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'A Sea of Dark Green Plants': Rereading Joseph Conrad's *The Planter of Malata* in the Plantationocene

ABSTRACT

In this paper I use the systemic concept of 'Plantationocene' to map out my reading of Joseph Conrad's short story 'The Planter of Malata' (TPM) (1914), reframing Conrad as a writer of the current geological age, where human activity has induced devastating alterations to the Earth. In my ecoreading of TPM, time acquires a double analytical meaning. While I focus on the historical entanglements between capital investment and imperial goals of colonial scientific management mirrored in TPM, I also look at this short story from a biocolonial perspective, foregrounding the role of displaced plant life as extremely relevant for an ontologically plural contextual understanding of TPM as a narrative of the Plantationocene. Ultimately, I argue that TPM gives access to what could be termed the Plantationocene 'unconscious', in Mark Bould's sense of the term, as it portrays for a contemporary readership the realities of human and nonhuman dislocation, relocation and exploitation unfolding in the context of the imperial plantation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: Plantationocene, Conrad, biocolonialism, nonhuman, ecocriticism

STRESZCZENIE ¹

„Na morzu ciemnozielonego listowia”: Powrót do *Plantatora z Malaty* Josepha Conrada w epoce plantacjocenu

Niniejsza praca wykorzystuje systemową koncepcję „plantacjocenu” w analizie *Plantatora z Malaty* (PzM) (2012 [1914]) Josepha Conrada, ukazując przy tym autora jako pisarza obecnej epoki geologicznej, w której niszczytelna działalność człowieka doprowadziła do nieodwracalnych zmian na Ziemi.

1 This abstract was translated by Joanna Ryszka, whom I would like to acknowledge and thank for her great professionalism.

W przyjętym w niniejszym artykule ujęciu czas w PzM nabiera podwójnego, analitycznego znaczenia. Pomimo że praca skupia się na historycznych powiązaniach ekonomicznych inwestycji z imperialnym zamiarem kolonialnego zarządzania naukowego, analizuje ona również PzM z biokolonialnej perspektywy. Perspektywa ta podkreśla rolę przesiedlonego życia roślinnego jako niezwykle istotnego dla ontologicznie pluralistycznej kontekstualizacji PzM jako przykładu plantacjocenińskiej narracji. Z analizy wynika, że PzM zapewnia dostęp do tego, co można nazwać w rozumieniu Marka Boulda plantacjoceniską „nieświadomością”, ponieważ opowiadanie to ukazuje współczesnemu czytelnikowi realia ludzkiej oraz „nie-ludzkiej” (tj. np. roślinnej), dyslokacji, relokacji i ich wyzysku na królewskiej plantacji na początku XX w.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: plantacjoceni, Joseph Conrad, biokolonializm, nie-ludzie, ekokrytycyzm

Joseph Conrad and Ecocriticism

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, criticism of Joseph Conrad's oeuvre has undergone remarkable transformations. The journey of these critical metamorphoses has been comprehensively traced by John G. Peters in *Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception* from the early dominance of historical-biographical approaches up until the new millennium, which has witnessed the birth of new original perspectives. Ecocriticism figures in Peters's volume among these new original angles of Conradian analysis,² but it is only over the last decade that ecocritics have begun to engage more comprehensively with Conrad's macrotext. In this respect, a major contribution is especially worth mentioning, namely *Conrad and Nature: Essays* (2019), the very first ecocritical collection of articles on Conrad. In their eco-investigations, the contributors to this volume use the word 'Anthropocene', reframing Conrad as a writer of the current geological age, in which humans are recognised as agents of ecological and geological disruption (Crutzen, 2006).

Joseph Conrad in the 'Anthropocene'

In academic discourse, the term 'Anthropocene', from the Greek *anthropos* ('human') and *cene* ('new'), has become the most popular among the plethora of names which have been used to refer to the most recent era

2 Two works are noted in Peters's volume: Jeffrey Myers's 'The Anxiety of Confluence: Evolution, Ecology, and Imperialism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' of 2001 and Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy's '«A choice of nightmares»: The Ecology of *Heart of Darkness*' of 2009 (Peters, 2013).

