

Africa in Disability Aesthetics: Engaging the Myth of Representation

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Abstract: Drawing primarily from Tobin Siebers' *Disability Aesthetics* (2012) which is "a first attempt to theorize the representation of disability in modern art and visual culture," this paper questions some stereotypical representations of Africa in Western literary texts. Using Clarice Lispector's short story, *The Smallest Woman in the World*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which both texts presented unimaginable accounts of Africa, I argue that the negative representations of the Africans and the African continent are ideological plots to constantly dehumanize the continent and its people, while projecting the West as the only ideal place and people.

Key Words: Disability, aesthetics, representation, discrimination, myths, Western, disabled, civilization, ideology, hegemony.

"Speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally The African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of human nature. Or when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality" (Achille Mbembe 1).

Introduction

This thought-provoking introduction from Achille Mbembe's *on the Postcolony* draws attention to the ordeals which characterize the Africans in their interaction with the rest of the world. Through these lines, Mbembe calls to question the various stereotypes attached to the African and the African continent. He observes that Western discourses often represent Africa in negative terms that could be likened to disability in various ways: intellectually, economically, politically, physically, behaviorally, developmentally, etc. This negative perception of Africa justifies Mbembe's argument that in Western conception, "Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of human nature." This negative conception invariably implies that Africa could be viewed as a place of disability. Disability in this context, therefore, does not necessarily mean a health condition but a socio-political construct that seeks to devalue Africans and make them appear inferior in Western discourses and interpretations.

Given the notion of Africa as a place of a lesser value system, less civilization, insignificance, poor quality, and invariably, a place of disability, one questions the ambivalent notion of "disability." In an attempt to demystify the term "disability" and take it beyond the boundaries of medical/health conditions to a socially constructed interpretation, Bill Hughes's study is quite relevant. In *Disability Studies Today*, Hughes observes that "The study of disability had undergone a transformation that might be described as a "paradigm shift" and states further that "The social model of disability transformed disability from an objective medical fact derived from the universal body of knowledge as clinical pathology into an outcome of relations of power" (65). Here, Hughes points to the paradigm shift that disability as a term has undergone and argues that disability is now viewed from relations of power. The implication is that a person or a place could be labeled "disabled" if such people/places do not meet some "accepted standards."

This paper addresses some mythological conceptions and interpretations of Africa and questions why the continent is often perceived as a place and a people with a lesser value system, insignificance, uncivilized, and, invariably, disabled people. This label is implicated in the various discriminatory interpretations that Africa has received from some Western scholars and media. A significant part of Africa's problems in the postcolonial era is discrimination. To this end, the label of Africa as a disabled continent is traceable to the system of negative representation sustained in Western discourses and narratives. Over time, this representation has been fueled by Western politics, philosophy, ideology, media, and other constructions. Africa is trapped in the myth of a representation that tends to see nothing good about the Africans or the African continent. This research seeks to question the validity of the various myths about Africa and to investigate how discrimination has characterized

Africa in her dealings with the rest of the world. It also calls to question why the West, in the global-modernist movement has chosen to downgrade Africa, thereby keeping the world and the nations (including Africa) at the level of *imagined communities*.

This paper is broken into three parts. The first part, “Some Myths Portraying Africa as Disabled: A Journey towards History,” traces some of the damaging myths about Africa and interrogates the validity of such myths and claims, especially given that the historians who formulated most of these interpretations had no first-hand knowledge of the people, place, and cultures of Africa. The second part, titled “The Smallest Woman in the World and Literary Projection of a Disabled Continent,” examines Clarice Lispector’s short story—*The Smallest Woman in the World*,” an unimaginable fiction account written by the Jewish Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector. *Tina Sequeria has described the Smallest Woman in the World* as “an unconventional short story that explores our dark, innermost bigotry to anything that looks foreign or alien to us.” The third section, Joseph Conrad’s “*Heart of Darkness* and the Myth of Representation, critically examines *Heart of Darkness* and questions Conrad’s imagination in describing the Native Africans the way he did.

