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The Forsaken Garden: Racial Capitalism and the Ecological Violence of Plantation Logic in Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Abstract— *A close reading of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, highlighting the motif of the "forsaken garden" at the Central Station, reveals the novella as a dynamic archive of plantation logic and racial capitalism. While many ecocritical interpretations depict the Congo as an untamed wilderness, this study foregrounds cultivated spaces that are rendered sterile and deadly. Drawing on Cedric Robinson, Katherine McKittrick, and Jason W. Moore, this article argues that colonial cultivation was not just a historical phenomenon but an enduring socio-ecological logic of expendability—one that renders both land and labor disposable. Conrad's horticultural imagery—especially the withered garden and the adjacent grove of the dead, vividly illustrates what Rob Nixon calls slow violence: harm that builds up time and space. The novella's silence on rubber harvesting, contrasted with the Casement Report, positions ivory as an ideological stand-in for rubber. Conrad's use of fog, impressionistic description, and atmospheric uncertainty generates an aesthetics of whiteness—affective strategies that obscure the brutality of racial and environmental violence. By bringing the abandoned garden to the forefront, Heart of Darkness stands out as a literary record of plantation dynamics—a structure that continues to shape the contemporary climate crisis and racial injustice.*

Keywords— ***Racial capitalism, plantation logic, slow violence, ecocriticism, Congo Free State, environmental humanities, affect theory, postcolonial ecology.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Few English literary works have attracted as much critical scrutiny as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Since its publication in 1899, the novella has been interpreted variously as a modernist experiment in narrative, a psychoanalytic exploration of repressed desire, and, following Chinua Achebe's influential 1977 critique, as a touchstone for debates about colonialism and race. In recent years, ecocritical scholars have engaged the text as an early Anthropocene narrative, exploring its portrayals of tropical nature and imperial resource extraction.

Ecocritical readings often dwell on striking images: the serpentine river, the encroaching jungle, or the wilderness that quietly beckons to Kurtz. The Congo is typically treated as untamed and sublime—a force that both resists colonial intrusion and exposes its moral contradictions. For George Griffith, the landscape acts as a character, absorbing and reflecting the psychological turmoil of European agents. Robert Marzec, meanwhile, views the Congo as a postcolonial frontier that unsettles European cartographic certainties.

Another, less conspicuous landscape—the derelict garden at the Central Station—has largely escaped sustained scholarly attention. Ian Watt briefly notes its decay, and Marzec mentions "failed cultivation," but neither takes this garden as a synecdoche for agro-industrial logic or connects it to racial capitalism and gradual violence. Marlow's understated sketch—a path winding back to the station, a modest garden with withered plants in a row—captures this overlooked site. This patch of withered vegetation and disturbed earth, where cultivation collapses into ruin, encapsulates the plantation framework that underpinned the Congo Free State, even in the absence of formal estates.

Reading *Heart of Darkness* through Cedric Robinson's concept of racial capitalism brings to light how the novella intertwines environmental destruction with the realities of colonial power. In the Congo, the extraction of rubber and ivory was not just a matter of individual greed, but part of a larger system that treated both land and people as expendable. Conrad's storytelling hints at this system indirectly: through horticultural imagery, silence about rubber, and a narrator who circles around truths he cannot fully face. In this light, the novella becomes a literary record of what Rob Nixon calls slow violence—the gradual, often invisible harm that imperial resource extraction inflicts on both environments and human lives.