on the geologic timescale.³ In this respect, Andreas Malm (2017) notices that even if the environmental humanities have embraced the Anthropocene as master concept, since it rightly points to the anthropogenic causation of climate change, this choice is not unproblematic: 'it tends to slip into a depiction of humanity as a monolithic entity, a species marching in unison towards biospheric mastery' (p. 133). He is not the only scholar to highlight this fallacy. Donna Haraway (2015) points to the same contradiction: '[t]he Anthropocene is thereby produced as a human species act (...), [but] the contemporary world is not a human species act' (p. 539). The avalanche of alternative terms being proposed seems to call forth the acknowledgment of divided origins when it comes to the historicization of the 'cene' we are currently inhabiting. The problem is essentially one of time scales, as noted by Ian Baucom (2014), and the greatest challenge facing historians nowadays lies in recognizing that 'history has never been ontologically singular; that it has always involved the traffic between the human and the nonhuman' (p. 139). Not without reason, the exploration of the entanglement between capital and fossil fuel has recently turned into a major historiographic and ecocritical key point, so pervasive as to generate the need for the term 'Capitalocene' to be coined (Moore 2016). Even when writing about literature, Malm (2017) focuses on the interconnection between the fossil economy and climate change, echoing Benjaminian theses to explore the way in which fossil fuel fiction can contribute to an understanding of the present environmental crisis. Unsurprisingly, Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon* (1902) figures in Malm's essay, as a fictional text in which a single narrative crystallises the total – viz. the forces of history are presented on a smaller scale –, and 'whose import can be fully recognized only now that we stand on the verge of uncontrollable climate change' (2017, p. 128). In this context, Conrad's fiction becomes an entry point to an ontologically plural understanding of history in the Capitalocene and vice versa. The temporal tensions inscribed in this form of ecocritical engagement generate an inevitable and fruitful anachronism, one that is worth pursuing. It is not so much a critical practice of presentism in disguise, but rather a willingness to engage with the Capitalocene or Anthropocene, Mark Bould (2021) suggests, as 'the unconscious of the art and literature of our time' ('Introduction') which are pregnant with the seeds of the climatic catastrophe.

3 'Capitalocene', first used by Andreas Malm and later developed by Jason W. Moore (Moore 2016), 'Wasteocene' (Armiero & De Angelis, 2017), and 'Plantationocene' (Haraway, 2015) are perhaps the best-known alternatives. See Mark Bould (2021) for an extensive list of alternative names; see 'Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene' (2015) for a discussion around terminology.

Joseph Conrad in the 'Plantationocene'

Fossil fuel exploitation is certainly one of these harmful seeds, but the extractive nature of modern capitalism also operates according to plantation logics. The entanglements between plant life, slave labour and capitalism are so historically pervasive that during a conversation at the University of Aarhus in 2014, the participants – Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing being among them – proposed the term 'Plantationocene' in lieu of 'Anthropocene' (Haraway 2015). When trying to define this concept, Haraway (2015) writes:

Plantationocene [stands] for the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor. (...) Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit – the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people – is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Anthropocene taken together (p. 162).

Building on these premises, in this study, I use the term 'Plantationocene' to frame my critical reading of Joseph Conrad's 'The Planter of Malata' (TPM) (2012 [1914]), given the historical forces that are crystallised in this colonial tale. I argue that the historical dynamics at play at the time of TPM's composition not only underpin the unravelling of the storyline, but they acquire a renewed meaning if they are read in the context of our contemporary understanding of the relationship between plantation systems and the present environmental crisis. In this paper, time acquires a double analytical meaning. On the one hand, I aim to unearth the historical context of TPM, as the story mirrors the entanglements between capital investment, biocolonialism,⁴ and imperial goals of scientific management of its time. On the other, I look at TPM from a contemporary perspective through the lenses of a positive anachronism, aimed at including plant life in the history of the Plantationocene, as the nonhuman resource dislocated for capitalist profit within the imperial slave plantation systems. To this end, in the first section of the essay, I offer a synopsis of TPM and a brief commentary on its early critical reception, touching on the issue of realism. In the second part, I explore the historical forces of scientific

4 Biocolonialism has been defined as a form of colonialism taking place at the biological level, following Vandana Shiva's (1997) understanding of colonial practices as extended to the interior space of both human and nonhuman beings.

imperialism, biocolonialism, and capitalism, which shaped the context of high imperialism in the Pacific, thus in-forming Conrad’s fictional world. Ultimately, I argue that TPM can be read as a narrative of the Plantationocene unconscious, as it especially focuses on the entanglement between artificial silk, capitalist investment, and slave labour.

