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Lara Atkin, “‘Conceive of a Tale of London Which a Negro, Fresh from Central Africa, Would Take Back To His Tribe!’: Exploration and Time/Travel in H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*”, in Barbara Franchi and Elvan Mutlu, eds., *Crossing Borders in Victorian Travel: Spaces, Nations, Empires* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018) pp.86-106.

Introduction

In his late essay *Geography and Some Explorers* (1924), Conrad reflects back on the era of British high imperialism in the late–nineteenth century. He recalls his youthful valorisation of the explorers of the age, the ‘worthy, adventurous and devoted men, nibbling at the edges, attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there.’¹ Having begun by praising what he termed the ‘militant geography’ of conquest that underpinned exploration in the age of high imperialism, Conrad’s tone shifts abruptly towards the end of the essay. He goes on to register the disillusionment that he experienced after finally fulfilling his childhood fantasy of travelling to the heart of Africa, and realising that the British explorers of the fin de siècle were far from being the ‘worthy men’ of his childhood imagination. He describes how having travelled to ‘the last navigable reach of the Upper Congo’ ‘a great melancholy descended upon me’ as he realised there was ‘only the unholy recollection of a prosaic newspaper “stunt” and the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.’²

The man who was responsible for filling the imaginations of young men such as Conrad with romantic fantasies of voyages into central Africa was Henry Morton Stanley. As Matt Rubery has argued, ‘Stanley earned a reputation as one of the era’s most sensational journalists for his correspondence from Africa. These dispatches, appearing in newspapers from 1871 until the end of the century, gave Conrad enduring impressions with which to fill his childhood vision of the blank spaces on the African map.’³ Stanley made three trips to central Africa, firstly to rescue the missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who he famously met at Ujiji on Lake

¹ Joseph Conrad, ‘Geography and Some Explorers,’ in *Tales of Hearsay and Last Essays*, 2nd edn (London: J. M. Dent, 1955), pp.1-22 (p.15).

² *Ibid.*, p.17.

³ Matt Rubery, ‘Joseph Conrad’s “Wild Story of a Journalist”’, *ELH*, 71: 3 (Autumn 2004), 751-774 (p.758).

Taganyika in 1871.⁴ After being valorised on both sides of the Atlantic for this sensational ‘rescue’, Stanley’s subsequent journeys to central Africa were increasingly controversial. Between 1879 and 1884 he returned in partnership with Leopold II of Belgium to develop the Congo Independent State.⁵ The ‘scramble for loot’ referred to by Conrad refers to the exploitation of the natural resources and native population of Leopold’s Congo that had, by the late 1890s, opened Stanley increasingly to the criticism of the British press.⁶ As Felix Driver notes: ‘while Stanley was hailed by the propagandists of empire as a heroic man of actions, his motives and methods as an explorer attracted considerable criticism throughout his career.’⁷

Stanley evidently shaped the image of the ‘dark continent’ in Conrad’s imagination that was to lead him to undertake the journey up the river Congo that was to provide the basis for *Heart of Darkness*.⁸ Yet what has yet to be acknowledged is the direct influence that Stanley’s representations of the Congo and its inhabitants had on the H.G. Wells. In this essay, I will use anthropologist Johannes Fabian’s concept of ‘space/time distancing’ to examine how Stanley represents African exploration as a form of time–travel. In Fabian’s formulation, narratives of exploration operate in a dual temporality: they represent African exploration as both chronological *progression* and socio–evolutionary *regression*. By borrowing this motif as explorer as time–traveller, Wells uses *The Time-Machine* (1894) to construct a sustained critique of the socio–evolutionary discourse that underpinned representations of Africa and Africans in the ‘militant geography’ of explorers such as Henry Stanley.

Furthermore, Wells’s representation of the two pygmy tribes the Time Traveller encounters in the year 802,701 — the Eloi and the Morlocks — draws directly on the tropes used by Stanley in *In Darkest Africa* (1890) to represent the two pygmy tribes he ‘discovered’ in the Congo: the Akka and the Wambutti.⁹ By examining Well’s

⁴ Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (London: Blackwell, 2001), p.121.

⁵ Rubery, p.762.

⁶ Rubery, ‘Joseph Conrad’s “Wild Story of a Journalist”’, p.767; Felix Driver, ‘Henry Morton Stanley and His Critics: Geography, Exploration and Empire,’ *Past and Present*, 133 (1991) 134-66.

⁷ Driver, *Geography Militant*, p.123.