This article unfolds in four sections. First, it reimagines the colonial cultivation estate as a way of organizing land, people, and nature—not just as a thing of the past. Second, it looks closely at Conrad's description of the Central Station to show how the forsaken garden brings together the failure of colonial farming and the ongoing dream of orderly extraction. Third, it sets the novella in the context of the Congo's rubber history and argues that the absence of rubber in the story speaks volumes. Finally, it explores how Conrad's style and narrative techniques help readers process and sometimes distance themselves from environmental and social violence. At its core, this article argues that *Heart of Darkness* is not only a critique of imperialism but a work that records the logic of plantations still shaping our world today.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical reception of *Heart of Darkness* has shifted dramatically, yet the novella's relation to ecological harm and race-based capitalism remains undertheorized. Three converging scholarly trajectories reveal a gap: no sustained attention has been paid to plantation rationale in the Congo Free State as represented through Conrad's horticultural imagery. The forsaken garden has been consistently overlooked because wilderness-focused ecocriticism dominates the field and treats cultivated spaces as marginal.

Postcolonial Interventions and the Question of Violence

The most influential intervention remains Chinua Achebe's 1977 lecture "An Image of Africa." Achebe charged Conrad with depersonalizing a portion of the human race through a rhetorical strategy that reduces African people to limbs, shadows, and a prehistoric backdrop for European psychological dramas. Even ostensibly anti-imperialist texts, Achebe shows, reproduce racial hierarchies through formal and linguistic choices. Edward Said extends this inquiry in *Culture and Imperialism*, situating Conrad within a structure of attitude and reference that makes imperial domination thinkable and narratable. For Said, the novella is deeply contradictory: it condemns specific brutalities but cannot conceive of a world outside the imperial frame. Benita Parry argues that the novella's silences around African subjectivity are not oversights but ideological necessities: the narrative cannot grant interiority to colonized people without collapsing its own epistemological premises. What these postcolonial readings have not addressed is the environmental dimension of race-based brutality. Achebe mentions the Congo River as a "watery snake" but does not theorize how the landscape produces racialized subjects. This article builds on their foundational critiques while turning attention to the material conditions of colonial harm that the novella registers only indirectly.

Ecocritical Approaches: Wilderness, Sublimity, and the Tropical Environment

When ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s, it brought fresh attention to *Heart of Darkness*, though largely within frameworks emphasizing the Congo as wilderness or sublime nature. George Griffith argues that the Congolese landscape functions as a character that absorbs and mirrors the psychological states of European protagonists. The jungle's "primeval" quality externalizes Kurtz's regression and Marlow's moral uncertainty, turning the environment into a mirror rather than a material reality. Robert Marzec reads the novella's environmental imagery as a disruption of European cartographic certainty: the unmapped Congo resists the totalizing gaze of imperial administration. Marzec gestures toward "failed cultivation" at the Central Station but does not develop this into a systematic reading of agricultural estate operations. Other ecocritical works have framed *Heart of Darkness* as an early Anthropocene text, reading its atmosphere of impending collapse as an anticipatory register of planetary crisis. These readings universalize the novella's brutality, treating the Congo as a synecdoche for all human-nature relations rather than a specific site of racialized appropriation. Kathryn Yusoff has argued that framing the Anthropocene as a species-level phenomenon obscures racial capitalism's role in producing

planetary crisis. This article follows Yusoff: the novella's environmental dimensions are inseparable from its racial ones.

Racial Capitalism and Plantation Studies: Toward a New Framework

The theoretical architecture for connecting environmental and racial harm is drawn from the Black radical tradition, as synthesized by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism*. Robinson argues that capitalism doesn't exploit preexisting racial differences but actively produces racial hierarchies as a condition of its own emergence. This insight, that race is constitutive of capital accumulation, has generated a vibrant literature on racial capitalism over the past few decades. Within this tradition, Katherine McKittrick reconceptualizes the plantation as a technology of racial domination that produces spatial hierarchies and racialized subjects simultaneously. For McKittrick, the plantation is not just a historical site but an ongoing operating principle organizing Black geographies beyond former slave societies. Jason Moore places the plantation at the center of capitalism's development as a world-ecology. The plantation, in his account, is a commodity frontier enlisting human bodies and nonhuman natures as "cheap" inputs to be used up and discarded. Exhaustion is not a side effect but the operational logic.

