A darker shade of white: expat self-making in a Congolese rainforest enclave

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At the road junction, I caught a first glimpse of the labour compound constructed a decade earlier by CTI, the timber firm that had accepted me as an ethnographer of tropical logging.[1] A truck had just brought me from the nearest town to the company headquarters along the Congo River, from where CTI managed its huge logging concession further north. Behind some lively bars and motorbike repair shops, children were playing between the wooden barracks and women were strolling to the market. Most of the men would only join their families in the evening, after a day of repairing heavy machinery in the garage or driving logging trucks back and forth between the forest and the log pile area near the river. Our truck continued on its course and passed through a guarded gate separating the fenced work site from the labour compound. We stopped in front of the main CTI offices and I was introduced to the Congolese human resources manager. After a brief conversation, he instructed one of his clerks to bring me to the 'garden of Eden' where I was supposed to wait until one of the expatriate bosses returned from the forest. Tired from the trip, I followed my guide to this promised Eden, hoping it would be a bar where I could have a refreshing beer. We passed piles of enormous logs that were being loaded on ships to Kinshasa and, behind the garages smelling of oil and gasoline, we came to yet another gate. The clerk loudly announced, 'This is Eden!', waking up the guard who was dozing off in his wooden shelter. Before me, five small bungalows bordered the river. But despite the ornamental palm trees and flowerbeds, the place seemed very far from Eden. With their scaly whitish walls, the bungalows made a rather shabby impression. In contrast to the busy road junction near the labour compound, the place appeared rather desolate. 'This is where the whites live,' my guide informed me, 'and the third bungalow is for visitors. That's where you will stay.'

A smiling man introduced himself as the *cuisinier* (cook or housekeeper) of the Danish site manager, the highest-ranking CTI agent in the concession, who lived in the adjacent bungalow. As he politely showed me my room, I uneasily realized how a racialized logic of difference and segregation was already pinning me down to my 'proper' place in a larger set of relations that structured everyday life. Several minutes later, a jeep abruptly stopped on the driveway and a bony, tanned European man entered the bungalow. He presented himself as Michel, the French forest overseer who was stationed in a similar but smaller expat

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[1] In order to protect the privacy of my fieldwork participants, I refer to this multinational timber company by way of the pseudonym CTI ('Congolese Timber Industries'). I do not reveal the exact location of its concession and use fictive names for the people appearing in this article.

quarter alongside a second labour compound in the middle of the concession. Michel was very curious about my presence. 'Aha … an anthropologist,' he shouted when I introduced myself. 'Unfortunately you won't find any interesting tribes here in the forest; they all lost their traditions a long time ago.' I clumsily explained that I was not looking for 'traditional tribes' but rather trying to under-stand everyday concession life as a way to grasp how global dynamics of neoliberal resource extraction manifest themselves in contemporary Africa. But this reply raised more questions about my underlying motives than it produced satisfying answers. 'Anyway,' Michel cut me short in the end, 'Welcome to hell!', pointing to the bungalow and the expat quarters beyond it.

At first, I thought it a mere coincidence that Michel's cynical 'hell' contrasted so poignantly with the human resources manager's and his clerk's denomination of the same lodgings as a paradisiacal 'garden of Eden'. Later, I understood that this metaphorical opposition between heaven and hell was frequently used to understand and critique the experienced state of the world and resonated strongly with widespread racial imaginaries. In the 'white' living quarters, this very oppos-ition structured processes of male expat self-making in which whiteness was con-structed by way of its dark opposite through a narrative strategy of self-exoticization. In the 'black' labour compounds, on the other hand, the heaven/hell opposition structured popular narratives in which whiteness explicitly referred to a global world of fleeting opportunities and occult accumulation that left in its wake a disturbingly dark reflection.

In this article, I use the vernacular opposition between heaven and hell as a way to rethink the concept of whiteness – as an ideology, an extant power structure and a set of racialized subjectivities – from the ethnographic perspective of everyday life in and around a multinational timber company. Specific ethnographic atten-tion to whiteness brings to the fore the racializing dynamics of what James Ferguson (2006) has called 'Africa in the neo-liberal world order'. The CTI con-cession, as one of Ferguson's investment enclaves for hopping global capital, illus-trates how contemporary African resource extraction, because of its labour relations, power structure and evocation of popular memories, is profoundly racial-ized. Whiteness, as an ideology and mechanism of privilege, needs to be made explicit in order to grasp its persistent presence in Africa in the current neoliberal moment. However, as a case study of a very particular manifestation of whiteness, this article specifically contributes to this part issue's theorization of its inherent het-erogeneity through empirical studies of whiteness*es* – in the plural – by contextual-izing them in local settings, regional histories and global realities.

The racialized imaginaries behind spatial practices of home-making and segre-gation in the logging concession reveal that the CTI expats used ambiguous strat-egies of 'self-exoticization' to forge a white male self out of an imagined interior 'darkness'. Despite its internal instabilities, whiteness was thereby reproduced as an everyday mechanism of privilege and violence that, from the vantage point of CTI labourers, also seemed to be explicitly tainted by a 'darkness' – albeit of a different kind to the interior darkness imagined by their white bosses. A careful ethnographic exploration of such a 'darker shade of white' ques-tions the unstable definition of the legitimate object of whiteness studies in Africa: that is, who counts as 'white African' or 'African white'. The CTI expats' nervous claim to belong somehow to that 'African' continent opens up new perspectives on citizenship and belonging addressed in this part issue.

Methodology

This article is based on fifteen months of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork between November 2009 and July 2011, mainly consisting of continuous participant observation and, to a lesser extent, (informal) interviewing in and around the CTI labour compounds and expat quarters in the north of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Most quotations originate from my personal field notes, in which offhand remarks, half-formulated reflections, everyday gossip and implicit hints gradually accumulated into a critical mass of 'data' that provides most of the basis for this article's analysis.