⁸ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.104. For more on the relationship between Stanley’s accounts of Africa and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* see Rubery, ‘Joseph Conrad’s “Wild Story of a Journalist”’.

⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Brian Murray at King’s College London whose paper “‘Stanley and his African Dwarfs’: Miniatures, Metaphors and Manikins in Darkest Africa’, given at the *London Nineteenth-*

representation of the encounters between the Time Traveller and the pygmy tribes of the future, I will examine how he both appropriates and critiques the representation of these 'primitive' races in Stanley's *In Darkest Africa*. In so doing, I will demonstrate how *The Time Machine* articulates what Aaron Worth has termed Wells's 'principled opposition to contemporary imperialism.'¹⁰

'Spatialised Time' and the 'Civilised' subject

In his early short-story 'The Chronic Argonauts' (1888), H.G. Wells first presented a model of what he termed 'spatialised time.' Although Wells did not represent an imagined future in this story, he did outline the theoretical basis on which his idea of time-travel was based. His Time Traveller figure, the eccentric Dr. Moses Nebogiel, explains to his companion Cook the mathematics of time-travel prior to their departure into the future. He claims it is based upon 'a geometry of four dimensions' — length, breadth, thickness and duration. To Nebogiel this opens up boundless possibilities for the expansion of human knowledge as 'we find ourselves no longer limited by hopeless restriction to a certain beat of time — to our own generation. Locomotion along lines of duration — chronic navigation, comes within range, first of geometrical theory, and then of practical mechanics.'¹¹

In the frame narrative of *The Time-Machine*, Wells's Time Traveller outlines to his interlocutors this notion of 'spatialised time', arguing that 'there is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of space except that our consciousness moves along it.'¹² Here we have the four dimensions of length, breadth, thickness and duration placed in the same frame. What is different is the Time Traveller's integration of this concept of 'spatialised time' into a socio-evolutionary narrative in which Time Travel is represented as a signifier of civilisation, open only to Europeans.

If I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instance of instant of its occurrence: I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of time, any more

Century Seminar in November 2010, first drew my attention to the tropes Stanley uses to represent the pygmy tribes of the Ituri jungle in *In Darkest Africa*.

¹⁰ Aaron Worth, 'Imperial Transmissions: H. G. Wells, 1897 - 1901', in *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2010), 65-89 (p.86).

¹¹ H.G. Wells, *The Chronic Argonauts* (ebook) <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0602911h.html#ch4> [accessed 12 February 2016] (chapter 4).

¹² H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.4.

than a savage or an animal has of staying six feet above ground. But a civilized man is better off than a savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way?¹³

In Well's formulation, time-travel is spatialised by being likened to movement through physical space. In the Time Traveller's view, the free movement through time is posited as a possibility open to the 'civilized', European and implicitly male subject, but denied to the 'savage' non-European. 'Civilized' and 'savage' are both spatial and temporal categories: the 'savage' exists in a geographically distant, implicitly extra-European space. Meanwhile, the 'savage's' perceived inability to technologically progress locates him in a more primitive socio-evolutionary phase than that of the European. This clear demarcation between the 'civilized' and the 'savage' immediately invites the reader to attend to the racial dimensions of *The Time Machine*. As I shall argue, Wells's Time Traveller adopts the role of explorer/anthropologist in the far-future, mapping this civilised/savage binary onto the relations between himself and the 'primitive' people he encounters there.

The Making of the Anthropological Object: Space/Time Distancing

In *The Time Machine*, after the Time Traveller journeys out of the nineteenth century, the narrative operates simultaneously in two distinct temporal frames: the chronological and the typological. In order for Wells to represent the Time Traveller's journey as simultaneously a chronological progression and an socio-evolutionary regression, he adapted the model of 'space/time distancing' deployed in the anthropological travel narrative. However, before I examine how Wells adapts this model in his representation of the London of the far-future in *The Time Machine*, it is necessary to examine in more detail both what is meant by 'space/time distancing' and how this dual temporality operates in Stanley's *In Darkest Africa*.

The construction of the white, European subject's journey through the ecology of Africa and other colonial spaces as a journey to a more primitive socio-evolutionary moment was a familiar trope of eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel narratives about the non-European world. Johannes Fabian has argued that in the travel writing

¹³ Wells, *The Time Machine*, p.6.

that documents voyages of exploration into unknown spaces beyond Europe and North America, the explorer/narrator simultaneously deployed two temporal frames: the chronologically progressive movement through *physical time* – the movement of bodies through space¹⁴ – and the chronologically regressive movement through *typological time* – the time of evolutionary eras. This latter framework, derived from developmental biology, reflected ‘a taxonomic approach to socio-cultural reality’ in which ‘real, ecological space was replaced by classificatory, tabular space.’¹⁵

We can see this dual temporality at work in Stanley’s descriptions of the central African jungle in *In Darkest Africa*.