These theorists have mostly focused on the Atlantic plantation complex, but the Congo Free State is a different case. As Adam Hochschild documents, Leopold's colony did not rely on plantation agriculture in the strict sense because its wealth came from wild rubber and ivory extracted through forced labor. Yet the plantation's rationale, including systematic expendability of land and bodies, racialized distinction between European managers and expendable Africans, and transformation of complex ecologies into extractive frontiers, operated in the Congo regardless. The absence of formal estates makes the plantation framework harder to see. That is why Conrad's forsaken garden becomes significant. The withered plants in a row are the ghosts of a colonial cultivation system that never materialized, exposing the underlying dynamic that would have organized farming if farming had been possible.

Slow Violence and the Problem of Representability

All these critical traditions circle the same problem: how a literary text can represent harm that is slow, diffuse, and accretive rather than dramatic and event-based. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* supplies a crucial vocabulary. Nixon defines slow violence as destruction occurring gradually and out of sight, a harm of delayed devastation dispersed across time and space, an attritional brutality typically not viewed as brutality at all. Slow violence lacks the narrative clarity of an explosion or assassination. It is hard to witness, hard to narrate, hard to mobilize against. *Heart of Darkness* registers slow violence precisely through its difficulty. The grove of the dead, where men were "dying slowly, it was very clear," exemplifies Nixon's framework: no single event produces these deaths. Instead, they accumulate through malnutrition, exhaustion, and environmental degradation. Conrad's prose, with its passive constructions, clinical tone, and absorption of destruction into atmospheric description, does not fail to represent slow violence. On the contrary, it represents the experience of slow violence from the perspective of an observer who cannot fully recognize what he sees. The novella's formal evasions constitute not a failure of political imagination but a faithful record of how slow violence operates: the text's difficulty is diagnostic, not defective.

The Present Contribution

By weaving together these critical perspectives, this article suggests that *Heart of Darkness* is best understood through the lens of plantation logic. The forsaken garden stands as a powerful symbol for the environmental and social harms of the Congo Free State. Looking closely at Conrad's imagery, the story's silences about rubber, and its narrative strategies for dealing with destruction, it becomes clear that *Heart of Darkness* is more than a critique of imperialism—it is a record of plantation dynamics that still shape our world today.

a) Theorizing the Plantation: From Site to Socio-Ecological Logic

The conventional image of the plantation is a bounded geographical site with monocrop agriculture, enslaved or coerced labor, and a violent racial hierarchy. Recent scholarship in Black geographies, ecological economics, and critical race theory pushes toward a different conception: not a place but a framework. McKittrick describes the colonial cultivation estate as a technology of racial domination that dispossesses land and produces racialized subjects simultaneously. The plantation is not where racism happens but an apparatus generating the categories of Blackness, property, and fungibility that underwrite capitalist modernity. Clyde Woods traces how the plantation system created a blues epistemology: a form of knowledge rooted in resistance to the spatial control exercised by planter elites. For Woods, the plantation's legacy extends far beyond emancipation and continues to shape the political economy into the twentieth century. For ecocritical purposes, Moore's formulation is most useful. Moore places the agro-industrial estate at the center of capitalism's development as a world-ecology. The plantation is a commodity frontier enlisting nature,

including soil, trees, and human bodies, as cheap inputs to be used up and discarded. Exhaustion is the business model. The plantation's operational principle is expendability: soils mined rather than tended, laborers expended rather than sustained, both abandoned once their value has been extracted.