Understanding the mutually related and co-produced life worlds of Congolese workers and European expats ethnographically necessitated constant movements back and forth between expat quarters and labour compounds. I thus shared a house in one of the compounds with two recently employed company workers and my fieldwork collaborator, a university student from the nearest town. But I also occupied a room in one of the expat bungalows, alongside Pablo, a young Spanish forest engineer, who kindly let me use his electricity, hot water, satellite television and occasional internet connection. Unavoidably, my constant crossing of racialized borders aroused some suspicion. Many inhabitants of the labour compound immediately supposed that I was working for the timber company, while the expats distrusted my 'closeness' to 'their' Congolese employees and suspected me of looking for information that might harm CTI's reputation. It took quite some time and some impression management before my seemingly transgressive presence was taken for granted to some extent, although doubts about my identity and motivations reappeared periodically.

While this constant movement between racially segregated communities was emotionally demanding and morally challenging, it was only by stumbling around racialized power structures that I learned to recognize the abiding force of whiteness and literally felt the consequences and sanctions of racial transgression. My bodily experiences thereby became 'data' in their own right and the reflexive basis from which I could slowly develop relations based on trust and mutual respect. This article's main argument was therefore crafted through many discussions, repudiations, angry reactions, reconciliations and revisions between CTI workers, expat loggers and myself.

Whiteness studies and 'African' expats

While the social construction of whiteness has become a popular research topic in Western (often US) contexts since the early 1990s, in-depth analyses of whiteness in contemporary Africa are still surprisingly rare, with the notable exception of a growing number of studies on South Africa and some other post-settler African contexts. Thorough engagements with *non*-settler whitenesses in the rest of the continent, however, are virtually absent and it almost seems as if whiteness no longer matters for African studies since the supposed end of colonialism.

Yet, as Jemima Pierre's (2012) work on Ghana poignantly shows, 'white' faces and, even more so, ideologies and imaginaries of whiteness have never left the African scene. Western aid workers and foreign company agents, for instance, reproduce and transform ideas of whiteness in surprising ways. But while their

daily practices inform fine ethnographies of 'development' (Mosse 2005; Stirrat 2008) and discussions on neoliberal capitalism (Ferguson 2006; Hardin 2011), these analyses often remain surprisingly race-averse and thus, as Pierre (2013) argues, colour-blind. The presence of *white* expats is often implicitly presupposed but rarely given in-depth attention. They are frequently depicted as de-territorialized cosmopolitans, moving between 'global cities' and 'expat bubbles' as members of a 'transnational class' (Sklair 2001). And while it is admitted that they sustain multiple commitments to their 'home' communities, their entanglements in the local realities in which they happen to find themselves often remain underexposed (Yeoh *et al*. 2003).

Fieldwork in the CTI logging concession shows that expat selves are not merely products of de-territorialized processes of self-making but contextualized subjectivities, imbued with social and cultural logics originating from, reacting to and reworking lived realities in Africa today. I therefore argue that, as a permanent fixture of neoliberal resource extraction, these expats are as 'African' as, for instance, more spatially settled 'whites' – at least if we do not reduce Africanness to a certain set of nationalities or ethnic belongings. 'Africanness' and 'whiteness' come in many shades; and the isolated living quarters of five male European loggers in the Congolese rainforest are as good a place as any other from which to study them. This argument thus directly contributes to this part issue's renewed discussion on whiteness in Africa by pushing it beyond those places where 'whites' constitute a more or less recognized minority as 'African' citizens, often as a result of settler histories.

Moreover, as an example of an extreme minority situation, the isolated CTI expats reproduce and make explicit aspects of whiteness that might otherwise remain invisible (Dyer 1997). This article specifically foregrounds the ambivalence of whiteness and its inherent contradictions and tensions, and thereby questions – to a certain extent – the often taken-for-granted totalizing control multinational corporations and their agents are said to possess (Gibson-Graham 1996). At the same time, however, the internal vulnerabilities of whiteness, to which my analysis – and others in this issue – draws attention, do not prevent whiteness from working as a structure of privilege in postcolonial Africa (Leonard 2010). In effect, despite its apparent isolation, the CTI logging concession was very much entangled in racialized memories and structures of feeling, and enmeshed in global networks of capital and corporate power that accounted for the everyday reproduction of whiteness – and, as we will see, of its accompanying 'dark' shadow.

My ethnographic analysis thus illustrates how a critical use of the concept of whiteness enables one to bring to the fore the racialized imaginaries and power structures that are reproduced in the extractive dynamics of neoliberal capitalism in contemporary Africa. But it also reveals that concepts such as 'whiteness' need to be understood from intersectional perspectives, particularly in relation to gender (and sexuality). As we will see, the everyday production of 'white' selves in the logging concession was, indeed, a highly gendered process, whereby whiteness was specifically performed *as a masculinity* in a racialized economy of power and desire that came into being between the expat quarters and labour compounds.[2]

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[2]For a more detailed exploration of the entanglements between masculinity, race and desire in the CTI logging concession, see Hendriks (2014a).

A brief history of extraction

Rather than an 'unspoilt' or 'primeval' wilderness, the CTI concession was marked by a long history of capitalist exploitation (Nelson 1994; Northrup 1988; Stengers 1989; Stengers and Vansina 1985). At the end of the nineteenth century, European private company agents working for warehouses along the Congo River were already trying to harvest ivory and natural rubber in the region, despite strong popular resistance against forced labour. When the Congo Free State became the Belgian Congo in 1908, the colonial administration got a firmer grip on the area and could impose taxes and obligatory cotton cultivation. From the mid-1930s onwards, forced village labour was used to build an extensive road and railway network, which, in turn, attracted palm oil, rubber and cacao plantations. Private labour recruiters, assisted by soldiers and colonial state agents, then relocated whole villages to the labour compounds built by these plantation companies. The characteristically 'paternalist' policies of the latter then gave rise to new aspirations for many men in the region, centred on the formal labour contract as a necessary condition for the achievement of 'modern' and 'civilized' masculinity. After independence, however, most of these companies withered away in a quickly deteriorating economic environment, provoked by the 1960s regional uprisings and Mobutu's 1970s nationalization campaigns (Young 1965; Young and Turner 1985).