1887, July 12. Bandangi. [...]It struck me on this dull dreary morning, while regarding the silent flowing waters of that dark river and the long unbroken forest frontage, that nature in this region seems to be waiting the long expected trumpet-call of civilization. [...]But withal, the forest world remains restful [...] Nature, despite her immeasurable long ages of sleep, indicates no agedness, so old, incredibly old, she is still a virgin locked in innocent repose.¹⁶

The movement of the explorer through *physical time* is characterised by a progressive chronology demarked in the narrative by the use of dates and place names, foregrounding the forward motion of the journey, even at points when progress through the unfamiliar and often hostile terrain was slow or even static. Meanwhile, the space that the explorer moves through is represented *typologically*, bringing the explorer into a more primitive socio-evolutionary era before ‘the trumpet-call of civilisation.’ Stepping back through evolutionary time is an ambivalent experience for Stanley: the jungle is simultaneously figured as a sinister primeval world– the very heart of darkness that Conrad’s Marlowe was to travel to eight years later¹⁷ – and a pre-lapsarian ‘virgin’ space, untouched and uncorrupted.

One of the most sensational revelations of *In Darkest Africa*, was Stanley's claim to have discovered two pygmy tribes—the Akka and the Wambutti—in the Ituri jungle of the Congo Independent State. In Stanley's descriptions of these two peoples, we see

¹⁴ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p.31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁶ Henry Stanley, *In Darkest Africa; or the Quest, Rescue, And Retreat of Emin Governor of Equatoria* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1913), p.155.

¹⁷ Conrad borrows from Stanley this trope of the journey into the Congolese jungle as both chronologically progressive, and evolutionarily regressive. In *Heart of Darkness* he likens the jungle to ‘the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.’ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.59.

how Fabian's concept of space/time distancing is mapped onto the peoples encountered by Stanley on his journey through what he viewed as the primitive ecology of the Ituri jungle. This aspect of the post-Enlightenment anthropological gaze is referred to by Fabian as the 'denial of coevalness'. He defines this as 'a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse'.¹⁸ Two points are worth highlighting here. Firstly, the European traveller is constructed as the subject and the non-European as the 'object' of his scrutiny. Secondly, that this serves as a dehumanising strategy that emphasises the evolutionary distance between the European observer and the indigenous observee. Central to the way in which the 'denial of coevalness' operates at the level of discourse is through the typologisation of the non-European as the embodiment of the 'primitive'.

As with Stanley's representation of the jungle, his account of the pygmies also operates in two temporalities: the progressive movement of chronological time and the regressive movement of evolutionary time. The pygmies are made by Stanley to embody the 'primitive' through his representation of their bodies as deviations from Western anatomical norms.

4 April 1888 Indemwani. We had four women and a boy, and in them I saw two distinct types. One evidently belonged to that same race described as Akka, with small, cunning, monkey eyes, close, and deeply set. The four others possessed large, round eyes, full and prominent, broad round foreheads and round faces, small hands and feet, with slight prognathy of jaws, figures well formed, though diminutive, and of a bricky complexion. [...]The monkey-eyed woman had a remarkable pair of mischievous orbs[...] sloping shoulders, long arms, feet turned greatly inwards and very short lower legs, as being fitly characteristic of the link long sought between the average modern humanity and its Darwinian progenitors [...]¹⁹

The pygmies of the Iruri jungle are split into two opposing types. The Wambutti, whom he describes elsewhere as 'mankin[s] from the solitudes of the vast central African forest' are 'well formed' and 'diminutive', with finely formed limbs and delicate features. In contrast, the Akka woman is zoomorphised as a 'monkey-eyed', 'almost bestial' 'missing link'. In both cases, they are denied co-evalness with Stanley (and by extension his Western readers). The diminutive stature and child-like appearance of the Wambutti evidence their arrested physical and socio-cultural

¹⁸ Fabian, p.31.

¹⁹ Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*, pp.374-5.

development, while the zoomorphised Akka woman is constructed as an embodiment of the Darwinian principle of reversion.