This reconceptualization has direct consequences for reading *Heart of Darkness*. The Congo Free State was not, historically, a classic plantation colony because Leopold's wealth came from wild rubber and ivory extracted through forced labor rather than enslaved agricultural labor. Yet the novella is haunted by the imagery and infrastructure of plantation agriculture. Marlow finds, when he arrives at the Central Station, that a heavy and dull detonation shakes the ground, a puff of smoke comes out of the cliff, and that is all. No changes are observed on the rock surface. They built a railway, but the cliff was not in the way, and this objectless blasting is all the work. The blasting is objectless because it produces nothing: no cleared space, no usable land, no measurable progress. This is pure performative brutality: labor expended not for production but for the appearance of production. Right after this description, Marlow turns to the garden. The withered plants in a row are the ghosts of a plantation, an attempt at rationalized cultivation that has already failed. The geometry of the row, the aspiration to orderly monoculture, and the fantasy of European horticulture transplanted to African soil have all collapsed into sterility. Marlow's deadpan irony underscores the pathos.

This failure is emblematic of how Conrad sees the colonial project as a whole. As Marlow observes, "The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die." The garden and the grove of death are side by side: land worn out, people worn out. Those dying in the grove are not victims of a single tragedy, but of slow, ongoing negligence. They have been used up by a system that takes what it wants and leaves nothing behind. Even without an official plantation, the same logic of disposability rules over both land and labor. Robinson's idea of racial capitalism helps explain this: race is not just added to class; it is central to how the system works. In the Congo, plantation dynamics existed even without plantations, because the division between European managers and African workers made the latter expendable. Africans were forced to gather rubber under conditions that broke their bodies and devastated their environments. The forsaken garden shows this dynamics clearly: the land can't grow crops, and the workers can't survive. Both are used and abandoned.

b) A Forsaken Garden: Reading Failed Cultivation

Conrad's prose at the Central Station leans heavily on horticultural language but inverts the usual associations of growth and fertility. The garden is only "a bit of" a garden: incomplete, abortive, not deserving the name. The plants are "in a row," a leftover trace of rationalized geometry from the plantation system's earliest days, but these plants have withered. Order has collapsed into sterility. The garden is paired with the blasting of the cliff: one represents the fantasy of farming, the other the reality of extractive destruction. Neither yields anything of value. Marlow's characteristic irony, detached, weary, and self-protective, mirrors the inefficacy.

As DeLoughrey has shown in her work on Caribbean and Pacific island literatures, the linear geometry of plantation agriculture is not a practical arrangement alone but a spatial ideology. The row imposes Euclidean order onto the perceived chaos of tropical nature, disciplining the land into legibility for European accounting practices. The row also enables surveillance, making each plant and, by extension, each laborer visible to the managerial gaze. When Conrad's plants wither in their row, the failure is not merely agricultural but epistemological: the colonial fantasy of making the Congo legible, predictable, and profitable has failed. The row remains, but it marks only absence.

The grove of the dead intensifies this pattern. Marlow describes it with clinical, almost botanical attention: "They were dying slowly, it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom." Ecocritical readers have often focused on the "greenish gloom" as a sign of the jungle reclaiming human habitation, but the location matters: these bodies are found in spaces intended for farming. The grove is contiguous with the garden, the residue of failed plantation agriculture. Here Conrad records what Nixon calls slow violence: destruction that accumulates gradually through ordinary operations of appropriation. The men are not shot or hanged. They are not killed in any dramatic event. Instead, they are worn down by forced labor, malnutrition, and environmental ruin. The grove's stillness and "greenish gloom" constitute the aesthetic form of slow violence in the novella. Marlow's syntax performs the erasure: the passive construction and negative catalog turn forced labor into something almost natural, almost meteorological. The men become "black shadows," a phrase that registers their presence while reducing them to insubstantial phenomena. This is not a failure of empathy but a structural feature of the telling's ideological position. To name the brutality as brutality, to say these men have been murdered by the system of

appropriation, would require a political analysis that the novella consistently refuses.