Some Myths Portraying Africa as Disabled: A Journey towards History

Representation of Africa as a disabled continent in Western conception is a myth that continues to impact the relationships between Africa, the Africans, and the rest of the world. Even in the postcolonial era, the legacies of oppression and subjugation that were begun by the colonizers who saw Africans as sub-humans have often continued in the West’s dealings with Africa up to the twenty-first century. The contact between the West and Africa has changed over the past century due to bilateral relationships, education, and globalization. But unfortunately, the attitudes of some Westerners towards Africa, in most cases, still rotate around the axis of negativity. Undoubtedly, some images of and notions about Africa have persisted in some European and American minds and have arguably filtered down through the generations. The Ancient Greek/European knowledge of Africa was primarily based on fantastic tales and indirect sources that were neither true nor proven by anyone.

The discrimination against Africa arguably accounts for its label as a “disabled” continent in the present century. It has far-reaching implications on Africa to the extent that the West sees Africa as alternative modernity. My interest in this study is to examine how discriminatory representation has affected Africa in its dealings with the West and to question the rationale for such negative representations that portray Africa as disabled. In its mythological representations, Africa is seen as a dark continent, a homogenous entity, a place of hunger, famine, conflicts, violence, mysticism, dangers, insecurity, and diseases, among other things. These labels are replete in most works dwelling on Africa and have remained internalized in the West’s interpretation of Africa. This interpretive representation of the African race accounts for the discriminatory attitudes to Africans even in the present era. With the myth of negative representation and its racial undertones, Western racial attitudes towards Africa have moved beyond an ideology to the height of prevalent social reality where deprivations of human identity are at the core of Africa’s representation. Arguably, Africans in most Western texts are treated with disdain and resentment to the extent that they are seen as “the wretched of the earth,” to use Frantz Fanon’s term.

Arguably, the direct contact between the Europeans and the Africans during the Portuguese exploration of the West African Coast should have corrected some of the impressions held by the Europeans about Africa. Of course, this direct contact between Europe and Africa should have resolved some of the myths sustained by Europeans about Africa. Still, unfortunately, this did not happen, as the representations of Africa continue to be fraught with negative images and blatant stereotypes. This section of the paper traces the origins of some of the myths about Africa and seeks to explore how these myths have been modified or sustained to serve the needs of Europeans/Westerners all through history.

Without a concrete, fundamental, first-hand knowledge of the lands and peoples of Africa, the ancient Greek writers relied primarily on tales told by traders and travelers who, perhaps, had visited or had contact with some Africans at one time. Even Herodotus—the Father of History (484-425 B.C)—did not travel to Ethiopia; instead, according to C.K Meek in “The Niger and the Classic: The History of a Name” *Journal of African History*, “he had traveled to Egypt and collected a mass of information concerning the interior of Africa, much of it, no doubt, from Caravan guides, and also perhaps slaves whom he had met at Memphis and Naucratis” (2). As such, Herodotus had no original information about Africa from the standpoint of a participant/observer. This fact should call to question the validity of Herodotus’ accounts about Africa. Given that his understanding of the people and place of Africa is from various unreliable sources, he may have made some distortions that impair

the accuracy of his accounts.

If this assumption is anything to go by, it, therefore, means that the sustained notion of Africa as a place of inferiority and disability is a stereotypical account, as imitation cannot give originality. Of course, Plato argues that “The poet [in this case the historian, since both are social artists] restricted to imitating the realm of appearances, makes only copies of copies, and this creation is thus twice removed from reality” (Adams 11). In the same vein, Leitch et al. reecho Plato’s assertion, maintaining that “poetry is merely a copy of a copy, leading away from the truth rather than toward it” (41). From Plato’s position, therefore, I argue that the history of Africa sustained by the West over time is inaccurate, especially when such history is built on “hearsay.” It is little wonder, Chinua Achebe, in his criticism of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, bluntly declares, “I will not trust the evidence even of a man’s very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad’s” (178). Consequently, the representations of Africa in Western texts do not have a realistic background because these representations are recreated from one Western generation to another as it serves their myth and perceptions of Africa as a disabled continent. The interest of such writers, reporters, explorers, and historians revolve primarily around stereotypes aimed at making the Africans appear less human, less sophisticated, and less developed. Hence, it is common to read many texts portraying Africa as a negative world, albeit without any authoritative evidence. To this end, Christopher Miller states:

Utterances on Africa tend to be hints rather than statements, hearsay rather than direct evidence, allegory rather than realism . . . texts on Africa were severely limited in number until the nineteenth century and tended to repeat each other in a sort of cannibalistic, plagiarizing intertextuality. Pliny repeats Herodotus, who repeats Homer, just as later French and English writers will copy each other and even copy the Ancients (6).