Reversion and regression: Exploring the urban jungle of the far-future

A key principle in Darwin's theories of biological development was the question of inheritance —how species received and passed on characteristics to one another. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin noted cases among men of 'arrested development' in which certain types of men maintained 'muscles proper to various kinds of apes.'²⁰ These anomalous survivals illustrated a previously unknown factor operating in human evolution, the possible of a 'reversion to a former state of existence.'²¹ While both the Wambutti and the Akka are denied coevalness with Stanley, it is only the simian Akka who are represented as the atavistic remnant of a pre-human evolutionary era, a fact I shall return to later when considering Wells's representation of the Morlocks in *The Time Machine*.

Upon his arrival in the year 82,701, the Time Traveller constructs himself as the anthropologist/observer of the Eloi and the Morlocks. In the first half of the narrative, he attempts to impose and police the boundary between his 'civilised' self and the 'primitive' others he encounters by denying the Eloi and Morlocks coevalness with himself. Wells reinforces this point by borrowing the tropes used by Stanley to describe the Akka and Wambutti in his descriptions of these two 'pygmy' races. Like Stanley's 'mannikins of the jungle', the Wambutti, the Eloi are frail, diminutive beings with 'delicate limbs' and a 'dresdan doll-like prettiness'.²² The idea that the Eloi are not co-eval with the Time-Traveller is seen in his infantilisation of them — he feels himself 'a school-master amongst children'.²³ This impulse to interpret difference as superiority and the concurrent construction of the native as a child in need of instruction was at the core of imperial racial ideology. As Henry Stanley wrote of central Africans in his 1890 autobiography: 'in order to rule them, and to keep one's life amongst them, it is needful resolutely to regard them as children'.²⁴

²⁰ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 68.

²¹ Greenslade, *Degeneration and the Novel*, p.68.

²² Wells, *The Time Machine*, p.24.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.28.

²⁴ *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley* ed. Dorothy Stanley (London: Simpson Low, Marston and Co., 1909), p. 377.

Yet in *The Time Machine* the double temporality of physical time and typological time functions differently from Fabian's model of space-time distancing in one important way — the Time Traveller travels through chronological time but *not* through space. Wells draws on the tropes and metaphors of Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* in order to articulate a fin de siècle anxiety about the resurfacing of the primitive within, an idea which is forcefully articulated through his representation of the Morlocks. In contrast to the Eloi, the Morlocks are depicted not as children or primitive men, but as the missing link in the evolutionary chain between man and monkey. In the description that follows the Time Traveller's descent into their world, Wells's depiction of the Morlocks has strong echoes of Henry Stanley's account of the Akka in *In Darkest Africa*. Stanley's anatomical descriptions locate the Akka on the boundary between man and monkey, living proof of Darwin's principle of reversion. Similarly, when the Time Traveller first encounters the Morlocks he states that he 'cannot tell whether it ran on all fours, or only with its forearms held very low', giving the creature an 'ape-like' appearance.²⁵

This use of the socio-evolutionary discourse that underpinned the discursive construction of non-European races in imperialist anthropological writing to describe a devolved future race in Britain is significant when we consider the class dynamics of Wells's representation of the Morlocks. Wells's Time Traveller's first encounter with the world of the Morlocks is depicted as a descent into a benighted world inhabited by the descendants of the nineteenth-century industrial working-class, whose quality of life had worsened until they had, in Wells's future, degenerated into a separate 'race' which had 'lost its birthright to the sky'.²⁶ The Time Traveller remarks that the working-class had

gone deeper and deeper into larger and ever larger underground factories, spending a still-increasing amount of its time therein, till, in the end - ! Even now, does not an East-End worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth? ²⁷

In Wells's elision of class and race we can detect a discourse in which, as Patrick Brantlinger has noted, 'class and race terminology' becomes 'covertly

²⁵ Wells, *The Time-Machine*, p.44.

²⁶ Wells, *The Time Machine*, p. 48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

interchangeable or at least analogous'.²⁸ As Richard Altick has noted, the metaphor of the 'savage' had begun to be deployed in discussions about the urban poor in both literature and the popular press by the mid-nineteenth century.²⁹ Joseph Mclaughlin has further argued that the popularity of narratives of African exploration led metaphors of exploration to be deployed by journalists writing about the urban poor in the late nineteenth century. He states: 'because the daily lives of West Enders provided little or no contact with the urban poor, they could understand these people and their world only through the mediation of something familiar.'³⁰ By the late-nineteenth century, discourses of class and race converged not only because the subordinate position of the indigenous African in the colonial order was analogous to the position of the working-classes in Britain, but because the popularity of narratives of African exploration meant that the distant jungles of Africa were more familiar to the middle-class, metropolitan reading public than the urban jungles on their doorsteps.