Elsewhere, Conrad uses botanical metaphors to describe European agents. The manager, Marlow notes, "inspired uneasiness. That was it! Uneasiness. Not a definite mistrust, just an uneasiness, nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a . . . a kind of vegetable creature." The manager is a vegetable: rooted in the colony, absorbing resources, producing nothing. His sterility mirrors the garden's sterility. Kurtz, by contrast, is described in terms of monstrous, excessive growth: "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, lo, he had grown to the size of a monstrous plant." Where the manager is withered, Kurtz is overgrown; where the manager is anemic, Kurtz is hypertrophic. Both figures are rendered through horticultural imagery, but in each case, the colony fails to achieve the orderly cultivation the plantation promised. It yields either sterility or monstrosity, two sides of the same extractive coin. This dual failure suggests plantation rationale cannot succeed on its own terms. The fantasy of rational control, the transformation of diverse ecologies into uniform monocrops, and the conversion of complex social relations into simple hierarchies keep collapsing into their opposite. The garden becomes a graveyard. The vegetable manager governs a kingdom of death. The brilliant Kurtz degenerates into a savage parody of civilization. Conrad's horticultural language operates as an immanent critique: the metaphors of farming expose the impossibility of farming under racial capitalism.

c) Rubber, Soil, and the Extractive Imperative

When plantation agriculture fails in the Congo, the harvesting of wild rubber and ivory succeeds, at least in generating enormous profits for King Leopold and his concessionary companies. *Heart of Darkness* is a story about ivory: Kurtz's obsession drives the plot; the company's goal is ivory accumulation; ivory serves as the novella's central engine. Yet the environmental dimensions of rubber extraction, including systematic forest exploitation, forced labor, destruction of food-producing lands, and demographic collapse, are almost absent from the text. This absence requires sustained attention.

Rubber requires a different landscape than plantations. The *Landolphia* and *Funtumia* vines that produced the Congo's wild rubber grew scattered throughout the equatorial forest. No laborer gathered rubber without spending weeks in the forest, subsisting on whatever they could forage or carry. To ensure quotas, concessionary companies held hostages, usually women and children, and punished shortfalls with flogging, mutilation, or execution. The *Casement Report* of 1904, commissioned by Britain and based on interviews with Congolese witnesses, documented how the rubber regime devastated human populations and the environment. Villages emptied. Food supplies collapsed. The forest itself was transformed by the pressure of harvesting.

Conrad substitutes ivory for rubber because of the differential symbolic weight of the two commodities. Ivory, unlike rubber, has a long history in European art and luxury. It signifies the exotic without forcing the readers to understand the industrial mechanics of its extraction. The substitution is not a literary choice alone but an ideological operation. By centering ivory, Conrad preserves the Congo as a space of mythic quest, a "dark place" where Europeans confront the limits of civilization. The rubber economy, more industrial, bureaucratic, and environmentally destructive, recedes into the background.

Reading the text against the historical archive illuminates what remains unsaid. Photographs taken by missionaries and journalists during the Congo reform movement show landscapes denuded of trees, emptied villages, and severed hands collected as proof of work. These photographs expose the forsaken garden as part of a continent-wide transformation of ecologies. As environmental historian John MacKenzie notes, the harvesting of wild rubber and ivory in the Congo represented one of the most intense episodes of environmental exploitation in African history. *Heart of Darkness* gestures toward this history in the withered garden and the grove of death, but it never names it. Naming is left to the readers, who must bring the historical archive to bear on the literary text. The novella's silence is both a limitation and a strategy: a limitation of Conrad's political horizon and a strategy forcing readers to confront the gap between aesthetic representation and material violence.

This silence is not a failure. The novella is not a documentary and has no obligation to represent every aspect of colonial exploitation. Yet the silence tells, exposing the limits of Conrad's critique. The novella can represent Kurtz's moral degradation, the company's hypocrisy, the overseers' cruelty, and the suffering of African bodies in the grove of death. What it cannot represent, or can only represent indirectly through absence and indirection, is the systemic structure connecting these phenomena to everyday capital accumulation. The rubber economy required an infrastructure of accounting, surveillance, and brutality that does not lend itself to the adventure-narrative form. Conrad's impressionism, for all its power, is better at representing the empire's psychological effects than its material mechanisms. This limitation makes *Heart of Darkness* valuable to the environmental humanities because the novella shows what happens when plantation logic meets a landscape that resists plantation agriculture. The result is not orderly appropriation but environmental and racial entropy: soils exhausted, bodies expended, forms

collapsed. The forsaken garden is the signature of this entropy, what remains after the fantasy of rational cultivation has been exposed.