Even though stereotypes about Africans are not true, these stereotypes continue to influence interpretations of various aspects of the Africans’s lives and there is no end to this tragedy of representation.

One of the myths of Africa is that Africa lacks a language. Herodotus concluded that the Ethiopians' "language resembled the squeaking of bats and was unlike any other in the world" (Snowden 105). Referring to the Ethiopians (Africans) as a people whose language resembles that of animals is Herodotus' attempt to sustain the notion that speech is a Western attribute. Unfortunately, Herodotus and his likes regard other people's language as animal sounds because they do not understand such language. Added to this language question is Pliny's similar submission, which argues that the Ethiopian-African-Cave dwellers "have no articulate voice, but only utter a kind of squeaking noise, and thus they are utterly destitute of all means of communication by language" (qtd. in Miller 27). As one reads through these accounts, it is impossible not to wonder what kind of humanity does not have a voice for speech. What kind of humanity can exist without a language for communication? Did God create the Ethiopian-African without the organs of speech? What kind of relationship do we have between human vocal/speech organs and the squeaking of bats that makes the African, what Pliny describes as "utterly destitute of all means of communication." Well, this is the plight of Africa in most Western discourses. As such, Miller argues that "Africanist discourse in the West is one in which the head, the voice—the logos, if you will—is missing" (27). Arguably, the claim that Africa has no language because the West does not understand the native African languages. However, if that is the case, does it imply that despite his enlightenment and knowledge, Herodotus (and his disciples) did not understand that language is people and culture-specific? Did the advocates of Herodotus not realize the essence of *Logo centrism* as enacting ametaphysics of meaning and that knowledge/meaning can only be derived from understanding the systems of speech and communication in use? These questions yearn for answers.

Perhaps, though a Western historian, Herodotus (and his likes) needed to be reminded that language is a system of arbitrary sounds and remains vague to anyone who has not learned the rules of such language. Given that Western accounts of Africa are based on *hearsay*, second-hand information, imitation, and photocopy, it is not surprising that writers such as Joseph Conrad and Clarice Lispector sustained Herodotus’ report of Africa as a place and a people, not having a language. This point will be addressed in the following sections of this paper. However, it is worth mentioning that the denial of language, humanity, morality, civilization, and knowledge from the Africans, were only tools used to perpetuate European plundering and exploitation of the African world. No wonder Aime Cessaire sees the European mission as a dying civilization incapable of solving what they call the “African problems.

Clarice Lispector's *The Smallest Woman in the World* and Literary Projection of a Disabled Continent

The Smallest Woman in the World (1960) is arguably Clarice Lispector's Eurocentric contribution to the old historicist debate of Western representation of Africa. The West has often presented Africa as a place of less civilization, and this notion is manifested in the various ways Africans and Africa are portrayed in Western discourses and interpretations. In his affirmation of the negative representation of Africa, Achille Mbembe observes, as quoted in my introduction above, that "the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*." (1). This negative interpretation of Africa is captured in *The Smallest Woman in the World*, as discussed below.

Given my great admiration for Clarice Lispector, I approached her short stories enthusiastically but soon recoiled upon reading *The Smallest Woman in the World*. The reason is quite simple. The story contains mythological and ideological interpretations of Africa as a place of unimaginable inhabitants. The narrative is patterned after Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and sustains the same theme of the inhuman portrayal of the African. As the story begins, Marcel Pretre, the French explorer/narrator, takes the readers through his journey into the African hinterland and sees nothing but "a world of pygmies of surprising minuteness, smallest of the smallest in the world, among mosquitoes, and trees moist with humidity" (Lispector 88). As if to worsen the scenario, he tells us how he further "came face to face with a woman forty five centimeters tall, mature, black, and silent, as black as a monkey" (Lispector 89). The author's description of "the depths of equatorial Africa" as made up of pygmies (a race of dwarfs, small and insignificant people), mosquitoes, trees, and humidity is in keeping with the archetypal or mythic criticism which sustains the negative labels that characterize not only the African but also the African environment in Western representation.

