). Both statements only have limited validity. It is true that Naipaul's texts are characterised by the absence of a vision for the societies he describes. This pessimism has often fuelled critical anger. To take his tales as an account of the way things are would, however, be misleading, given the many prejudiced descriptions of African culture that can be found in Naipaul's texts. Lukács' opinion is accurate in so far as it exposes one of the most striking characteristics of Naipaul's writing, namely that of criticising almost any of his characters. Nevertheless, the analysis of the author's texts on Africa has shown that it would be wrong to assume that this criticism might be 'disinterested' or 'impartial'. Quite obviously, the critique of the texts' white characters is limited in scope. While they may be selfish and unlikable as individuals, their culture is seen as "the standard against which the Third World is measured"(Pyne-Timothy 1985: 258). On this more abstract level, Europe is considered to be the source of order, progress and stability, whereas Africa represents chaos, instability and violence.

A profound analysis of Naipaul's texts can reveal more about the writer's view on Africa than an evaluation based on political expectations derived from the author's biography or a critique which regards every critical commentator as a detractor. Taken together, Naipaul's texts present an Africa that is a "dreamlike and threatening"(HL: 167) place conveying a "sense of nightmare"(FS: 221). While his descriptions are obviously influenced by the books of literary forerunners like Conrad and Stanley, the major difference between these works is Naipaul's utter pessimism. This notion is strengthened by the author's belief in certain innate African flaws which render any progress impossible. Therefore, Naipaul presents an Africa that is dark and will remain dark for an unforeseeable time.

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