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Tourism of Doom: In Search of Hemingway’s “Snow” on Kilimanjaro in the New Millennium

Like no other American artist, Ernest Hemingway has left his literary footprint on the iconic summit of Kilimanjaro. Hemingway’s admiration for the African region attracted worldwide curiosity. With “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936), Hemingway inspired readers to follow on his heels to face the essentials of life, either by means of an aesthetic transfer in the act of reading or quite literally by hiring a travel guide from Tanzania. Today, you can book a “Last Frontier Expedition” with Hemingway Tours & Safaris, buy “adventure clothes” from the Hemingway Travel Collection, and start your climb of Kilimanjaro at the Hemingway base camp, staying in a “tented accommodation [that] is luxuriously comfortable and spacious with en-suite bathrooms and ... naturally, fully and tastefully furnished,” as the website promises.

Ken Shapiro, editor of a travel magazine, has identified a trend labeled “tourism of doom” which encourages visits to endangered sites like Kilimanjaro’s shrinking ice cap. Hemingway’s short story regains prominence within this new cultural context of global warming, enabling us to ask if and how the reading of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” today could activate an ecocritical attitude in the reader. In addition, one might ask why Hemingway’s African encounters are so effective in triggering a positive response to an unlikely hero such as Harry who constantly quarrels, drinks, and blames others for his shortcomings.

This article will analyze Hemingway’s African encounters by emphasizing the literary strategies he used to authenticate cultural curiosity. This analysis will reveal a hidden frame of false promises played out between urban memories and constructions of an African wilderness. Methodologically, I will combine a Rortian reading of Hemingway’s African encounters with recent theories of ecocriticism. By tapping into the rich resources of aesthetics, ethics, and cultural theory my reading will put to test whether, as Lawrence Buell suggests, the power of imaginative literature can foster a climate of “transformed environmental values, perception and will” (Buell vi).

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Stereotypes and Means of Redemption

Texts can only answer those questions that have been put to them, and they can only answer them “as best they can” (Bode 89). Each generation, however, asks different questions. In the wake of the “ethical turn” proposed at the end of the 1980s, ethical questions such as “How ought one live?” and “What ought I to do?” have been applied to literary texts by theoreticians such as Richard Rorty (1931-2007). Focusing on the interaction between text and reader, Rorty optimistically recognizes the process of reading imaginative literature as a starting point for a revolution or – in more modest terms – at least a change in the reader, helping him to become “a more sensitive, more knowledgeable, wiser person” (“Redemption” 244).

Because Hemingway was such a popular and authoritative figure in his time, the constructed answer to the question “How ought one to live?” (as extracted from his cosmopolitan texts) defined, to a certain degree, the contemporary standard of how a man (of that period) is supposed to live. How does today’s reader – the twenty-first century individual who faces the question “How ought I to live?” – relate to an American writer repeatedly described as chauvinist, racist, anti-Semitic and, in general, an immoral expatriate? And when readers tend to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, between biography and work, how can this question of self-improvement be applied to his writing?

I would like to advocate a Rortian reading of Hemingway’s “African” texts because in this kind of reading the text is not reduced to the status of a tool or a fluid mass that can be molded into any form desired by the critic or biographer. Rather, with Kurt Müller I argue for an “attitude of respect for

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3 The return of ethics into literary studies has been proposed at the end of the 1980s by philosophers such as Rorty, Eldridge or Nussbaum. In literature, scholars such as Booth and Harpham have been crucial in re-introducing ethics to literary analysis.

4 See Aiken 4, Lynn 242 ff., and Fiedler (65-117).

5 If the ongoing concern with ethics is indeed what Theo D’haen calls in Freudian terms “the return of the repressed” (195), the question of what is fresh and productive in the current debate remains. More concretely: what kind of new insight can be gained from Hemingway’s African writings? After postmodernism’s non-functional and playful approach to literature in the laboratory of literary criticism it comes as no surprise that the pendulum swings in a different direction where a renewed interest in the outside world unavoidably leads to a discussion of moral issues. Literary scholars, however, should not work, in the words of Patrick Parrinder, “in an artistic vacuum” when they proclaim yet another “theoretical revolution” (13). When in close contact with literary objects, theory and criticism can be used as tools to illuminate ethical concerns.