‘The Planter of Malata’: Synopsis and Early Critical Reception

TPM is set in both Sydney and Malata, a fictional island of the Pacific Ocean⁵ where Kanaka workers⁶ have been employed to work on a plantation. Geoffrey Renouard, the main protagonist, is the fictional embodiment of the British explorer, coloniser, planter, and entrepreneur of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On Malata, Renouard is growing silk-plants, harvesting fibre ‘to be transhipped to Liverpool for experimental manufacture’ (Conrad, 2012, p. 22); a business particularly palatable to the ‘[e]minent capitalists’ in England (p. 22). At the beginning of the story, during a conversation between Renouard and his friend the Editor, we are informed of some recent developments in Renouard life: he has

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- 5 The fictional island of Malata is still a mystery to critics, who have often tried to find sources for its name. See the ‘Explanatory Notes’ of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad: Within the Tides* for a complete list of suggestions. Here, I will make an original speculation. There is another island in the Pacific, which could be identified as a possible source for Malata’s name, namely ‘Namalata (Malata) (...), a wooded island’ belonging to the archipelago of the Fiji – ‘one of the few atolls in the Fiji group which has a sloping outer edge to windward with a bank, on which, in case of necessity, a vessel might anchor’ (Hodgson, 1943, p. 331). Instead of relying on a single referent for his imaginative world building of Malata Island, Conrad may have relied on a multiplicity of different impulses, derived from real-world experiences or from story-driven experiences. Malata has no fixed identity, it is an imagined space, and the heterogeneous impulses of several Pacific contexts are blended into a single spatial representation.
- 6 ‘Kanaka, a Polynesian word for man, was used during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to describe Pacific Islanders who participated in the labour trade’ (Moore, 1985, p. xi). The plantation workers are referred to in TPM as ‘kanakas’ (Conrad, 2012, p. 50). At the time of TPM’s composition, the Pacific Islanders Act (1901) had been passed, ‘prevent[ing] the further importation of indentured labour after 1904’ (‘Explanatory Notes’, 2012, p. 411). It is interesting to point to two historical facts that seem to reconnect TPM with its contemporary historical background. First, a great number of Kanaka workers were from Malaita, in the Solomon Islands (Moore, 2017) – which supports one of the suggestions made in the previous note. Second, the Fiji were among the main colonial plantation sites where Malaitans were employed up until 1911, making the Fiji one of the last bulwarks of British plantation enterprises in the Pacific (Moore, 2017). Two of the Kanakas in the story are identified as ‘Tahitian’ (Conrad, 2012, p. 62). Tahiti has a history of being a plantation site, but rather than Tahitian laborers, the work force employed in Tahiti came mostly from Kiribati and China (Moore, Leckie, & Munro, 1990).

employed an assistant to work on Malata and has unknowingly embarked in the search of a missing man, Arthur. Arthur is the fiancé of an English lady, Felicia Moorsom, with whom Renouard has fallen desperately in love. Towards the end of the story, we find out that Renouard's assistant, recently deceased, is none other than Arthur – known in Australia by the name of H. Walter. Instead of sharing the truth with Felicia, Renouard prefers to lie, postponing her inevitable return to England. When Felicia and the rest of the search party find out about Arthur's death, they are shocked and disgusted by Renouard's behaviour and decide to abandon the island. After a month, the Editor reaches Malata, only to discover that Renouard has probably drowned himself.

This short summary already calls attention to the relevance of TPM as a narrative of the Plantationocene unconscious, adding to the realism of the story, but its tragic ending invites a brief discussion on the opinion of TPM's first reviewers, who were disappointed with the disconsolate finale. Some critics were rather displeased, as Alexandre Fachard (2007) reports, with 'Conrad's gloomy predisposition to tragedy and, especially, tragic endings' and with 'his detachment from English social life' (p. 21). In a most upsetting review of *Within the Tides* – the collection in which TPM appears as the first short story –, for instance, William Courtney denounces the 'false realism' of Conrad's TPM (as cited in Fachard, 2007, p. 121). The critical response to the collection must have been so unsettling for Conrad that he decided to respond to the accusations in his Author's Note (2012 [1920]) five years later:

The nature of the knowledge, suggestions or hints used in my imaginative work has depended directly on the conditions of my active life. It depended more on contacts, and very slight contacts at that, than on actual experience because my life as a matter of fact was far from being adventurous in itself. (...) [T]he mere fact of dealing with matters outside the general run of everyday experience laid me under the obligation of a more scrupulous fidelity to the truth of my own sensation. The problem was to make unfamiliar things credible (5–6).