In his use of the metaphors of Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* to make an analogy between class and race, Wells had hit upon a strategy that had already been used four years earlier by William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army. Booth sought to capitalise on the immense popularity of Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* in 1890 by mapping Stanley's metaphors onto the British working classes in his polemic on the subject of the urban poor, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890). By inviting the reader to read Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* as a class allegory, Booth explicitly compares Stanley's 'pygmy races' with the British working classes. Booth begins his book by dramatising Stanley's account.

This summer the attention of the civilised world had been arrested by the story which Mr. Stanley has told of "Darkest Africa"[...]Nothing has so much impressed the imagination, as his description of the immense forest which offered an almost impenetrable barrier to his advance[...]May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest? The two tribes of savage, the human baboon and the handsome dwarf[...]may be accepted as the two varieties who

²⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', *Critical Enquiry*, 12:1 (1985), 166-203 (p. 182).

²⁹ Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.283.

³⁰ Joseph Maclaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot*, (Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p.80.

are continually present within us – the vicious, lazy lout, and the toiling slave.³¹

Booth's introduction to *In Darkest England* presents the industrial working-class as a degenerate race whose moral and social conditions have already caused the beginnings of the degeneration that Wells presents as having taken hold of all of society in *The Time Machine*. The notion that the social conditions of contemporary Britain could lead to the physical degeneration of the racial stock was widespread in the 1890s, with the trope of the industrial worker as degenerate dwarf being commented upon with great alarm.³² Booth also elides the image of the 'urban jungle' that was popularised by narratives of social exploration in the late-nineteenth century with Stanley's African jungle in order to represent the nineteenth-century class hierarchy as an evolutionary taxonomy, effectively denying the urban poor coevalness with the middle-and-upper classes.

Reversing the Anthropological Gaze : The Time Traveller as Anthropological Subject

In *The Time Machine*, Wells complicates this analogy by representing the Morlocks as the embodiments of the Darwinian principle of reversion — a race better adapted to the 'primitive' conditions of the far-future than the Time Traveller himself. In doing so, he destabilises the teleological narrative the Time Traveller attempted to create at the start of the novella by stressing the evolutionarily progressive nature of European society. Yet even in the frame narrative at the start of the novel, this narrative is already implicitly called into question by the Time Traveller's physical appearance upon his return from the far-future. The narrator notes the following.

His coat was dusty and dirty, and smeared with green down the sleeves; his hair disordered, and as it seemed to me greyer – either with dust and dirt or because the colour had actually faded. His face was ghastly pale; his chin had a brown cut on it – a cut half healed; his expression was haggard and drawn, as by intense suffering [...] He walked with just such a limp as I have seen in footsore tramps.³³

Here, the signifiers of civilisation are gone: instead of clean, well-made clothes, they

³¹ William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: William Burgess, 1890), pp. 11-12.

³² As Brian Murray has pointed out, an article was written in the radical *Reynolds' Newspaper* in February 1891 echoing Booth's concerns in response to the admission by War Minister Edward Stanhope that the decreasing stature of army recruits was the inevitable result of the fact that "women are now shorter". The report states: 'There is terrible significance in this fact; it means that the conditions of modern industry having made our working women, the mothers of the people, a race of slaves, their stature has been arrested, and we are becoming a nation of commercial dwarfs.' (Reference from Brian Murray, "'Stanley and his African Dwarfs': Miniatures, Metaphors and Manikins in Darkest Africa').

³³ Wells, *The Time Machine*, pp.13-14.

are ‘dusty and dirty’; his appearance is ‘disordered’ and he resembles a ‘footsore tramp’. In this proleptic moment, the narrative of socio–evolutionary progress posited by the Time Traveller in the previous chapter is immediately called into question. As the tale unfolds, it becomes clear that the Time Traveller’s journey through time has brought him to a moment in which society has degenerated rather than progressed. His encounters with this future society have fractured his psyche — uncoupling him from both the physical time of the nineteenth century and the typological classificatory systems that underpinned his self–definition as a ‘civilised’ inhabitant of nineteenth century Britain.