d) Affect, Atmosphere, and the Aesthetics of Whiteness

If plantation rationale operates through disposability, then the problem of how the novella's form mediates that operation becomes central. The historical archive supplies what the text withholds, yet the novella's formal features—the fog, impressionism, and narrative delays—actively manage the brutality the archive makes visible. This inquiry yields atmospheric whiteness and raises the further problem of whether aesthetic form can be complicit in racial violence. Affect theory offers tools for thinking about narrative atmosphere as a site of ideological production.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the fog, narrative delays, and Marlow's persistent uncertainty create a defensive structure of feeling that protects the European subject from confronting the brutality of appropriation. Sara Ahmed writes that whiteness is not a skin color but an orientation: a way of inhabiting space that makes certain bodies and objects feel at home while rendering others out of place. Whiteness, in Ahmed's account, is an affective economy organizing what can be seen, felt, and acknowledged. The fog enveloping the steamer as it approaches Kurtz's inner station figures this orientation. When unseen figures from the forest attack the crew, Marlow describes the experience as "an atmosphere of tremulous uncertainty." The attack is never fully seen but felt as a disturbance in the air, a ripple in the affective field. The fog turns the forest into an impalpable threat, a wilderness that seems to strike out on its own rather than a site of organized resistance by people with every reason to resist.

Effectively, the fog allows Marlow to narrate brutality without confronting its agents or material causes. The attackers remain unseen, their motivations unexamined, the destruction absorbed into the atmosphere. This is not merely a narrative technique but an ideological operation. By rendering the Congo as atmospheric rather than political, Marlow and Conrad preserve the fantasy that the brutality of appropriation is a product of the environment itself, the "darkness" of the title, rather than a deliberate system of racialized exploitation. Marlow's impressionistic style, with its "haze of uncertainty," its "glimmer," its "shadows," does similar work. He describes the grove of death not as an atrocity but as a natural phenomenon. The passive construction and clinical tone turn forced labor into something meteorological. The men are not killed; they die, the way leaves wither, or rivers dry up.

This rhetorical strategy is what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism: attachment to an object, here the civilizing mission or the aesthetic of adventure, that prevents flourishing. Marlow stays attached to a vision of the Congo as a place of mystery and moral testing even as he documents horrors. That attachment lets the destruction continue without full acknowledgment. To acknowledge the brutality as brutality, to say this is murder, torture, or crime, would require Marlow to abandon the aesthetic frame that gives his telling coherence. Whether an ethics of form could resist such absorption remains an open problem. The novella provides no answer, but the problem itself becomes a provocation for the reader.

The novella's formal features, including its inconclusiveness, irony, framing structure, and reliance on a narrator reporting another narrator, are not merely modernist innovations but strategies for managing environmental and racialized harm, rendering it tolerable and even aesthetic. The frame narrative distances the reader from Marlow and Marlow from the events. The irony lets the narrator register horror while maintaining weary detachment. The inconclusiveness, the famous "horror" that signifies nothing particular, lets the reader fill the void with meanings that need not include the specific material history of the Congo Free State. These strategies create an atmosphere that makes the plantation's slow violence survivable for the narrator and, perhaps, for the readers. They let readers see *Heart of Darkness* as a tragedy of the European soul rather than a record of genocide. The novella is not an apology for empire; it is too dark, too critical, too aware of hypocrisy. Yet the critique operates within limits determined by the racial and aesthetic ideologies of Conrad's time. The forsaken garden is the trace of what the novella cannot fully represent: the systematic transformation of African land and African bodies into disposable inputs for European accumulation.