6 To apply a Rortian approach to Hemingway’s African encounters, the critic needs to overcome the powerful psychoanalytic paradigm introduced by Philip Young more than fifty years ago. According to Young’s so-called “wound theory,” Hemingway’s life and art were motivated by the trauma of his injuries in World War I. With this psychological construct, Young is able to identify a recurring “code hero” who displays “grace under pressure” as he adheres to a discipline of honor and courage. In a “life of tension and pain” these principles “make a man a man and distinguish him from the people who fol-
the aesthetic autonomy of the work of art” (“Modernist” 318). In the case of Hemingway, this requires us to free ourselves from the stereotypes Hemingway’s biographers have heaped onto the protagonists of his fiction. Following Winfried Fluck’s and Wolfgang Iser’s reception aesthetics, I will apply an ethics of reading, combining it with Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatic theory of reading in order to re-evaluate the literary figure of Harry in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” This approach generates a number of new questions regarding Hemingway’s oeuvre.

According to Rorty, novels offer a “means of redemption from self-satisfaction” (qtd. in “Der Roman” 49). Instead of only asking how something is said in order to trace back the moral effect in the reader’s response, I ask how the protagonists interact with and within their cultural environment. It will become quite apparent that Hemingway’s protagonists are not only incurious and inattentive “to anything irrelevant to [their] obsession about their cruelty towards other people” (Rorty, Contingency 163). They also tend to be oblivious towards cultural encounters in Austria, France, Italy, Spain, or various regions in Africa. A critical scrutiny of the protagonists’ self-centeredness in Hemingway’s African writings will lead the reader to a heightened awareness of cultural differences. What implications does such a reading hold for interpreting transcultural encounters? This question seems to me also relevant to Rorty’s effort to focus on cultural incuriosity and its ethical implications. In such an investigation, imaginative literature can play a key role. Rorty’s concept of the “liberal ironist,” who has “continuing doubts” about his means of expression and communication (Contingency 73), challenges the reader to question the self-stylizations of, for example, the code heroes in Hemingway’s African stories. Thus, cultural environments in both fiction and the reader’s personal sphere become interlinked. From this perspective, literature holds an ethical potential to make us more sensitive to our fellow creatures as well as to the environment.

It is by causing us to rethink our judgments of particular people that imaginative literature does most to help us break with our own pasts. The resulting liberation may, of course, lead one to try to change the political or economic or religious or...

7 In “Humiliation and Solidarity,” Rorty accused those American fellow-citizens who supported President Bush’s war against Iraq of being incurious regarding global issues. With Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, Rorty agrees that Europe must counterbalance the American hegemony in order to strive for a global confederation. He calls on Europe to activate a kind of idealism that America has lost. Namely, to create a cosmopolitan order based on the international law (Völkerrecht) and to defend that idealism against competing agendas. This might also be a starting point for a critical approach to Frederic Henry’s fight for the Italian war effort in World War I in A Farewell to Arms (1929) or Robert Jordan’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 in For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940).
philosophical status quo. Such an attempt may begin a lifetime of effort to break through the received ideas that serve to justify present-day institutions. But it also may result merely in one’s becoming a more sensitive, more knowledgeable, wiser person. (“Redemption” 244)

In the following pages, I will trace back various aspects of cultural (in)curiosity in Hemingway’s African encounters to reveal the potential of a Rortian reading. Instead of trying to counter-balance the familiar image of Hemingway as the ethnocentric, white racist and male chauvinist, I would like to emphasize a hidden discourse on cultural indifference ingrained in Hemingway’s African stories.