This history, and the popular historiographies it informed, strongly affected the moral economy in which CTI came to operate when it acquired the exploitation rights over its concession in the late 1980s and started logging in the early 1990s. The preceding postcolonial era was largely experienced as a long period of *dis*-connection (Ferguson 1999), fuelling widely shared feelings of colonial nostalgia, which circulated alongside harsh vernacular critiques of the colonial past informed by popular memories of labour recruitment, compulsory crop cultivation, obligatory road maintenance and head taxes. As the Congolese branch of a multinational timber firm, CTI therefore initially revitalized glimmers of hope for economic change but eventually provoked sharp criticisms of its perceived exploitation of the region's natural resources and labour power.

Despite these critiques, the CTI concession quickly grew into a regional commercial node. Because the timber firm was the only private employer in the wider area, its isolated compounds attracted traders, farmers, fuel smugglers, prostitutes and fortune-seekers from near and far, growing into communities of thousands of people living according to the rhythm of the monthly arrival of hundreds of salaries. But their livelihoods were always experienced as profoundly volatile. Political instabilities and an unpredictable global timber market created an ever shifting profitability frontier that forced CTI to frequently lay off (and then re-employ) its workers (Hendriks 2015). Finally, in February 2012, the long-running rumours of an imminent shutdown became a fierce reality when CTI was sold to a Congolese investor who decided to close down the concession.

A garden of Eden

Although CTI officially denied that racial logics informed the spatial segregation of its expat quarters from its labour compounds, in practice residence in the expat

bungalows was overwhelmingly reserved for 'Europeans'. But despite the fences that inscribed such racial segregation in mental geographies, these gated zones were not completely out of reach for Congolese workers and their families. Male *cuisiniers*, for instance, were permanently permitted in the 'white' bungalows and, from time to time, mechanics and technicians were called in to repair water pumps or satellite dishes. Moreover, when their bosses were at work during the day, company guards often allowed women and children to hurry along shortcuts to the river or a cassava field. This de facto porous nature of its boundaries, combined with the tantalizingly brief glimpses of expat life it offered, fuelled informed rumours, gossip and speculations in the neighbouring labour compounds.

At first sight, the colonial-style bungalows evoked nostalgic memories of an idealized past of economic connection, while also hinting at a contemporary but faraway world of modernity. With their air conditioning, satellite televisions and internet, the expat quarters figured as sites of wealth and abundance. Seen from the labour compounds, where 'life was hard' (Li. *bomoi eza makasi*), without electricity or running water and outside the coverage of mobile phone networks, the expat quarters seemed a 'garden of Eden' (Fr. *jardin d'Eden*), where life was 'peaceful' (Li. *kimia ezali*) and 'without trouble' (Li. *mobulu eza te*).[3] In a lived context of crisis from which the country seemed unable to arise (Mbembe 1995), this paradise literally represented the utopian possibility of another world. Despite the otherwise rather diverging perspectives of contractual company employees, day labourers, farmers and traders, the Eden metaphor was used by all to refer to the expat bungalows as visible metonymic manifestations of the 'West' (Li. *mpoto*). But the same metaphor also contained a significant ambivalence that profoundly darkened this 'white' utopia – a darkening to which I turn near the end of this article, after exploring an uncannily similar yet different kind of 'darkening' from the vantage point of the CTI expats themselves.

Everyday expat life

Michel's 'welcome to hell' evoked in the opening vignette profoundly characterized the logging concession's particular 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977). In this ephemeral context, cynicism was indeed an affective dimension that was produced through social interactions, gendered practices and racialized imaginaries, which simultaneously reconfirmed and destabilized the 'difference' between expat quarters and labour compounds. To properly grasp such affects, and the darkening strategies of 'white' self-making they provoked, a grounded look at everyday expat life is needed.

The five European male CTI expats formed a small and isolated community, consisting of Jens (Danish site manager, early seventies), Julien (French mechanic, early sixties), Roger (French constructor, late fifties), Michel (French logger, early sixties) and Pablo (Spanish forest engineer, early thirties). Michel and Pablo occupied bungalows in the middle of the concession, while the others lived in the 'white' quarters alongside the Congo River. The four older expats had left

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[3]These are vernacular terms and expressions commonly used in the labour compound in Lingala (Li.) or French (Fr.).

Europe in the 1960s and 1970s and were, at the time of my fieldwork, approaching the end of a long 'Africa career'. Pablo, on the other hand, had recently obtained a tropical forestry degree in Madrid and had started working for CTI only a couple of weeks after my own arrival. Being more or less the same age, I ended up sharing his bungalow.

As young men and fellow 'whites', we were quickly adopted by Michel, Roger and Julien, whose distinctively masculine style of logger camaraderie and joking advice gradually 'initiated' us to rainforest life. Jens, by contrast, sternly imposed his authority on both of us – although, unlike Pablo, I was not working *for* 'his' company at all. Notwithstanding the suspicions provoked by my presence as an ethnographer transgressing racialized boundaries of intimacy between expat quarters and labour compounds, I was usually accepted as 'one of them' because of the seemingly natural facts of my white skin colour and male gender. Moreover, my closely monitored endurance in facing difficult living conditions ultimately guaranteed my awkward belonging to this band of tough loggers, despite my apparently fragile and bookish appearance.