III. CONCLUSION: READING THE PLANTATION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Heart of Darkness may be productively reread through the frameworks of plantation logic and racial capitalism. The abandoned garden plot at the Central Station functions not as a minor detail, but as a synecdoche for the broader environmental brutality of the Congo Free State—a violence enacted through the simultaneous exhaustion of land and human bodies. Attention to the novella's horticultural imagery, its silences regarding rubber, and its affective atmospheres reveals how literary form participates in the ideological operations of racial capitalism, even when it purports to serve other purposes.

Several tasks remain. If the forsaken garden is the whole story, attentive reading is only the first step. The next step is to trace continuities between Conrad's Congo and our extractive present. This rereading matters beyond Conrad studies because the plantation framework that shaped the

Congo persists today in the extractive economies of the Global South, the racialized distribution of environmental risk, and the ongoing dispossession of Black and Indigenous lands. The Anthropocene concept, for all its usefulness, has been criticized by scholars like Kathryn Yusoff for obscuring racial capitalism's role. The Anthropocene is not a geological event but a political-economic one, forged through the expropriation of Black and Indigenous lives and lands. Plantation dynamic, as theorized here, is a key mechanism of that expropriation.

The potential for literary criticism to intervene in material processes such as resource extraction must be carefully qualified. While reading Conrad cannot halt extractive practices, understanding the aesthetic management of violence is a necessary precondition for resisting its contemporary manifestations. For the environmental humanities to address the intertwined crises of climate change and racial injustice, it is essential to engage with cultural texts that have historically encoded and normalized these connections. *Heart of Darkness* remains a vital text in this endeavor, as its forsaken garden continues to symbolize enduring forms of violence. Approaching the novella through the lenses of ecocriticism and racial capitalism offers a means to uncover the origins of the current precarious moment.

IV. FINAL COMMENT: THE PHILOSOPHICAL GROUND OF THE FORSAKEN GARDEN

To return one last time to the abandoned garden plot is not to decode a metaphor but to stand on the literal ground of the novella's philosophical critique. That small patch of failed cultivation—a row of withered plants, a mound of earth where order was promised and decay delivered—condenses the machinery of the Congo Free State: forced labor, rubber quotas, hostage-taking, severed hands, villages emptied and left to rot. The forsaken garden is a garden that is not a garden: a plantation that never grew, a space of farming transformed into a space of death.

This image invites a more precise lesson about aesthetics and violence. The aestheticization of violence is not incidental but structural to racial capitalism's self-representation. Philosophically, the forsaken garden operates as the material sign of an internal contradiction: plantation rationality promises the systematic transformation of nature into value through orderly appropriation, yet it yields only exhaustion and sterility. This is not a failure of execution but a structural necessity. Racial capitalism cannot sustain the conditions of its own reproduction; it treats land and labor as disposable inputs rather than participants in a regenerative ecology. The garden's withered row literalizes this impossibility. The geometric order imposed by the plantation system remains, but it now marks only absence—and that absence proves that the fantasy of rational control was always a fantasy of brutality.

What kind of reading does such an image demand? Not a puzzle to solve, but a wound to witness. Recognizing the forsaken garden means understanding that modernism's aesthetic strategies—the fog, the impressionism, the narrative detours—function as emotional techniques for making harm tolerable. The novella's most haunting moment may not be Kurtz's final word but the silence of the garden: the row of withered plants pointing only to broken promises. If the garden could speak, it might say what it already shows: under racial capitalism, cultivation is always on the brink of ruin. One is left to wonder whether any literary form that renders such a scene beautiful does not thereby betray it—and whether the only honest response is a reading that refuses to look away.

The forsaken garden is not a detail but the whole story. Learning to recognize it in Conrad, in the colonial archive, and in the supply chains that pass through our own hands is the first step toward acknowledging what has always been known but refused: nothing grows there, and that, precisely, is the point.

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