Conrad's effort in clarifying that the short stories in *Within the Tides* are mimetic in the aesthetic sense, since they engage in a realistic representation of the unfamiliar to the common reader, but nevertheless real circumstances of life, is quite illuminating, especially when compared to Amitav Ghosh's recent commentary on Conrad's realist effort. In critiquing the mimetic role of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (*HOD*), as the mirror of those European explorers who exterminated indigenous people, Ghosh (2021) points to a fallacy in Kurtz's exceptionality; where Kurtz died in solitude, these explorers 'were richly rewarded, and their names were commemorated in

roads, parks, poems, and history books' (p. 185). Renouard seemingly dies in solitude, abhorred by the party of English compatriots who had joined him on Malata. Far from wanting to speculate further on the claims of a failed *mimesis*, I still believe the issue to be an interesting starting point, not so much to prove or disprove TPM's entitlement to realism, as to realign my analytical efforts to the original goal, turning my attention to the real historical dynamics of the Plantationocene from which TPM stems out. Instead of looking solely at the credibility of Renouard's tragedy, I wish to turn my focus on the broader contextual background that may have inspired Conrad's short story, starting with the geographical pointers scattered in the text.

The Pacific Context: Science and the Empire

While the name 'Malata' drives us towards a multiplicity of speculations with respect to its origins (see Note 4), it can be unquestionably argued that TPM has a Pacific setting. Apart from the name of the fictional island, the mention of 'Garden Point' (Conrad, 2012, p. 14) and the reference to Kanaka workers, further evidence for this statement can be found in the original manuscript (OM) of TPM. The first clue is more solid: 'the great colonial city' (Conrad, 2012, p. 13) is identified as Sydney in the OM ('Explanatory Notes', 2012, p. 405). The second clue is a bit more speculative: Dunster, the 'eminent colonial statesman' (Conrad, 2012, p. 13) who granted Renouard concession of Malata, was originally named 'Deacon' in the OM, but Conrad decided to change it, supposedly for the close resemblance of this name with that of Australian Prime Minister Alfred Deakin ('Explanatory Notes', 2012). The reasons behind this choice are unclear, but the Dunster/Deakin superimposition is certainly interesting and worth exploring, as it reconnects TPM to Australia's political role in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked the birth of the Australian Federation (1901), but the history of the Australian acquisition of territories, Pacific Islands in particular, is long and complex. It will suffice to say here that the reasons for territorial annexations to the Federation were numerous, as Alan Kerr (2009) writes: 'defence, security, trade routes, communications, resources, scientific research and meteorology being the main ones' (p. 3). What is most interesting, however, is the role played by Deakin's leadership, not only in terms of his political commitment to White Australia policies⁷ (Atkinson, 2015), but also for his support of the

7 In 1901, when Deakin was speaker of parliament, the newly founded federal parliament of Australia approved three acts of racially discriminatory law. The Pacific Island Labourers Act

ideas promoted by the Science Guild, which Roy MacLeod (1993) thus summarises:

[I]t was typical of a wave of new ideas converging in British politics. It represented a contemporary interest in scientific meliorism that crossed the Atlantic and the Channel. Its support of a mixture of political, biological and social theories, produced a vision of a scientific society (...). Liberalism would survive, but by the imposition of scientific authority, mediated by experts (p. 160).

These ideas spread as far as the Pacific and Deakin was one of their many advocates. One of the occasions in which the Australian Prime Minister endorsed the alliance between science and Empire was during a banquet organised by the British Empire League and the Science Guild in honour of the Colonial Prime Ministers:

Surely we shall yet be found willing to sit at the feet of our scientific teachers and (...) to acquire that scientific knowledge (...), which shall enable us to appreciate (...) the incalculable natural resources which are at present in our possession under the (...). That appears to me to be the task of Empire, the task of scientific conquest of its physical, and shall we not be bold and say, ultimately of its political problems? The Empire rests upon the individual citizen – the individual citizen that has great capacity for service, providing you permit him to have access to the means of knowledge to that stored-up wisdom of the ages, to these lessons and teachings which science can place in our hands (Science and the Empire, 1907, p. 37).