This breakdown occurs during the Time Traveller's descent into the world of the Morlocks — an episode that forms both the literal and figurative centre of the novella. The instinctive ‘repulsion’ that the Time Traveller expressed towards the Morlocks when he first subjected them to his anthropological gaze in the world of the Eloi ‘Upperworlders’ increases as he descends into their subterranean world. It is significant that the lack of light in the Morlocks’ world causes a reversal of the anthropological gaze through which the Time Traveller had first sought to make sense of the world of 802,701. The Time Traveller realises he is no longer the autonomous subject of his own anthropology of the future, but the impotent object of the curiosity of the Morlocks.

The sudden realization of my ignorance of their ways of thinking and doing came home to me very vividly in the darkness. I shouted at them as loudly as I could. They started away, and then I could feel them approaching me again. They clutched at me more boldly, whispering odd sounds to each other. I shivered violently, and shouted again – rather discordantly[...]I shuddered with horror to think how they must already have examined me.³⁴

The inversion of the temporal distancing effected by the explorer/anthropologist to deny his coevalness with the races he encounters means that not only is the Time Traveller fixed as the object of the Morlock’s anthropological enquiries, but he becomes estranged from his sense of self. On ascending out from the Morlocks’ den, the Time Traveller acknowledges that: ‘Before, I had felt as a man might feel who had fallen into a pit: my concern was with the pit and how to get out of it. Now I felt like a beast in a trap, whose enemy would come upon him soon.’³⁵ In contrast to his earlier zoomorphisation of the Morlocks, it is the Time Traveller who occupies the

³⁴ Wells, *The Time Machine*, p.55; p.58.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.57.

position of a hunted beast in the world of the future. The Time Traveller's regression into the savage is completed when he explains how he battled the Morlocks with: 'only the weapons and the powers that Nature had endowed me with – hands, feet, and teeth'.³⁶

This dissolution is prefigured by a significant moment, after his first encounter with the Morlocks, when the Time Traveller steps out of his own narrative to reflect critically upon this reversal of the socio–evolutionary hierarchy. In a refutation of the visions of the future offered by socialist Utopian fiction such as William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (1890)³⁷ in which the time–traveller/explorer is equipped with the knowledge to interpret the social relations of future societies, the Time Traveller makes the following observations.

Conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe! What would he know of railway companies, of social movements, of telephone and telegraph wires, of the Parcels Delivery Company, and postal orders and the like? Yet we, at least, should be willing enough to explain these things to him! And even of what he knew, how much could he make his untravelled friend either apprehend or believe? Then, think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age!³⁸

This moment marks a rejection of the epistemology of anthropological travel writing in which the explorer/anthropologist assumes that he can position the societies he encounters within the established frameworks of anthropological discourse. In a conscious allusion to Stanley's narrative, Wells uses the trope of the 'negro from central Africa' to construct the Time Traveller as occupying the temporal realm of the primitive in his dystopic future. Instead of the explorer casting his imperial eye over the inhabitants, interpreting their society for a metropolitan audience, he re–casts himself as a 'negro fresh from Central Africa' in London. His inability to interpret the society in which he finds himself represents a disintegration of the self/other, civilised/savage paradigm that structured anthropological accounts of non–European cultures, implicitly revealing the fallacy of such paradigms.

Curation and the Enlightenment Telos: Critiquing the European Progressive Socio–evolutionary Narrative

³⁶ Ibid., p.58.

³⁷ Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), p.42.

³⁸ Wells, *The Time Machine*, pp.40–41.

A further example of the dissolution of Enlightenment epistemologies is when the Time Traveller reaches the ‘Palace of the Green Porcelain’, a gargantuan museum exhibiting material culture from the nineteenth century. Here he finds an immense variety of different objects representing the fields of palaeontology, literature, natural history, and finally a gallery displaying ‘huge bulks of machines, all greatly corroded and many broken down’.³⁹ The Time Traveller refers to these as the ‘ancient monuments of an intellectual age’,⁴⁰ and describes the building as ‘the ruins of some latter day South Kensington’.⁴¹ This last remark alludes to the process of the collection, cataloguing and display of material culture that led to the creation of the South Kensington Museum in 1857, which was founded to display leftover items from The Great Exhibition of 1851. The Great Exhibition was the first world’s fair, and was designed to display Britain’s industrial and technological achievements. For Britain, The Great Exhibition became a means of projecting its self-image as a society at the zenith of social and technological progress to people from a vast array of different countries.⁴² As Raymond Corbey has suggested, the worlds’ fair, like the museum, demonstrates an ‘unlimited trust in Enlightenment ideas and the rational constructability of the world’.⁴³