Cultural (In)Curiosity

In “Snows of Kilimanjaro,” Hemingway tells the story of Harry, an American writer, and his wife, Helen, who go on a hunting safari in East Africa. Due to an infection in his leg, Harry faces death. While Harry and Helen wait for a rescue plane, past events of Harry’s life unfold before his inner eye, revealing the critical self-reflection of a celebrated author on the loss of his artistic stamina. Harry quarrels with his wife in order to blame her, her money, and their excessive drinking for his stifled creativity and feeling of “emascula-
tion.” Helen is cast as “this rich bitch, this kindly caretaker and destroyer of his talent” (60). Memories of the “dark continent” represent the happiest days of their lives (probably a period of love and creativity). The dialogues with Helen reveal the motivation for going to Africa: to enable the writer whose work has become as “rotten” as his infected wound to “work the fat off his soul” (60). Facing death, Harry remembers several stories he would have liked to write. Set apart by italics, these vignettes exemplify Harry’s artistic talents to the reader.

Biographers and scholars have repeatedly pointed out the close correlation between Harry’s self-condemnation and Hemingway’s own increasing anxieties about his drinking, his status as a writer, and his literary fame: the critics had mostly disliked his recent Death in the Afternoon (1932) and had “killed” Green Hills of Africa (1935; see Selected Letters 426). Jeffrey Meyers quotes Hemingway’s depressed statement of January 1936, expressing fears of “impotence, inability to write, insomnia” and suicide, and argues that this, combined with the “violent and bitter break with Jane [Mason] in April 1936” led to misogynist feelings (252). Feminist discourse has also used the two African stories to shed light on Hemingway’s own personality. Rena Sander-
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son, for example, argues that with these fictive “bitches” (Margot and Helen), Hemingway is “attacking not only or primarily the woman but rather male passivity and dependence on women – traits he found in himself” (185). The Harry/Hemingway identification has been so strong that Hemingway biographer Kenneth Lynn even suggested that Hemingway used the short story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” as a means to rehearse his own future death and its aftermath (431). This enduring emphasis on psychology and biography shows that issues of place and the dichotomy of city and nature, featured so prominently in the flashbacks, have hardly been addressed. The matters of cultural (in)curiosity in the African stories, as well as the discrepancy between Harry’s rhetoric about the healing powers of Africa and his status as a tourist, have also been neglected.

Wilderness, Urban Life, and African Encounters

In “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” the American artist seeks a sense of transcendent harmony. For him (as well as for the leopard), the rhetorical evocation of a sacred, mythic wilderness outside the American historical context comes at a price: death. In his African narratives, Hemingway transfers the American concept of “wilderness” (as a constructed textual entity) to the African continent and blends it with elements of the frontier myth.9 Harry embodies the traditional frontiersman who, in the sense of Richard Slotkin, allegedly escaped “from civilization and its discontents” (Slotkin 86) driven by his love for the spirit of the wilderness. However, the construction of wilderness in Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” reproduces the very values and social situation from which Harry tried to escape. Harry hopes that “Africa” and “Kilimanjaro” will cure his literary flabbiness, but the all-too familiar quarrels with his wife - an integral part of his tense, over-modernized life-style in various cities in Europe - come back to haunt him.10 His memories of those cities, and of his life in those cities (exemplified in the flashbacks) also keep him from opening his senses to the African environment.

The epigraph of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” offers an entry into Hemingway’s concept of wilderness and the literary construction of his African encounters. Critics have juxtaposed the “dried and frozen carcass” of the leopard with Harry’s rotting leg (e.g., Waldhorn 145) and have generally agreed that there is a parallel between the impulse which spurred the leopard’s search and the artist’s drive to reach the unattainable. Moral and artistic

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9 Of course, Harry is no modern day Daniel Boone or carrier of myth-narratives about the process of leaving the imprints of civilization on the ‘untouched’ American soil. However, Harry recreates the excitement of facing natural forces, overcoming ‘wilderness,’ and laying claim on Kilimanjaro – if only for himself.