It is interesting to point out how Renouard's character resonates with Deakin's description of the individual citizen with great capacity to serve the Empire; a citizen who employs scientific knowledge for the exploitation of natural resources. Deakin's words echo the Editor's description of Renouard, who is defined as 'our local celebrity, (...) the explorer (...), who is now working for the prosperity of our country in another way in his Malata plantation' (Conrad, 2012, p. 22). In TPM, science is understood as the driver of imperial ideology and economic enterprise and Renouard,

was one of them, and its 'purpose (...) was to deport the vast majority of the Pacific Islanders currently working in Queensland and northern New South Wales as soon as possible after the end of 1906' (Moore, 2000, p. 22). However, Deakin did extend some exemptions, explaining that 'possible arrangements would be made for employment in the Solomon Islands, Fiji and to a lesser extent in the New Hebrides, or for return to mission stations' (Moore, 2000, p. 27). This imbues TPM with realism, since it explains the presence of Kanakas in the Pacific as late as 1911 (see Note 5).

as one of the material agents of a late Victorian/Edwardian rhetoric of scientific management and colonial exploitation.

Botanical Expeditions and Capitalist Investments

Renouard's role in the Pacific appears to be closer to the realities of English social life than early critics would have admitted, especially when associated to an exemplary historical figure of this trade, Sir Henry Alexander Wickham (1846–1928). Wickham was, in fact, as Ann Lane Bradshaw writes (2008), an explorer and planter, 'remembered for his role in the founding of the hugely lucrative imperial British rubber industry' (p. 183). His story is a useful starting point to re-establish multiple connections between TPM and the real-world efforts that were being made at the time to find a viable alternative to silkworm farming (Bradshaw, 2007). While Wickham had undeniable success with his rubber plantations in Malaya, his commitment to the cultivation of arghan – a plant that produces silk fibre – led to a financial disaster instead (Bradshaw, 2008). Renouard's fictional plantation mirrors this quite unlucky enterprise, as Bradshaw (2007) explains: '[w]ritten in the last two months of 1913, [TPM] connects with the contemporary great race to discover an industrially viable artificial silk' (p. 278), a market that had been expanded during the late nineteenth century 'by the fashion set by Queen Victoria for extended mourning' (p. 281). At the time of TPM's writing, the need for a vegetal alternative for silk manufacturing was strongly felt. The Empire needed a plant that would, as Young Dunster remarks in the story, '[d]o away with the beastly cocoons' (Conrad, 2012, p. 35), reducing production costs and risks. Even if Renouard's fictional plants cannot be ultimately associated with any of the plants listed by Bradshaw, not even the arghan, the study is quite revealing, and it demonstrates that Conrad had some knowledge of the economic manoeuvres, investments, and experiments that were being made by Britain at the turn of the twentieth century.

Apart from Wickham, there is another historical figure I would like to consider when trying to piece together the context of botanical expeditions and capitalist investments framing TPM. To this end, I would like to devote a few words on the very name 'Renouard' and the origins of this character. The first thing that should be pointed out is that Renouard's family used to live in Canada – which explains the French origin of his name –, but he was 'brought up in England before coming out here [in the Pacific]' (Conrad, 2012, p. 18). Renouard is therefore the product of a macro-imperialist context, where many European countries acted as participants. Marlow's remark in *HOD*, 'all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz' (Conrad,

2010, p. 95), could be well applied to Renouard himself. England was not in fact the only imperialist force operating in the Pacific during Conrad's time. Due to the high level of competition, as it happens to be for the argan plant, European countries falsely attributed botanical discoveries to their own explorers. As argued by Auguste Chevalier (1923), Wickham's Arghan Company behaved in this exact manner to reserve 'to British possessions and English industrialists, if not the monopoly, at least a considerable advantage over all other countries in the production, in the processing and in the use of the fibre'.⁸ In reality, Wickham was not the first to discover the argan plant, Edouard André was (Chevalier, 1923). Surely, it would be highly speculative to assert that Conrad had any knowledge of the history of this French explorer and of the subsequent false attribution of his discovery to Wickham. Nonetheless, he must have known about the broader dynamics of economic rivalry among European countries, which can be certainly interpreted as another indicator of Conrad's realism. In TPM, although indirectly, we are invited to reframe the exploration, appropriation, and relocation of the world *physis* as a European phenomenon. This final remark acts as an introduction to the last section of this essay, which is devoted to an exploration of Conrad's depiction of the nonhuman in TPM.