Despite the many personal differences between Jens, Julien, Roger, Michel and Pablo, they all shared a largely similar 'expat' lifestyle that was constantly reproduced through everyday interactions on the work floor. 'Working in the rainforest' was the experiential basis for the creation of shared meanings, imaginaries and affects, as the ultimate purpose that accounted for and justified their presence. Starting at around 5 a.m. and usually ending only after sunset, work occupied the major part of the day, while evenings were usually spent 'clearing their minds', watching satellite television or surfing the internet before an early night's sleep. The hardships of forest labour and the occasional escape strategies to which its daily frustrations gave rise – such as heavy drinking or reckless jeep racing – provided a fertile setting for the embodiment of tough white logger masculinities.

This everyday production of masculinity-through-whiteness and whiteness-through-masculinity was enabled by a profoundly racialized economy of desire (Hendriks 2014a). As de facto single men,[4] the CTI expats not only shared dirty (and often bluntly misogynist and racist) jokes, but also had fleeting encounters with women and girls from the labour compounds and the nearest town, whose 'blackness' was simultaneously eroticized and devalorized as 'easily available' and 'free for all'. The sexual opportunities the European loggers claimed to enjoy as one of the delights of rainforest life were, however, a direct consequence of their perceived presence as lucrative targets for women and girls looking for ways to realize their own aspirations in a context of poverty. In expat discourse, the actual privileges of whiteness – and their high salaries – were thus mystified as 'freedom', sexual or otherwise, accounting for their career choice to 'work in Africa'. 'Here you can be completely free,' Roger told me. 'You can do whatever you want without others looking over your shoulder.'

But despite the so-called freedom they claimed to enjoy, expats also deliberately portrayed their lives as an everyday ordeal, which entitled them to the 'hardship allowances' CTI paid them to compensate for their exposure to danger and

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[4]Three of the expat loggers were married or had a girlfriend in Europe but they all led 'single' lives in the concession.

frustration. Alternating three to six months of work with three or four weeks of holiday, the European loggers considered each period in the forest as a time of exhaustion that could completely devastate one's state of mind. Concession work was felt to be particularly frustrating because it often lacked tangible results. 'Nothing ever works here!' Julien exclaimed while tinkering at a bulldozer. 'Everything you do just breaks down and disappears forever.' His desperate will 'to change things' constantly seemed to collide with a world where 'nothing ever changes': the roads they built disappeared through erosion, bridges collapsed, machines broke down and – so they asserted – the salaries they paid their workers were either spent on drinking or immediately claimed by greedy relatives.

The ephemerality experienced in their work frequently led to choleric outbursts and blunt racist accusations towards a supposedly all-encompassing 'blackness' that was held responsible for the 'ruin' and 'chaos' in which expats tried 'to make some order'. 'How can we do our job,' Roger asked me, 'when those lazy blacks do everything they can to make it impossible?' In a similar vein, 'white' bosses often blamed their 'black' employees for the many failures and difficulties on the shop floor. The logging company's racialized power structure, which allowed its expats considerable freedom in executing their jobs and firing people at will, thereby reproduced whiteness as a taken-for-granted right to shout, insult and humiliate the black 'other'.

Such racist accusations, however, seemed to contradict expat declarations of their love for Africa as a continent whose people might be frustratingly 'stubborn' and 'lazy' but whose landscapes were of a seductive beauty (Hughes 2010). 'Africa is something out of the ordinary,' Michel affirmed, 'a beautiful place that not many Europeans get to see.' These self-avowed feelings for a continent that – so they claimed – seemed unwilling to truly appreciate their love deeply marked the everyday drama of expat life in the CTI concession. The European loggers' positions of command within the concession's racialized power structure thus produced similar motivations, frustrations, fears and desires amongst them. As illustrated in the next sections, it is from within these shared affective experiences and co-produced meanings that the making of expat selves can be understood.

'White' home-making

Everyday expat life was thus characterized by the deeply ambivalent ways in which the European loggers perceived their environment and their own role within it – an ambivalence saliently captured in the recurrent metaphorical opposition between 'heaven' and 'hell' noted above. While the African rainforest was imagined as an Edenic place for free spirits, its Congolese realities were also experienced as a living hell that was nevertheless 'loved' by expats claiming to be 'addicted' to it. And while the CTI concession was a place to 'get things done' without annoying oversight, it was also an environment where attempts to 'make a change' and 'bring development' generally failed because of the region's supposedly 'black' entropic tendencies. To illustrate how the making of expat selves and the (re)construction of whiteness occurred in constant negotiation with a co-constructed blackness, the following paragraphs explore the spatial practices that made 'white' homes in a 'black' world.

The CTI expats in the concession explicitly considered their homes islands of 'order' and 'civilization' in the midst of a chaotic blackness. Expat practices of home-making therefore comprised the deliberate construction and maintenance of a 'white' space, surrounded by fences, gates and guards that were supposed to keep unwelcome non-white bodies out.[5] I quickly learned that my interlocutors and friends among the company workers and compound inhabitants were not allowed to visit me when I stayed at Pablo's place. Every transgression of such unspoken rules of racial segregation was immediately experienced as an invasion of white privacy and privilege and taken as an occasion to redraw the boundaries between my own presence and people I had grown close to. But despite the expats' emphasis on privacy and the right to their 'own' place, in reality black bodies were constantly present in the supposedly 'white' garden of Eden, not only because of the porous boundaries mentioned above but also because expat home-making was directly dependent on Congolese labour, both for constructing and maintaining bungalows and for daily cleaning, cooking and housekeeping.

The tension between expat desires for a 'white' home and their dependencies on 'black' labour to actually *make* that home was particularly visible in the everyday interactions between expat loggers and their male *cuisiniers* drawn from the labour compound. The ways in which *cuisiniers* carried out their daily chores – cooking, cleaning and ironing – were subject to intense surveillance and criticism. The expat loggers constantly complained about how their *cuisiniers* 'messed up' the expensive Western food that arrived each week by plane from Kinshasa, or how they were unable to 'respect' modern household items – such as microwaves and coffee machines – or 'treat stuff with proper care' – computers, televisions, DVD players, tableware, taps, cupboards and couches, all imported by boat or plane. Because of these tensions, most *cuisiniers* had carefully developed skills for making themselves as invisible as possible, in order to avoid choleric outbursts by their expat employers by literally *hiding* the 'black' labour that went into everyday 'white' home-making.