The author's description is preposterous and leaves the mind much food for reflection as to the extent of its claim to reality, a work published not so long ago in 1961. In 2006, Chris Ballard pointed out the enduring attachment Western writers place on pygmies in the colonial imaginary. He observes that "the mythical properties of the conventions of Western discourses on pygmies have ensured the persistence of these conventions and strategies into the present, where they pervade both popular and scholarly narratives of difference" (135). As such, Ballard agrees that the West has continued in the myth of negatively portraying Africans as pygmies and sub—humans to perpetuate a world of difference between Africa and the West. In his perception, the ideological depiction of pygmies is a product of colonialism and part of the colonizers' strategies in subjugating the Natives to the extent that they cannot rise above this label and assert their individuality and humanity at the height of Western stereotypes.

Moreover, I think Lispector succeeds in joining other Western writers in achieving what Tobin Siebers describes as "representing a marker of otherness that establishes differences between human beings not as acceptable or valuable variations but as dangerous deviations" (24). Here, Siebers understands the tendency to view others with a mark of difference, leading to stereotypes in dealing with them. Lispector employs this marker of „otherness“ in her short story to represent Africa as disabled. In keeping with the Western myth of negative representation and seeing Africans as pygmies, Chris Ballard notes, "the connivance that writers (and readers) attempt to establish with their pygmy subjects can also be detected in colonial racial hierarchies in which Western authors seek to ally their interests with those of pygmies and other extremely marginalized groups, in an assault on other categories of Natives" (135). Here, Ballard calls attention to the colonial politics of race and the attempt to draw a boundary between the West and the Natives. In most cases, writers deliberately fabricate stories that dehumanize the Africans insofar as such literary works catch the interest and admiration of the Western audience and satisfy the writer's stereotypical inclinations.

As unfortunate as it seems, the inaccurate representations and negative images about Africa have persisted in most Western perceptions and have filtered down through the generations to the present. The bulk of research by some Western scholars in African literature and Anthropology has not helped correct the old notions held against Africa. Most of the problems created by labeling Africans as the "other" have not helped to address the identity of inferiority placed on Africa. Again, despite the claim to civilization, the West continues to hold its stereotypes against Africa. To this end, the West has succeeded in creating more problems in their dealings with Africa without attempting to correct the negative impressions they present. In all their engagements, Africa has been deceitfully portrayed as a place of negative things and people. The problems created by the biased representation of Africa during colonialism remain an ongoing concern in the postcolonial era. To this end, in his assessment of the European claim to civilization, Aime Cesaire observes that "A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that

chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization" (9). Here, Aime Cesaire sees the entire European mission in Africa as a failed project. In Aime Cesaire's contemplation of the European encounter, he argues against the label of Africa as a less-superior continent but never tries to solve the African "problem." of inferiority and incivility. What, then, is the essence of the colonizing mission? Besides, what is the essence of a civilization that sees nothing good in *others* apart from disabilities—intellectual, physical, physiological, cultural, and language-wise, among many other aspects? One cannot but wonder if these representations can change despite the sweeping influences of globalization and global interconnectedness.

Added to the problem of representation is the French explorer's further account in "The Smallest Woman in the World." The explorer presents a picture of Africa as a place of dangers, polluted airs, and rivers, deficiencies of food, wild beasts, and savage Bantus, they live on tress, and above all, they have no language but only make gestures and animal noises (90). One sees nothing good in all these accounts but only a depiction of degrading images aimed at creating a disgusting picture of Africa. In the explorer's quest to further deny humanity to the Africans he encountered, he states that they have "no language rather, they only make gestures and animal noise" (90). Dumbness is a disability, and here, it is equated with Africans simply because the French explorer does not understand the people's language. The reference to not having a language is also reflected in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow states, "Suddenly there was a growing murmur of voices and a great tramping of feet . . . A violent babble of uncouth sounds burst out on the other side of the planks" (Conrad16). The French explorer who visits Africa in the story, being a European, "has much experience of life," unlike the Africans who, in Western conception, are regarded as a child, immature, inferior, illiterate, and without knowledge. One can't help wondering the kind of effect or response Lispector expects her readers to have as they read "The Smallest Woman in the World." This worry is significant given that phenomenological criticism of work seeks to investigate how the medium of presentation affects readers and, in turn, shapes their attitudes toward a piece of writing. Perhaps the author expects every reader of this story to join her in seeing Africa as a place not worthy of critical attention.