10 Eco-historian William Cronin has equated “wilderness” with a “flight from history” and an “escape from responsibility” (484-485).
corruption, the metaphor of the rotten body, the vultures, and the hyena form a chain of motifs bespeaking mortality, decay, and death (Müller, Der Mensch 123), against which the story has been hailed as a positive symbol of the artist exorcising his inner demons through his own imagination and his striving for perfectibility. I would like to undermine this assumption by unmasking the drama of cultural indifference which has been part of other transcultural encounters in books such as The Sun Also Rises (1926), Death in the Afternoon (1932), and Green Hills of Africa (1935) - a drama of cultural indifference that culminates in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

The epigraph suggests a keen interest in a particular geographic location, as well as familiarity with the religious beliefs of the Masai and with their language. "Kilimanjaro is a snow-covered mountain 19,710 feet high, and is said to be the highest mountain in Africa. Its western summit is called the Masai ‘Ngâje Ngâi,’ the House of God. Close to the western summit there is the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude" (52). From this, two questions emerge:

First, how thorough is Hemingway’s interest in the cultural “other”? Hemingway might simply have taken the information on Kilimanjaro from Samler A. Brown’s The South and East African Year Book (published in 1933), which was in his personal library in Key West (Brasch and Sigman 336). One passage provides almost verbatim the information Hemingway used for his epigraph. It says that “Kibo, the western summit, is called by the Masai ‘Ngâje Ngâi’ the House of God. The highest point of this summit was first reached by Prof. Hans Mayer and Ludwig Purtscheller in 1889” (Brown 307). Other elements might also, and just as easily, have been gleaned from contemporary publications. The reference to the leopard, for instance, might have been taken from an article which the English mountaineer Donald Latham wrote for the Geographical Journal in December 1926 entitled "Kilimanjaro." Latham is the one who discovered the mummified corpse of a leopard. He wrote that a “remarkable discovery was the remains of a leopard, sun-dried and frozen, right at the crater rim. The beast must have wandered there and died of exposure” (qtd. in Stewart 87). The spot later became known as ‘Leopard Point.’ In terms of content, then, the information presented in the epigraph was easily obtainable from contemporary sources, and does not, as is often assumed, indicate that Hemingway had intimate knowledge of or sympathy for local languages, beliefs, or geography.

A second question is: what creative strategies are used to introduce the reader to the exotic locale? Hemingway brings together several stylistic ele-

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11 The final scene leads Harry to the “House of God,” the summit of Kilimanjaro and, despite its dream-like quality, allows him to have a triumphant epiphany. Critics over-emphasized the elaborate psychological struggle and dramatic power which Hemingway derives from dissolving the orderly pattern of chronological time and the fragmented memories interspersed as interior monologues throughout the story. Here, the reader gets a glimpse of Harry as a man of “undeniable sensitivity, passionately alive to people, places and experience” (Waldhorn 145).
ments (including journalism, guidebook information, and poetic reduction) which are important for a successful aesthetic transfer with imaginations of “Africa” at the center. The literary products of these discourses have been part of Hemingway’s oeuvre since his Paris years, when he struggled to access another culture, become immersed in it, and then exploit it for creative purposes. Hemingway prided himself on being a connoisseur of French culture, and the American tourist industry has accepted him as such, issuing guidebooks to Hemingway’s Paris, its bars, drinks and cuisine. The text of his first Paris-based book, however, offers many clues to reveal the superficiality of this French-American ‘love affair.’ For example, in an ironic performance of notoriously conservative moralists, Bill teaches Jake about the moral fallout of being an expatriate: such a person is in limbo, out of touch with his home country, unable to grow roots, escaping from one alien nation to another. “You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil […] You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés.” Jake’s response reveals a cynic approval of such a lack of cultural communication and curiosity: “It sounds like a swell life” (The Sun Also Rises 115).

In that novel, the European continent served as a metaphor for being dislocated. Later, “Africa” becomes another literary objet trouvé which Hemingway used for similar purposes. In this he is not alone. Particularly since the Harlem Renaissance, American flâneurs, flappers, intellectuals, and artists have fantasized about African culture as a rich reservoir of tropes, ideas, and imaginary spaces which might inject American modernism with a stimulating dose of energy. Alain Locke’s founding document of the Harlem Renaissance, the anthology The New Negro: An Interpretation (1925), Langston Hughes’s blues poetry, Paul Robeson’s iconic embodiment of the leading role in Eugene O’Neill’s drama Emperor Jones (1920), Aaron Douglas’s murals on Aspects of Negro Life (1934-36), and a host of jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, and Louis Armstrong catered to white fantasies about the African jungle, primitivism, and the allegedly authentic vitality of anti-urban, pre-civilized forms of life. Cole Porter’s song, “Find me a Primitive Man,” points both towards the jazz craze and the obsession with fantasies of primitivist modernist art. The reference to Cole Porter’s popular musical comedy Fifty Million Frenchmen (1929) set in Paris reminds Harry of his own failures to come close to “the real thing” – a trope Hemingway introduced as