The awkward presence of the *cuisinier* obviously reminded both the expat loggers and the inhabitants of the labour compound of earlier colonial housekeeping. Such colonial connotations were also reinforced by the architectural recuperation of the old bungalow housing style that used to be a well-known characteristic of 'white' presence in colonial times (King 1984). In the CTI concession, colonial bungalow architecture merged with a chalet style that was reminiscent of the European Alps, in which heavy roof beams, wooden wall coverings and dark furniture evoked a 'European' atmosphere. But this evocation was always inherently

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[5]There is, however, a class element that could temporarily rework such racialized logics. Visiting Congolese company managers from Kinshasa, for instance, were usually accommodated in a small cabin on the edge of the expat quarters for the limited duration of their stay and high-ranking state agents sometimes spent the night in the mess (canteen) for European visitors. Moreover, during my fieldwork, the same mess was also temporarily occupied by Rodrigo, a half-Portuguese, half-Congolese '*métis*' who had arrived to help out with truck mechanics. Although confined to the mess instead of a fully equipped expat bungalow, Rodrigo's stay tainted the exclusively 'white' character of the expat quarters. The Europeans therefore started to avoid his house because – so they claimed – the place had now 'turned into a pigsty'. Being increasingly ignored, the mess was thereby effectively excluded from the space of whiteness until Rodrigo returned to Kinshasa and the temporary aberration could be restored.

limited. No matter how hard expats tried to fill their bungalows with Western objects referring to a perceived home community to which they supposedly belonged, these object signs could always lose their metonymical power and, instead, uncannily reveal their out-of-place strangeness and incapacity to adequately reproduce a 'Western' home in the Congolese rainforest. 'It is ridiculous,' Roger exclaimed in visible desperation when changing his mouldy curtains, 'everything just falls apart by humidity and heat.' Of course, this fate usually saw the blame placed on the *cuisinier* and – beyond him – on 'blackness' in general.

But despite its evident impossibility, the notion of 'home' remained central to expat self-making practices. On the one hand, European homes were nostalgically remembered in stories about the expats' favourite dishes and the villages and towns they grew up in. Such stories often maintained a particular, localized, often rural and idealized form of cosy belonging, temporarily relived during short holiday breaks. 'Whenever I get back to my region [Brittany], the smell of the food and the changing colours of the sea remind me of my childhood,' Roger nostalgically recalled. On the other hand, precisely because of their expat subject position, this idealized home was always far away, unreachable and frustratingly resistant to being reproduced in an African setting. Moreover, despite all the trouble they took to evoke a European home in the middle of the rainforest, the expat loggers also explicitly distanced themselves from it. Home was a place from where they continuously exiled themselves, a place that was forever lost and to which there was no return. Jens, in this sense, represented himself as an 'exile by choice' and Julien claimed to 'belong nowhere'. Like the stereotypical 'misfits' described by Stirrat (2008) in the context of the contemporary development industry, the CTI expats claimed to no longer fit into their home societies because they were completely caught up in a way of life that had irrevocably changed them.

These simultaneous feelings of belonging and distancing deeply affected expat strategies of self-making. In effect, the European loggers constructed themselves as *exiled* men who had fled or left their home to wander around Africa without settling down. And, although they usually identified as Europeans, they explicitly claimed to belong to a disappearing 'tribe' of *African* whites and presented themselves as the 'last specimens of the white man in Africa', jokingly urging me to take a closer ethnographic look at them *before it was too late*.

'White' self-making

The expats' cynical call for a salvage ethnography of their own 'kind' directly brings us to the central argument of this article. Their self-exclusion from a Western home is indeed part of a broader identificatory strategy of *self-exoticization*, a deliberate strategy that literary scholar Ali Behdad describes as a process whereby the self becomes an exotic 'other' that can then be observed and talked about (1994: 75). The expat loggers frequently confessed to each other – and to the anthropologist in their midst – 'incredible' stories about how they had to 'improvise' in difficult situations, having no choice but to temporarily forget the social commands of accepted morality. 'I am quite an interesting case,' Jens told me once while taking me to town in his jeep. 'I am not proud of all the

crazy stuff I did … but I did what needed to be done. You won't find people like me anymore. That's why these days [CTI] has a lot of trouble finding the right men for the job.'

Although there is a great deal of self-aggrandizing rhetoric at work in such stories, their significance lies in the evocation and production of 'dark' secrets through a shared narrative strategy of self-exoticization that was central to the making of 'white' selves. Such self-exoticization resembles literary strategies that often recurred in colonial fiction and were used to produce a *masculine* self that was 'defined, valued and understood', as Anjali Arondekar (2003: 76) phrases it, 'not through its brazen gestures of conquest, nor through its mastery over the native landscape, but instead through an uncovering of its own dark secrets' (see also Hendriks 2014b). It is by sharing secret stories that supposedly reveal a *darkness within* that CTI expats constructed their autobiographical characters as tough guys who are 'crazy' enough to work in such places as logging concessions.

Such self-exoticizing statements and stories directly contribute to the reproduction of masculinity-through-whiteness, albeit a whiteness of a somewhat 'darker' shade. In effect, by presenting themselves as tough 'no-bullshit' men who tried to bring development against all the odds to a region that was supposedly devoid of it, or as 'forest whites' who, in the manner of tragic heroes, confronted the harsh circumstances of the 'real Congo', the expat loggers deliberately created a distance from the supposedly 'soft-minded' environmentalists and development workers who often criticized CTI's hard work from behind their desks but were 'not man enough' to leave the comforts of Kinshasa's expat bubble. While for an audience of Congolese workers the CTI expats tried to uphold white authority by performing a pure whiteness untainted by its dark environment, amongst themselves they frequently confessed supposedly dark secrets that proved their membership of an almost extinct tribe of 'real' men who were strong enough to face the African rainforest – exactly *because* of their supposed 'darkness' within.