As the narrative progresses, the image of the smallest woman, as created by Lispector, is revealed in different scenes. Upon taking her photograph, the narrator could best describe her as "she looked like a dog" (Lispector 90). Comparing a woman, a human being, an African to a dog is, to me, the most degrading label that could be given to any human being. On seeing her picture in a newspaper, a woman could not look at her a second time "because it distresses me" (Lispector 90). Referring to her as "it" (non-human, inanimate) is another attempt to deny the African woman a human identity. In another family where her picture is brought, a five year-old girl, after looking at her picture, concludes, "misfortune knows no limits." (91). Again, she is called "the sadness of an animal, not of human" in another house" (91). In another apartment, a little girl suggests they could use her as a plaything when her brother wakes up from sleep (91). The French families that recoil at seeing her picture and the little girl who suggests they use her to play as a toy are simply reacting to their feelings for her, and this sustains Tobin Siebers' assertion that "the representation of inferiority always comes back to the appearance of the body and the way the body makes other bodies feel" (26).

However, I do not intend to dwell on a chronicle of negative representations but to use these few images from Lispector's "The Smallest Woman in the World" to draw attention to various social constructions about the, other and representation in Western discourse, and to examine the extent to which these stereotypes have distorted the African in his/her existence in the wider world. Moreover, to reflect on how these constructions have come to inform the interpretation of and about Africa despite the general claim to civilization and literacy sweeping all over the West. Given this kind of representation, Africa is conceived as a place and people with Disabilities. In "(Post) colonizing Disability," Mark Sherry defines Disability in terms of identity. She contends that "Disability (like race, gender or religion) is not necessarily regarded as a bad thing—it is an identity with both social and personal dimensions, which may be associated with feelings . . . of difference, exclusion and shame" (94-95).

Despite the images representing the Africans in "The Smallest Woman in the World," I appreciate the work, albeit from the perspective of disability aesthetics. In all their representations of Africa, Western scholars and authors have tried so hard to give a kind of "realistic" picture of Africa in a way that their readers and audience could perceive Africa with a sense impression that is capable of leading to a suspension of disbelief while accepting the writer's account as accurate and true of Africa to the extent that this acceptance of the representation of Africa becomes, in the words of Longinus, "difficult to avoid and its memory is strong and hard to efface" (Adams 80). By so doing, the myth of negative representation is perpetuated from generation to

generation as readers of such works are prone to accepting false information that leads them to suspend disbelief.

The many questions raised from this reading include: what contemporary or scholarly relevance is the story? Is it intended to teach morals, values, inform, and educate? These are the elements I think should be the quest of any literary production. If so, how far has the author gone in actualizing these goals? If the story is read as history, how valid is that history? If it is intended to educate people about the African lifestyle, what kind of knowledge can one gain from an uninformed Foreign explorer? Of course, Michel Foucault reminds us that “All knowledge is rooted in a life, a society, and a language that have a history; and it is in that very history that knowledge finds the elements enabling it to communicate with other forms of life, other types of society, other significations” (372). Neither Clarice Lispector nor her French explorer—the narrator, has historical knowledge of Africa.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Myth Representation

The earth seemed unearthly . . . it was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being human . . . they howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was the thought of their humanity (Conrad 31).

In my assessment of the various representations of Africa in depicting it as a disabled continent from a Western perspective, it is necessary to revisit Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, given its canonical position in Western literature. Again, bringing Conrad into context is further reinforced by the similar themes that run through the novel and Lispector's story discussed above. I do not intend to do a comparative analysis of these works but to sustain a point raised earlier about writers and historians who do not have originality in their accounts of Africa but rather build their representative accounts of Africa from what Plato calls imitation of the imitation. Otherwise, how can Lispector sustain the same images in her 1961 story, images already created by Conrad in his novel written as early as 1902? Who is copying who, and which account do we accept as accurate? Of course, both authors claim originality of account, which we know is untrue.