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12 As Lemke points out, Hemingway worked the white fascination with “primitivist modernism” into the protagonist Catherine in The Garden of Eden (1986). When Catherine tries to make herself “darker and darker” she tries to achieve two purposes: to distinguish herself from other white people in her social surroundings, and to become more sexually attractive to her husband. With reference to Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark it becomes clear that the underlying function of such references to blackness and the fictional fabrication of a black persona becomes a projection of “white desire and fear” (Lemke 10).
a goal of all artistic endeavors in *Death in the Afternoon* (2), published in 1932 before he left for his African safari the following year.

Not surprisingly, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” uses *The Sun Also Rises* (the quintessential story of the American fantasy of and fascination with Paris) as a metatext. Having explored various spaces and places all across Europe, Harry tries to tap into the vaunted African energy promoted by the American mass media in the wake of the mass migration of African-Americans from the southern states to the North, in the second part of the 19th century, and particularly in the immediate aftermath of World War I. That migration invested the metropolitan city in the North with a glorious whiteness that became a symbol of freedom in the African American imagination – as can be seen, for example, in Douglas’s idealized “the City” (see figure 1), which places factories and skyscrapers on the square top of a hill from which light radiates to the aspiring people in the lower spheres. In an ironic turn, Hemingway invested the image of the highest mountain in Africa with a similar mythological whiteness, turning it into a place of redemption for white urban travelers. Hemingway seems to return to the metaphysical framework of the African setting which informed Douglas’s artistic vocabulary. While Douglas emphasizes education and work as a means for African Americans to move from bondage to urban freedom, Hemingway places a literate but unproductive urban dweller at the foot of the highest African mountain.

**The Changing Function of “Africa”**

In the 1920s, European towns evolved as a trope and escapist landmark for young American artists looking for affordable entertainment, amusement, and transatlantic adventures. The allegedly primitive world of “Africa” held similar promises for wealthy travellers. Hemingway’s fascination with traveling into exotic countries and big game hunting follows Theodore Roosevelt’s popular travel account, *African Game Trails*, which popularized the notion of “Africa” as a new frontier for Americans and which Hemingway owned (Brasch and Sigman 318). After seeing the snowy summit of Kilimanjaro, Roosevelt envisaged “Africa” as a kind of New World “of high promise for settlers of white race” (30). Hemingway was equally impressed with the

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13 Douglas’s murals *Aspects of Negro Life* on which he worked since 1933 were exhibited at the Texas World Fair at the same time Hemingway’s two famous short stories about his African encounters appeared.

14 The book’s subtitle, *An Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-Naturalist*, resonates with the notion that by the beginning of the 20th century, adventurers, explorers, and other culturally curious intellectuals would find challenges in Africa similar to those encountered by the early discoverers of the New World such as Columbus or Vasco da Gama. Roosevelt claimed that in British East Africa Americans might encounter the “spectacle of a high civilization all at once thrust into and superimposed upon a wilderness of savage men and beasts” (1).
promise of a new and vast country. However, for Hemingway’s protagonist the African encounter proves to be more ambivalent.