But what exactly is this interior 'darkness' that so insistently appears at the very centre of 'white' selves if not that old, trite Conradian double entendre: a characteristic of *both* a racialized world outside *and* a hidden personal secret within? While such darkness was usually invoked as a familiar trope from a broader Western cultural repertoire, at times its specifically Conradian reference was made explicit. Michel, who had read *Heart of Darkness* several times, was very well aware that he himself seemed to repeat the old stereotype of the lonely isolated white man in the Congo. And Pablo, usually referring to *Apocalypse Now* rather than to Conrad's novel, often entered his bungalow after a day of work ironically shouting 'The horror, the horror!', simultaneously parodying his older colleagues and expressing his own growing frustrations. Moreover, the CTI expats often eagerly used this Conradian imaginary of the Congo as the most 'African' and 'darkest' place on the continent to reproduce broader mediatized discourses about the DRC as 'the world's most dangerous country' (Butcher 2009) or as a 'failed state' characterized by 'corruption', 'ethnic conflict', 'postcolonial mismanagement' and 'lack of infrastructure' (Dunn 2003).

Such invocations of Conradian darkness in a contemporary Congolese context obviously pose a serious challenge for every anthropologist concerned about their involuntary role in the continuing reproduction of such colonial stereotypes. But no matter how hard I resisted telling the European loggers' stories through this

framework of 'darkness', my continuous efforts to *de*-exoticize expat life were immediately turned upside down by their own tendencies to *re*-exoticize themselves, whenever they explicitly posed as special 'specimens' or exotic 'whites' of a rare and disappearing kind. Hence, their invoked 'darkness' needs to be taken seriously as a metaphor to live by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), through which they could situate, understand and perform themselves in the current neoliberal moment in Africa (Ferguson 2006), and in enclaves, camps and concessions that materialized an ephemerality that uncannily resembled earlier extractive logics described in Conrad's novel (Hendriks 2015).

Indeed, the old trope of darkness seems to promise, once again, to make some sense of experienced anxieties, operating as a device for contemporary expat self-making practices that captures lived emotions of fear, guilt and desire. In effect, fears of 'losing their minds' (Fabian 2000), guilt about the positions they occupied within extant power structures, and avowed desires to ultimately 'escape from it all' characterized the everyday drama of expat life in the logging concession. In such a context, the CTI expats could not help but confess to one another their own dark alienation. As an incitement to discourse and a specifically 'white' African mode of self-writing (Mbembe 2002), self-exoticization turned one's perceived 'lack' into a resource to (re)build the self. 'You cannot think about all this too much,' Roger admitted: 'The morality of it … it stinks.'

Unlike the 'mercenary' self-image used by some development professionals to mask their moral doubts and anxieties (Stirrat 2008), the expat loggers did not cover up the many frustrations and moral difficulties encountered at work but mobilized them as the very basis from which to forge a new 'white' self. 'Of course it's not right,' Julien told Pablo during his first week of work at the concession, 'but the world is an ugly place. We need to be strong and do our job. Even when we know that it doesn't make a difference.' This self-imposed darkness thus transformed everyday experienced powerlessness into an eagerly confessed craziness that paradoxically rebuilt expat self-confidence and ultimately saved the white self as a controlling, autonomous, male agent in an environment over which it otherwise felt it had so little control. It was exactly by confessing to 'lose' control that the European loggers managed to *regain* some control – at least for and amongst themselves. In everyday relations with their Congolese employees, by contrast, control was directly manifested as a white privilege to command and punish. And the 'dark' secret of powerlessness only uncovered itself when choleric outbursts by expats revealed their underlying uncertainties and frustrations.

Whiteness was thus not only reclaimed but also continuously threatened by the supposed 'darkness' within. It therefore had to be compulsively repeated and reaffirmed. During visits to the logging concession, CTI superiors from the timber company's European head offices often complained that 'their' expat loggers were no longer 'white enough' to operate according to the rules of responsible forest management and the 'good practices' demanded by CTI policies. But while their superiors accounted for such 'contamination' of whiteness merely by way of an enduring exposure to a 'black' world outside, the expat loggers themselves often suggested that it took a particular kind of man to do their jobs: that is, a white man who is sufficiently 'dark' inside.

Such claims profoundly complicate the popular understanding of white self-making as an oppositional process of identification and differentiation in which

the (invented) 'black other' is always defined by what the 'white I' is not, and vice versa. Expat self-exoticization creates a 'dark' drive *within* that unsettles such a clean oppositional logic of racialized self-making. As a deconstructing supplement, this interior 'darkness' sets in motion more complex identifications. The dark interior resources needed to endure work in the rainforest recall a racialized ideal of blackness as a 'natural' mode of being that is supposedly well adapted to a life removed from the comforts of 'civilization'. These productive slippages between a constructed interior 'darkness' and a supposed outside 'blackness' – and the mimetic desires they reveal – illustrate the libidinal complexity of the expats' strategies of self-exoticization (Hendriks 2014a). White male self-making thereby entails a process through which whiteness is constantly reproduced in self-exoticizing confessions of interior 'darkness' that are set within a dialectic of masculine *competition* and *identification* with an objectified blackness. The CTI expats' explicit attempts to outdo their male workers in masculinity – through performances of toughness and sexual prowess, or through the disciplined practice of bodybuilding – could barely hide their fascination for this (constructed) blackness and, thus, their unsaid desires to effectively 'be' black.

Eden revisited

White self-making in the CTI logging concession operated according to self-exoticizing logics that paradoxically reclaimed whiteness through a constructed darkness within. But if one now reverses the gaze, and looks at the expat quarters from the vantage point of the labour compounds, does whiteness retain the same darkened shade? Perhaps surprisingly, several discourses and events suggest that Congolese workers' imaginations of whiteness were indeed profoundly darkened. But, as the following paragraphs demonstrate, this assumed darkness was of a rather different nature.