Like the French explorer in Lispector's *The Smallest Woman in the World*, Conrad presents Marlow and sets him on a journey of discovery and exploration. As Marlow moves towards the African hinterland, he sees a race full of cannibals, beasts, deaths, darkness, and violence. He tells us early in the narrative, "A rocky cliff appeared, mounds of turned up the earth by the shore, houses on a hill, others with iron roofs, amongst a waste of excavations, or hanging to the declivity. A continuous noise of the rapids above hovered over this scene of inhabited devastation. A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants" (Conrad 12). As noted by Marlow, the artistic depiction of the Africans' physical, environmental, psychological, and moral disposition is quite fascinating and troubling. Having created this initial picture of disability and incivility, the readers are prepared to face the supposed darkness in the heart of Africa as we follow our Western narrator whose voice we hear and whose accounts we must accept as definitive.

Furthermore, Marlow—the narrator, describes the Africans he encounters as savages, specimens, and dogs (33). He implies they had no sense of reason and direction because “they still belonged to the beginnings of time—had no inherited experience” (36). Again, the narrative is replete with animal references as Marlow informs us, “I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movements . . . I saw vague forms of men running bent double, leaping, gliding, distinct, incomplete” (41). Another hilarious moment in the novel where the narrator does not fail to voice his stereotype of Africans is the moment of reporting the death of Mr. Kurtz. The narrator tells us, “suddenly, the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt—Mista Kurtz—he dead” (64). The making of an ill-formed sentence in his report of the death of Mr. Kurtz seems a deliberate attempt by Marlow to portray the African boy as incapable of correct English usage. This assumption justifies his earlier claims that Africans had no language but rather made animal noises, as in “suddenly there was a growing murmur of voices and a great tramping of feet. A caravan had come in and a violent babble of uncouth sounds burst out on the other side of the planks” (16).

In all these accounts, we notice a recurrence of a negative representation. In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Chinua Achebe laments the degrading image of Africa depicted in Conrad's novel and notes, "The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world" (176). As such, Achebe's concern, and the concern of

other postcolonial African scholars, is the dehumanizing depictions of Africa in such literary texts. Achebe observes that Conrad was only helping to sustain the already-held notion of Africa as the "other" and laments how this notion has become ingrained in the perceptions of most Western scholars/audiences. He reminds us that "Conrad did not originate the image of Africa we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination, and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his mind to bear on it" (180). Here, Achebe reiterates the point of the myth of representation and argues that it is like a given tradition that the West expects her writers to follow in any discourses about Africa. If this assumption is anything to go by, Conrad remains committed to that expectation of recreating Africa as disabled.

This argument quickly calls to mind Ellen Barton's assertion, "Disability also must be defined as a more complex social construct, one which reflects not a benign evolution of acceptance but a dynamic set of representations that are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts" (169). Barton's definition of disability as a socially constructed representation and deeply rooted in a people's historical, cultural, (and by extension, mythical) experience conforms to Achebe's earlier argument that Conrad did not construct the image of Africa we encounter in *Heart of Darkness*; instead, he was and is keeping to a cultural tradition developed by his Western world. The representation of Africa remains an ongoing concern. This concern becomes more pressing when we consider Achille Mbembe's reminder that "More than any other region, Africa thus stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of "absence," "lack," and "non-being," of identity and difference, of negativeness—in short, of nothingness" (4). Although much has been published about the anti-imperialist rhetoric in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, critics such as Chinua Achebe have noted that despite Conrad's explicit critique of imperialism, there remains a troubling and sinister oppression of nonwhites in the novel. Like Lispector, Conrad's portrayal of women in *Heart of Darkness*, though arguably crafted for narrative effect (I suppose), is as troubling and oppressive. To Marlow, the primary storyteller of *Heart of Darkness*, women "live in a world of their own" (10). He notes ironically that "its queer how out of touch with the truth women are" (10), foreshadowing his inability to differentiate fact from fiction in Africa. Like nonwhites, women in Marlow's story are often objectified, as symbolized by the paintings of Mr. Kurtz (21). Again, the two women in the narrative that works at the company office are compared to machines "knitting black wool" (8); Kurtz's fiancée, that is his "Intended" (66), is described as a piece of artwork when Marlow meets her (68-69). Added to this objectified/pictorial depiction of women is Kurtz's native mistress, who is described as a "stately" (56) and "statuesque" (55) "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman . . . She walked in measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes" (55). This objectification of African women is recreated in "The Smallest Woman in the World" by Clarice Lispector. The implication, arguably, is that the African only has the illusion of agency.