Nature in 'The Planter of Malata'

According to Lissa Schneider-Rebozo and Jeffrey McCarthy (2019), Conrad's treatment of nature should be understood in the context of traditional English nature-writing, which has long been committed to the romanticisation of wilderness – with nature standing as moral testing ground for human character – or, in the pastoral, as idealised harmonious garden, namely the perfect cradle for economic and sociocultural stability. While previous conceptualisations contributed to the implementation of the false dualism nature/culture, Conrad's fictions highlight the tragedy of this dualism, representing nature as an inspiring and ungoverned realm, but also as a culturally and politically shaped construct (Schneider, Rebozo, & McCarthy, 2019). In this respect, Jesse Oak Taylor provides us with a great definition of Conrad's wilderness, taking *HOD* as the most fitting example. According to Taylor, wilderness in *HOD* is 'the contact zone between the metropolitan economy and the material resource base on which it feeds' and Kurtz is 'an agent of extractive industry' (Taylor, 2019, p. 21).

8 My translation from French: 'aux possessions britanniques et aux industriels anglais, sinon le monopole, du moins une avance considérable sur tous les autres pays, tant en ce qui concerne la production que le traitement et l'utilisation de la fibre' (Chevalier, 1923, p. 655).

Seemingly in TPM, wilderness is a domesticated landscape of botanical and human dislocation and depopulation, but the wreckage we witness is much more disguised. At a first glance, Malata could appear as an idyllic setting, a perfectly administered colonial garden, where relocation and extraction are admirably enforced:

At last, one morning, in a clear spot of a glassy horizon charged with heraldic masses of black vapours, the island grew out from the sea, showing here and there its naked members of basaltic rock through the rents of heavy foliage. Later, in the great spilling of all the riches of sunset, Malata stood out green and rosy before turning into a violet shadow in the autumnal light of the expiring day (Conrad, 2012, pp. 52–53).

Sheltered by the squat headland from the first morning sparkle of the sea the little bay breathed a delicious freshness. (...) In the distance, in front of the dazzlingly sunlit bungalow, a row of dark-faced house-boys unequal in stature and varied in complexion preserved the immobility of a guard of honour (57).

The crop promised to be magnificent (...) (61).

Despite appearances, however, we are offered a veiled hint to Malata actual environmental disruption. Malata is not merely the fictional site of human dislocation, viz. the Kanaka workers (see Note 5 and 6), but also botanic dislocation, for the silk plants that Renouard is growing are not indigenous to the island (Bradshaw, 2007). When Renouard and Felicia are walking together on Malata, Renouard points out: ‘The path begins where these three palms are. The only palms of the island’ (Conrad, 2012, p. 64). In this very brief, but most revealing passage, we are informed about the consequences of human intervention on the fictional landscape. The palms seem to constitute a mere botanical exception on Malata, now covered with ‘a sea of dark green plants’ (Conrad, 2012, p. 61). Considering that one of the hallmarks of the Plantationocene is the absence ‘of places of refuge for both people and other critters’ (Tsing, 2015, p. 100), Renouard’s statement acquires a particular relevance. In the fictional space of Malata, palm trees are missing their own space of refuge, and their absence constitutes a reminder of the environmental consequences of imperialist space mastery and disruption of indigenous plant life.

Conclusions

In the present study I adopted a contextual and anachronistic approach to build an ecocritical analysis of TPM, one respectful of the coeval

ramifications of the short story's historical dimension and simultaneously interested in foregrounding elements that connect TPM with a contemporary awareness of plantation logics. Framing TPM from the temporal scale of the Plantationocene has shed light on the historical forces, economic interests, and the human and nonhuman entanglements in-forming Conrad's short story. In particular, adopting a post-biocolonial approach to the study of TPM proved to be crucial in highlighting the ontological plurality of TPM's historical context. TPM gives access to what we may term the 'Plantationocene unconscious', as it portrays for a contemporary readership the realities of human and nonhuman disruption operating in the context of the commodity-producing imperial plantation at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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