The 'Eden' metaphor that Congolese workers used to refer to the expat quarters starkly reveals this underlying darkness. At first sight – and as noted above – the expat bungalows were valued as a 'good' place, evoking promises of modernity and memories of a bygone colonial past. As Esibo, an older bulldozer driver, often repeated: 'We used to have a lot of these beautiful gardens of Eden. But they are all gone now.' Representing both a longed-for future and a nostalgically remembered past, the expat quarters seemed to be positively valued. However, beneath this biblical Eden metaphor, as both a foregone paradise and the promise of a New Jerusalem, competing discourses produced strikingly different meanings, directly contesting such positive evaluations and attacking 'white' presence for its 'dark' secrets.

Such counter-discourses emerged in various forms but were clearly expressed in sermons and speeches given in several churches in the labour compound.[6] Congolese pastors and preachers, whose voices had particular moral authority in the camp community, frequently re-qualified this Eden as a 'source of evil'

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[6]I encountered different versions of this counter-discourse in several of the eighteen church communities in the labour compound, but most explicitly in neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

(Fr. *source du mal*) and even the 'birthplace of death' (Li. *esika ya liwa*). They mobilized Eden's biblical ambivalence not only as a place of innocence and peace, but also as the setting for the original human sin that brought into the world suffering, hunger, illness, death and man's necessity to labour. In the dominant eschatological discourse of the compound's churches, this fall of man was at least as important as its preceding prelapsarian innocence, because it set in motion the world's continuing moral degradation towards a satanic present waiting for final salvation (De Boeck 2005).

For many inhabitants of the labour compound, this morally ambivalent notion of Eden not only referred to the expat quarters but also, more broadly, to the widespread image of the DRC as a 'paradise' abundant in natural resources and potentially very prosperous but currently under the reign of Satan and pillaged by 'foreigners' (Li. *bapaya*). The expat quarters thereby directly mirrored what had gone wrong in the whole country: 'white' strangers taking what rightly belonged to 'black' people and hiring 'black' workers to do the job. In a world where trees continuously left the forest to feed a hungry global economy and where salaries did not realize their promised access to that economy's spectral possibilities, the 'dark' side of the 'white' Eden was an everyday lived reality.

This dark underside was also occasionally invoked when instances of bad luck, illness and death were directly attributed to CTI's perceived need to 'sacrifice' innocent lives in a racialized 'occult economy' that accounted for its apparent wealth in circumstances of extended crisis (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). At one time, for instance, many compound inhabitants whispered that the sudden death of a young woman amongst them had been caused by the immoral actions of Michel. According to these rumours, Michel had provoked the jealousy of Mami Wata, a water spirit living near the white garden of Eden, with whom he had signed a contract that would yield him wealth and success in return for sexual abstinence. However, unable to keep his promise, Michel's erotic adventures led to Mami Wata's deathly vengeance. Rumours about similar white sacrificial practices also emerged, for instance, during a population survey that was carried out by CTI agents in the concession, when village after village refused to collaborate because of widespread fears that the company was secretly making a list of potential victims for future occult sacrifices. In the same vein, CTI labourers also, but not uniquely, attributed work accidents in the forest to 'dark' sources of 'white' accumulation of wealth.

White presence in the concession was therefore morally ambivalent, both fascinating and threatening. While the garden of Eden metonymically stood for a Western modern world and played a fundamental role in popular imaginations as an object of desire, it also represented evil and death as a site of satanic influence on daily life. This re-evaluation of the *object of desire* into the *object of moral disapproval* contained a vernacular critique of racial segregation and (neo)colonial exploitation of natural resources and Congolese labour. In this sense, stories about Eden's 'dark side' joined a repertoire of older rumours about the injustices of racialized exploitation in the logging concession: rumours of 'white cannibalism', for instance, that were now reproduced in the labour compound as moral evaluations of the present (Ceyssens 1975; White 2000). As instruments of resistance or 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), these propagating rumours and the everyday gossip they informed sustained a regional moral economy over which CTI had little control. As a collective form of social

action, the telling of stories about CTI's 'dark' exploitation and accumulation produced a tense social landscape in which villagers and fuel smugglers regularly blocked logging activities (through the setting up of roadblocks) or simply refused to cooperate (as in the population survey mentioned above).

These rumours about the occult or even cannibalistic undercurrent of whiteness somehow resonated with the supposed secret 'darkness' at the heart of expat self-exoticization. The deep historical roots of the European loggers' self-proclaimed 'Africanized' whiteness were not lost on the older inhabitants of the labour compound. The latter often compared their bosses *not* to the former Belgian colonial agents – supposedly 'real' whites (Li. *mindele ya solo*) – but to the Greek and Portuguese traders who operated small businesses in the Congolese interior – and who were often qualified as 'false' whites or literally 'pig' whites (Li. *mindele ya ngulu*). Like these traders, it was said in the labour compound, the CTI expats were content with living standards supposedly 'below' their racial status, slept with Congolese women and had spent so much time in Africa that they had forgotten how to behave as 'real' whites. As noted above, this comparison was also regularly made by visiting European managers from the CTI head offices, who imagined their forest expats as perhaps not white enough but in any case dark enough to endure (and enjoy) rainforest life. In both incarnations, 'darkness' indexed the moral unease and gnawing discomfort about the ways in which the current neoliberal moment uncannily repeats and reproduces early colonial power structures whose racialized aspects seem out of tune with the official discourses on social responsibility and sustainable development that informed reflections on CTI's activities by both its managers and its Congolese employees.