For Harry, “Africa” functions as an antidote to the enervating and finally destructive rich (American) people with whom he has been spending most of his time: “Africa was where he had been happiest in the good time of his life, so he had come out here to start again” (“Snows” 59). Where does this satisfaction with Africa come from? One is tempted to argue that the intricacies of hunting, the African wildlife, the exotic landscape, the many tribes with their specific cultural practices, languages, and music provided a rich source of inspiration, a fine antidote to the deadening habits and decorum of the nouveaux riches from which he had escaped. But Harry seems less concerned with these matters than with his own well-being. Like a boxer training for the next season, he simply chose a remote location to try to regain his original fitness. To be sure, the safari was initiated with “the minimum of comfort” as Harry indicates in one of his inner monologues (“Snows” 60). Nevertheless, he ad-
mits that “There was no hardship” either (60). Hemingway puts special emphasis on Harry’s well-being and comfort, mentioning the “personal boy” constantly at his disposal to fulfil every wish (59). Harry and Helen display imperialistic attitudes towards their African companions – and not cultural curiosity. The reader, as Debra Moddelmog has pointed out, easily becomes complicit in the colonial relationship and attitude of domination and subjugation (136).

Language functions as a tool to define the geographic and cultural environment. However, like Jake in Paris, Hemingway’s Harry is unfamiliar with the local language.\(^{15}\) This language barrier marks Harry as a cultural outsider who has mastered only those key words necessary for issuing commands to his Masai guides and carriers. What holds true for American visitors to Paris also applies to wealthy adventurers who book a hunting trip to Africa: “if suitable chosen, all the attendants will speak English,” as a recent guide to Africa (ungrammatically) assures its would-be customers. Indeed, a glossary of places and vernacular expressions for Hemingway’s writings set in Africa would be quite short. In “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” the vocabulary appears most often when Harry orders alcoholic beverages:

“Molo!” he shouted.
“Yes Bwana.”
“Bring whiskey-soda.”
“Yes Bwana.” (“Snows” 54)

Although the next line suggests moral ambiguity (his wife critically remarks “You shouldn’t”), it becomes quite clear that her remark does not refer to his bullying attitude or his shouting at the servants. Instead, she is concerned about the amounts of alcohol Harry consumes.

Harry appears as a discontented racist and chauvinist who does not engage with the environment in any way. Instead of looking around him, Harry constantly ponders the past, recalling other places that he would have loved to immortalize in his fiction. The African setting never appears to hold any potential for an unwritten story. And his wife, despite her repeated insistence that she, too, “loved Africa” (62), shares her husband’s attitudes, up to and including his penchant for drink (which she has criticized): “’Molo, letti dui whiskey-soda!’ she called” (63). Neither one of them recognizes their own or each other’s disconnectedness from the African socio-cultural and natural environment.\(^ {16}\) Instead, they spend most of their time arguing about themselves and their relationship and soothing their spirits with alcohol.

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\(^{15}\) I have pointed out the linguistic barriers in more detail in my article “’You don’t know Paris!’ Cultural Indifference” (337-360).

\(^{16}\) Mayer has detailed how Hemingway fashions a seemingly authentic travel experience into an African fantasy. Regarding the main protagonist in “The Short Happy Life,” she reconnects the white male with Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan of the Apes and thus strips Hemingway’s story of its realist African setting (248).
As Harry starts to realize, the promise of authenticity on a big hunt safari turns out to be both a false promise of the American tourist industry and a personal lie. “It was not so much that he lied as that there was no truth to tell. He had had his life and it was over and then he went on living it again with different people and more money, with the best of the same places, and some new ones” (59). “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” exemplifies the repetition of the same superficiality and lack of authentic cultural contacts in the flashbacks. “Africa” is yet another place which evokes, if anything, the same old set of emotional responses Harry had already experienced in his urban flashbacks. Thus, the juxtaposition of an “imaginary heaven” with an “African hell,” as Richard B. Larsen recently argued (45), does not really apply to the story. Hemingway’s “Africa” is as esoteric as the construction of a Christian heaven. Paradoxically, this African safari story is dominated by narratives set in non-African urban settings.