Unfortunately, despite the waves of civilization, science, globalization, and other movements worldwide in the present century, eradicating racism/racial stereotypes has remained an illusion. The notion of superiority versus inferiority has dramatically affected the Africans as they are more often labeled inferior, sub-human, non human, the other, savage, cannibal, and many such negative connotations. From the colonial era to the present times, Africa continues to be misrepresented and discriminated against, and one keeps wondering about the essence of globalization and the post-civil rights claim. Benedict Anderson noted that "nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history" (149). As such, racism is an endless and transferred phenomenon that has come to stay insofar as the West keeps sustaining its notions of Africa. In keeping with this ideology, Western writers build stereotypes portraying Africa as disabled in many ways. From this understanding, discrimination against Africa is not necessarily because Africa is inferior, but it is in upholding the mythological view of Africa as a world of negative things, less civilization, and low-class people. This idea arguably supports Anderson's observation that "the dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of class, rather than in those of nation" (149).

The ideology of class continues to inform how Africa is represented in world discourses. Africa has been called "Dark continent" and "Third world," among many other names. These labels aim to give the African continent an identity that keeps it under suppression and repression while the continent struggles to assert itself in a world of discrimination. To this end, Karl Marx informs us that "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles" (50). Although Marx made this as a generic statement in *The Communist Manifesto*, this class struggle is relative to the African existential experience as the continent continues to battle forces of oppression, dehumanization, and discrimination. Class struggle has remained at the center of human existence as the powerful and privileged often oppress the weak to assert their perceived superiority. Unfortunately, the African continent is trapped in this struggle.

Furthermore, the ideology of class struggle and its dividing lines call to immediate attention Jean-Paul Sartre's important statement in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Not so long ago the earth numbered 2 billion inhabitants, i.e., 500 million men and 1.5 billion „natives“. The first possessed the world, the others borrowed it" (Fanon xiii). Sartre's important observation of the division between the East and the West draws closer attention to the politics of representation that has adversely affected the East, including Africa. Dating back to the earliest beginnings of time and history, the notion of the superior and the inferior (the strong and the weak) has remained a recurring phenomenon. Unfortunately, the weak have always been the blacks/Africans. It has always been a case of the first possessing the world (the West, the civilized, the superior, the powerful, the invincible), while the „ others" borrowed it (the colonized, the weak, the Black, the subject, the vulnerable). This ideological divide between the East and West has remained the lot of Africa, even in the era of globalization and civilization.

Conclusion

In *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, James Ferguson states that "Historically, Western societies have found in "Africa" a radical other for their constructions of civilization, enlightenment, progress, development, modernity, and, indeed, history" (2). The dominant status of Western interpretation and definition of the African identity has attained a tremendous hegemonic significance, which has become an accepted reality of the African existence. Given hegemony's deceptive and luring tendencies in Western philosophy, Africa remains an experimental ground for most Western scholars craving stories to tell about the "other." Against this background, Achille Mbembe argues that "Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world" (quoted in James Ferguson 2). As such, the desperate desire to maintain a difference between the West and Africa has arguably given rise to some uninformed literature, such as *Heart of Darkness* and "The Smallest Woman in the World." These works, and others like them, try to present Africa as a disabled continent with its people represented as what Tobin Siebers calls "dangerous deviations" (Siebers 24) from the West's construction of normalcy.

This paper used some history and literature sources to examine Africa's representations in Western literary discourse. The study reveals how the myth of negative representation has, over time, resulted in various discriminatory actions and interpretations against Africa and the African people. Representations based on identity, race, color, ethnicity, and all that, have adversely affected Africa in many ways, and this continues to limit the prospects for Africa's advancement in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, the myths held about Africa are more fiction than fact. This study has established that negative notions about Africa are an age-long tradition that has continued to influence contemporary thoughts and scholarship. The label of inferiority placed on Africa has made Africa a ripe subject for the modern assessment of disability. Here, the African is viewed as disabled not in terms of physical, physiological, and health bases but in matters of literacy, science, technology, and the place of Africa in the Global Modernist movement. The discourse on Africa in disability aesthetics is yet unfolding as representations and misrepresentations of the other continue to influence our very humanity and our acceptance or rejection of each other.

The recurrence of negative representations in dealing with Africa reveals that despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Globalization, the Post-Civil Rights Movement, and the claim to civilization, the world is still at the level of imagined communities far from the ideal. The ideal society, therefore, according to Chinua Achebe, is one that "Rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society" (180).

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