This belief in the Western man’s ability to create order through classification can also be seen in the Colonial Exhibitions which presented to the public the material culture of recently colonised peoples. ‘The Stanley and African Exhibition’, which took place in London to celebrate Stanley’s return from the Congo in 190, included a range of artefacts, including those belonging to the so-called ‘dwarf tribes’ of the Ituri forest which were collected by Stanley. These included a belt and loin cloth, a fighting axe,

³⁹ Wells, *The Time-Machine*, p.110-111.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 111.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴² For more on The Great Exhibition and its influence on the colonial exhibitions that followed, see John Mackenzie, ‘The Imperial Exhibitions’ in *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984) pp. 96-12. For more on the colonial exhibitions of the nineteenth century see, for example: Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and Worlds Fairs* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Peter Hoffenburg *An Empire on Display: English, Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2001); Corbey ‘Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930’; M. Armstrong “‘A Jumble of Foreignness’: The Sublime Musayums of Nineteenth-Century Fairs and Expositions”, *Cultural Critique*, 23 (1993), 199-250; Robert Rydell *All The World’s A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1870-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition: The Victorian New World Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

⁴³ Raymond Corbey, ‘Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930,’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 8:3 (1993), 338-69, p. 340.

and a quiver of arrows. According to Annie Coombes, items such as these ‘functioned metonymically, to stand for various African societies’.⁴⁴ The stated aim of such collections was to ‘bring the conditions of life in Africa more clearly before the visitor’s mind’.⁴⁵ However, this was life in Africa as represented by travellers such as Henry Stanley, and therefore functioned as a means by which Western man, as symbolised by the figure of the explorer, could take ownership of the African. The ostentatious displays of African material culture in the museums and colonial exhibitions functioned less to educate the metropolitan public about the cultures of the Empire, than to reassure them that they had the right of ownership over the cultures and peoples that were being assimilated into the Empire.

However, the breakdown of the sense that the world can be known and classified is evident throughout the Time Traveller’s exploration of the Palace of Green Porcelain. Firstly, the systems designed to order and classify natural history and cultural artefacts which govern the display of the items in the museum no longer have any meaning to the inhabitants of the year 802, 701, a fact which is reflected in Weena’s failure to interpret what she sees in the museum. In fact, her only interaction with the items on display is through an act of play, which emphasises her infantile understanding. The Time Traveller describes her in the act of ‘rolling a sea urchin down the sloping glass of a case’.⁴⁶ Secondly, despite the fact that the Time Traveller takes a greater interest in the exhibits, pausing to reflect on the intellectual and cultural entropy that has occurred, and the futility of the endeavours of ‘civilised’ man, his mind quickly turns to more pressing matters when he spots the tiny footprints of the Morlocks. ‘I felt that I was wasting my time in this academic examination of machinery. I called to mind that it was already far advanced in the afternoon, and that I still had no weapon, no refuge, and no means of making a fire’.⁴⁷ This immediate shift from intellectual concerns to the bare necessities of survival indicates a regression on the part of the Time Traveller from the position of intellectual and cultural superiority he adopted upon his arrival in the year 802,701.

⁴⁴ Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.4.

⁴⁵ *The Stanley and African Exhibition Catalogue* at The Victoria Gallery, Regent Street, 1890, John Johnson Collection, Exhibition Catalogues, box 24 (77047), p. 7.

⁴⁶ Wells, *The Time-Machine*, 109.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Upon his arrival, his main concerns are philosophical. Immediately before his first encounter with the Eloi, he speculates upon the condition of the men of the future. ‘What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness, and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful’, he wonders.⁴⁸ This comment foreshadows the Time Traveller’s reaction to the Morlocks, at which point the narrative begins to shift in emphasis. His speculations as to the structure of the society of the future and the characteristics of its people no longer dominate. Instead, the reader is presented with a tale in which the Time-Traveller’s visceral fear and repulsion at the Morlocks is foregrounded, which causes his focus to change from philosophical, cultural and scientific speculation, to the necessities of survival. The cultural entropy that has taken place during the millennia which separate his own time from the year 802,701 has left him in a position of evolutionary inferiority to the Morlocks, an anachronistic relic from a distant time whose ways are long forgotten. In the face of fear and disorientation he can no longer adopt a position of superiority, and is forced to attempt to adapt to circumstances that he is ill-equipped to deal with. His failure to adapt is evident as the story progresses, during which his inability to either protect Weena or escape the Morlocks is exposed.