Africa, whiteness and belonging

Looking at the construction of whiteness from both sides of the 'racial' divide, the ethnographic analysis presented in this article shows how a surprisingly recurrent vernacular opposition between heaven and hell was used to think about, understand and critique the state of the world experienced in and around the CTI expat quarters and labour compounds. While, from an expat perspective, the rainforest concession was simultaneously a place of freedom, autonomy and adventure, *and* a place of stress, frustration and anxiety, from a Congolese worker's perspective, the expat quarters were at the same time a zone of wealth and abundance *and* a site of dark occult accumulation. This latter 'darkness' was, moreover, repeated in a different guise at the heart of expat self-making practices, which, through a dynamic of self-exoticization, created the dark secrets that supposedly lurked at the very centre of their exiled selves.

This article's analysis demonstrates how 'racial' thinking and 'racial' logics informed and affected the everyday lives of people living in one of Africa's neoliberal investment enclaves (Ferguson 2006). It specifically offers a contextualized ethnography of whiteness: not as an invisible aspect of power but as a *visible* – though disputed – dimension of structures of privilege and control that, despite its internal contradictions and vulnerabilities, still worked in the CTI logging concession. Locked in an ambiguous double bind with 'blackness', producing and taming 'interior darkness', and dealing with suspicions of 'false' whiteness, the

CTI expats in their garden of Eden illuminate the always dynamic relational and vulnerable nature of whiteness and point to its heterogeneity in contemporary Africa. As an analytical concept, whiteness might come in many shades, but – as this part issue shows – it has not lost its heuristic value.

As Pierre (2013: 550) has argued, African studies urgently needs a new 'radical racial analysis' in order to 'analyze the ways that Africans (in former non-settler colonies) continue to grapple with issues of white power and privilege'. The ambiguous garden of Eden metaphor, and the ways in which it resonates with a wider set of narratives and rumours about the dark underside of whiteness, offers just that: a vernacular critique of white power and privilege that can initiate new empirically informed social analyses highlighting the continuing importance of 'race' in contemporary Africa. But who are the 'Africans' grappling with issues of white power and privilege in Pierre's call for explicit racial analysis? Surely one cannot just assume them to be 'black' (even if that is exactly what seems to be suggested implicitly). Together with the other articles in this issue, the present ethnographic analysis demonstrates that 'white' African subjects are grappling with whiteness just as much as their supposedly 'black' neighbours.

But then again, who is a 'white African' or an 'African white'? And what kind of unsaid politics of inclusion and exclusion inform the answers to this question? The CTI expats considered themselves to be the 'last specimens of the white man in Africa'. But is that enough to qualify them as 'African'? I argue that, beyond questions of nationality and histories of (post)colonial settlement, the *claim to belong* to the 'African' continent – albeit, admittedly, in often contradictory and awkward ways – should suffice to take seriously the 'African' dimension of whiteness.[7] The European loggers' claims effectively challenge unspoken assumptions about 'whiteness' and 'belonging' on the continent that are also dissected in other articles in this issue. As exiled and wandering rainforest whites, the CTI expats are a rather permanent fixture in neoliberal Africa. Their self-consciously constructed darker shade of white suggested a profound distance from their lost European home and thereby supposedly indexed their 'Africanness'. Rather than European men merely visiting the African continent, they perceived themselves to be – and told their own stories as if they were – exoticized whites addicted to and tainted by Africa, and, therefore, 'African' themselves.

Acknowledgements

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[7]This feeling or claim of belonging even contained embryonic forms of imagined continental 'citizenship' – another theme in this part issue – in the form of a felt responsibility for the 'development' of Africa and a claimed stake in its future.

compound and the expat quarters where I did my fieldwork. Their textual presence is perhaps an anonymous one but I retain their memories with a great deal of affection, despite our many disagreements.

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Abstract

This article offers a new perspective on contemporary 'whiteness' in Africa by looking at the ambiguous ways in which it affects everyday life in and around the labour compounds of a multinational timber firm in the Congolese rainforest. As a foreign investment enclave, the logging concession is home to a small isolated community of European expatriate men whose 'white' faces evoke a set of ambivalent memories of colonial exploitation in the area. Through a carefully contextualized understanding of how these contemporary expats are perceived in the labour compounds and how they construct their own racialized male selves, this article pushes the discussion on whiteness in Africa beyond the

conventional analysis of (post-)settler identities and whites of African national-
ities. It argues that, as a permanent fixture in the present neoliberal moment but
also as an uncanny repetition of a colonial past, the European loggers construct
and embody very specific 'expat' masculinities whose internalized dynamics of
self-exoticization make them 'African' in their own right. Mobilizing the problem-
atic trope of 'darkness', both in expat self-making practices and in popular narra-
tives about their presence, this article illustrates how whiteness in Africa comes in
many shades.

Résumé

Cet article offre une nouvelle perspective sur la « blanchité » en Afrique contempor-
aine, en investiguant comment elle affecte la vie quotidienne dans et autour des
camps de travailleurs d'une entreprise forestière multinationale en forêt
Congolaise. En tant qu'enclave d'investissements étrangers, cette concession
forestière, gérée par des hommes « blancs » vivant dans une petite communauté
isolée, fait ressurgir des mémoires populaires ambivalentes touchant à l'exploita-
tion coloniale de la région. A travers une lecture contextualisée de la façon dont
les travailleurs perçoivent ces expatriés Européens et de la façon dont ces derniers
construisent leurs propres identités raciales masculines, cet article pousse la discus-
sion sur la « blanchité » en Afrique au-delà de l'analyse conventionnelle des
identités (post-)settler et des Blancs de nationalités africaines. Comme
caractéristique du présent néolibéral, mais aussi comme répétition troublante du
passé colonial, les forestiers Européens construisent et incorporent des
masculinités expatriées particulières qui « s'africanisent » à travers des dynamiques
d'auto-exotisation. En mobilisant la métaphore problématique des « ténèbres »
dans les pratiques de construction de soi chez les expatriés, mais aussi dans les
narratifs populaires sur leur présence, cet article montre comment la blanchité en
Afrique présente de multiples nuances.