The clever plot device of presenting Harry’s memories of other, better times allows Hemingway to introduce five striking vignettes, all of them set outside Africa. While any of the places mentioned in the flashbacks (Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Turkey and Spain) might serve as a foil, the prominent position of Paris is remarkable. The couple’s connection to Paris was established even before the first flashback, when Helen emphasizes the dissimilarities between their common time in Paris and the experience of being paralyzed at the foot of the Kilimanjaro:

“You never would have gotten anything like this in Paris. You always said you loved Paris. We could have stayed in Paris or gone anywhere. I’d have gone anywhere. I said I’d go anywhere you wanted. If you wanted to shoot we could have gone shooting in Hungary and been comfortable.” (“Snows” 54)

Hemingway elaborates on the metaphor of snow first introduced in the epigraph when Harry refers to the “snow on the mountains in Bulgaria,” the snow on Christmas day in Schrunz which “was so bright it hurt your eyes, or the “rush of running powders-snow on crust” in Bludenz (55-56). In the end, however, Harry’s mind returns to Paris. ”’Where did we stay in Paris?’ he asked the woman who was sitting by him in a canvas chair, now, in Africa” (57). As if to remind the reader that the story is not set in Paris, Hemingway re-introduces “Africa.” While referring to the entire continent, the term functions as a trope to evoke remoteness from western civilization. Paris epitomizes the dream of civilization gone right from an American perspective.

H.L. Mencken noted that despite extensive travels and academic credentials American intellectuals abroad are “far too dull […] to undertake so difficult an enterprise” as learning the foreign language (40). The same is true for Harry in Africa, where he is also and again a cultural outsider who describes the places he visits as if he were looking at a kitschy postcard retouched with bright colors. Consider his memory of Parisian street life:

you could not dictate the Place Contrescarpe where the flower sellers dyed their flowers in the street and the dye ran over the paving where the autobus started
and the old men and the women, always drunk on wine and bad marc; and the children with their noses running in the cold; the smell of dirty sweat and poverty and drunkenness at the Café des Amateurs and the whores at the Bal Musette they lived above. The Concierge who entertained the trooper of the Garde Republican in her loge, his horse-hair-plumed helmet on a chair. (69)

This trip down memory lane to Paris is followed by a reference to the successful American songwriter Cole Porter, who turned American escapist fantasies into hit Broadway plays: “Cole Porter wrote the words and the music. This knowledge that you’re going mad for me” (“Snows” 71), Harry explains to Helen. Like Harry, Porter was a regular in the Café Society of Paris in the 1920s. In his 1929 “musical comedy tour of Paris” called Fifty Million Frenchmen, he tellingly wrote of American tourists and expatriates that they claim knowledge of Paris without having established any real ties with their cultural environment:

You come to Paris, you come to play;  
You have a wonderful time, you go away.  
And, from then on, you talk of Paris knowingly;  
You may know Paris, you don’t know Paree. (Porter 344)

The fourth flashback follows the reference to Porter and begins with a revealing insight: “No, he had never written about Paris. Not the Paris that he cared about. But what about the rest that he had never written?” (71). The well-constructed paradox sets up the dichotomy between writing about a cultural experience and at the same time admitting that it is based on the perspective of a cultural outsider. Earlier, Harry had talked about the return of his creative strength identifying the feeling as an illusion. His abilities to write about “Paris” or “Africa” respectively emerge as a white lie which allows him to continue working. “If he lived by a lie he should try to die by it” (45), Harry explains regarding his artistic talents. This reference foreshadows the rescue scene, which takes him closer to Mount Kilimanjaro. The one scene in which he finally hopes to attain a sense of purity and a sensuous overflow of powerful feelings turns out to be a hallucination of the dying artist. In a way, it is yet another lie of the writer when he continues the narration after his own death. In addition, the reader becomes the victim of a literary trick, which leads him to follow a false storyline. The final episode is the hidden sixth vignette without the graphical identification suggested by the italics.