In the Time Traveller’s devolution we can trace a counter-argument against social-cultural evolutionism. Wells’s presentation of both the Eloi and Morlock ‘pygmy races’ drew on established discourses that were used in popular representations of African ‘pygmies’ in other popular cultural forms. In these representations, we can trace a direct link between the presentation of Wells’s ‘pygmy races’ and those recently discovered on the African continent by Henry Stanley. However, by using these tropes to describe the descendants of nineteenth-century Londoners, Wells presents the world of the future as one in which of the barrier between the ‘primitive’ and the ‘civilised’ is no longer stable. Where the spectacle of primitive African customs evident in the ethnographic displays of the period served to reassure contemporary audiences that this barrier was clearly defined, an idea reinforced by popular anthropological travel writing, Wells presents an alternative perspective whereby regression back to the primitive state associated with the inhabitants of the non-European world is the likely future for ‘civilised’ man.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.34.

The challenge this presents to contemporary readers is evident in the figure of the Time Traveller. His initial reaction to the society that he finds himself in is governed by what he defines as his 'Occidental' characteristics. Central to this, is his belief in what Raymond Corbey termed 'the rational constructability of the world'.⁴⁹ The Time Traveller articulates this explicitly in his initial reaction to the loss of the time machine. He states that he must: 'Face this world, learn its ways, watch it, be careful of too hasty guesses at its meaning. In the end you will find clues to it all'.⁵⁰ Yet as we have seen, the more he explores this new world, the less he is able to construct any meaning in what he finds, and the more disorientated he becomes. This process begins with his descent into the domain of the Morlocks, which is figured as a journey into a hinterland inhabited by the atavistic remnant of a previous evolutionary era. His exploration of the 'Palace of the Green Porcelain', with its once well ordered and carefully classified exhibits reverting, through a process of entropy, back into a state of physical decay and intellectual meaninglessness, marks the end of his attempts to construct a rational order out of what he sees. His focus after this point is entirely on his own survival in a hostile environment that confounds every attempt he makes to understand it.

Conclusion

In *The Time Machine* Wells exploits the conflation between exploration and time-travel in order to challenge the ideological assumptions that underpinned European imperial adventuring. His strategic deployment of tropes associated with the representation of central Africa popularised by Henry Stanley allowed him to encode within the tale an implicit critique of the Eurocentric assumptions of socio-cultural superiority that were so central to British imperial self-imagining in the age of high imperialism. Thus Wells's *The Time Machine* does more than just present a dystopic vision of the degeneration of society; by presenting the Time Traveller as an explorer/anthropologist of the future whose every attempt to classify and categorise his observations collapses into fear and incomprehension, Wells is able to expose the myth of the rational constructability of the world which shaped the epistemology of colonial knowledge formation for the chimera that it was.

⁴⁹ Corbey, 'Ethnographic Showcases,' p. 340.

⁵⁰ H.G. Wells, *The Time-Machine*, p.64-5.

Furthermore, by representing the disintegration of the Time Traveller's occidental certainties and recasting him in the role of the primitive African, Wells implicitly critiques what Conrad termed the 'militant geography' of the explorers of the age of high imperialism and which, in the 1890s, was embodied in the figure of Henry Stanley. As Felix Driver explains: 'Stanley's geography was a science of action, dedicated to the subjugation of wild nature; its books and maps were weapons of conquest rather than objects of contemplation'.⁵¹ This opposition can also be seen in Wells's more polemical criticisms of British imperialism in his 1929 pamphlet *Imperialism and the Open Conspiracy*. In this pamphlet, he reflects retrospectively on the manner in which the British Empire had been presented to its citizens during the closing decades of the nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth century. He states:

a whole generation was persuaded that our imperial system, which in reality is based on opportunity, compromise, adaptability, the luck of the steamship, and the obsession of our European rivals with the Rhine, was really a system of high and swaggering conquest, to be sustained by the magic of prestige and developed further and higher in a mood of arrogant swagger. We had got our empire by luck and cunning, scarcely aware of what we did, and we were persuaded we had got it by superhuman strength and heroic resolution.⁵²

In this remark, we discover an explicit critique of the presentation of British imperial expansion as what Wells terms 'high and swaggering conquest', resulting from the 'superhuman strength and heroic resolution' of a few men. In this context, *The Time Machine* can be read as a text which presents a counter-argument against this public mood of what Wells terms 'arrogant swagger', presenting a more critical view of both the rapid colonial expansion in Africa that was taking place in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the socio-evolutionary discourse that helped justify it.

⁵¹ Driver, *Geography Militant*, p.126.

⁵² H. G. Wells, *Imperialism and the Open Conspiracy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1929), pp. 8-9.

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