Thus, the overall structure of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” resembles an artistic confession. The story deconstructs the ongoing process of Harry’s self-delusion. While he blames Helen for all of his artistic failures, he admits at one time that she has indeed been “always thoughtful” (44) and caring. There is no one to blame for his artistic and physical numbness but himself: “He had destroyed his talent himself. Why should he blame this woman because she kept him well? He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by
The flashbacks are a last resort to drum up support for the many transcultural encounters he experienced during his travels. However, after the fifth and final flashback the trope of cultural curiosity emerges as yet another lie.18 Considering the lack of curiosity in African cultures and spaces, it is ironic that Hemingway originally named the dying writer in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” Henry Walden (Lynn 429), with an obvious nod to the patron saint of nature writing, Henry David Thoreau. The literary strategy of “Snows,” which juxtaposes the African experience with memories of urban life, reflects the dichotomy of city and nature which also plays out in Walden.19 It emphasizes the tragic element encoded in Harry’s love for “Africa,” namely that he cannot escape his memories of urban life. Just as Thoreau ends his experiment in the ‘New England wilderness’ (which was actually only one and a half miles outside the city of Concord) by returning to his city life, Harry’s mental paralysis is doubled in physical space. Kilimanjaro, the object of his fascination, is always in clear sight, but rendered inaccessible by the spreading gangrene in his leg. Ironically, he can only hope to reach it through industrialization, by using complex machines that can transcend the limitations of the human body. Thus, the story’s central act of waiting for the plane (an icon of modernization, transportation, and liberation) constantly undermines Harry’s dedication to the promises of the African wilderness. In Green Hills of Africa Hemingway explains that he described wilderness in “an attempt to write an absolutely true book” (iii). “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” uses a fictional character to reveal the literary strategies employed in the construction of “Africa.” The façade of purity and authenticity starts to crumble right after the introduction of the epigraph and continues methodically with the five flashbacks.

Hemingway’s “Kilimanjaro” and the Tourist Industry

In the course of the 20th century, the earth has urbanized at an incredible speed. As urban sociologist Mike Davis explains, cities have absorbed nearly “two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950” (2). With the dynamics of urbanization and the creation of megacities with populations in

17 Another of his confessions revolves around the cultural curiosity he tried to sell as authentic in his many trips around the world.
18 “You know the only thing I’ve never lost is curiosity,” he said to her. “You’ve never lost anything. You’re the most complete man I’ve ever known.”/ “Christ,” he said. “How little a woman knows. What is that? Your intuition?”/ Because, just then, death had come and rested its head on the foot of the cot and he could smell its breath (74).
19 As Ross argues in her analysis of the Nick Adams stories set in Michigan, Hemingway relies on a mythic form of wilderness which in a Barthian sense is “parasitically empty” (24). His impoverished concept of wilderness becomes apparent in “The Big Two-Hearted River” where the fictive rendering of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan provides the backdrop for a paradoxical loss and regeneration of Nick Adams.
excess of eight million or hypercities with more than twenty million inhabitants, comes the desire to leave these spatial confinements in order to confront more essential aspects of human life. In “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” the frequent flashbacks to city life seem to suggest that no matter where the urban intellectual goes, he depends on and cannot free himself of “the city.”

Although Hemingway was not necessarily interested in improving the ecological quality of life in the cities, Harry’s dissatisfaction when he is in Africa, away from his urban environment, poses interesting questions about the relationships between urban and non-urban environments. For example: is it possible to assume an ecocritical attitude about Harry’s sojourn in Africa, in order to address question of ‘ecological footprints’? Do nature and city represent an antithesis or symbiosis in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”?

It is crucial to understand that Hemingway turns to the quintessential constituent of city-life to describe the aesthetic experience of “Kilimanjaro”: the house. The mountain top, the mythological “House of God,” recalls the mystique and symbolic status which Harlem had for the “New Negro” who was migrating from the South to the brightly lit northern “city on the hill,” as depicted by Aaron Douglas in “Aspiration” (see ill. 1). Many other works worked the same theme, transforming “the city” into a metaphor of self-discovery, like James Weldon Johnson’s “Black Manhattan,” Alain Locke’s “Mecca of the New Negro,” and Langston Hughes’ “Racial Mountain.” This (African-American) experience is also at the center of Hemingway’s story about the imaginary flight towards the top of Kilimanjaro. If fictive literature has, as Lawrence Buell asserts, “the power to draw its readers into its imagined scenes affectively and even sensuously, as against instilling a sense of mystified spectatorial distance,” the changing image of Kilimanjaro in the age of a “tourism of doom” might activate in the reader an ecocritical attitude in the process of reading “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.”

Such a reading must take John Dewey’s re-definition of traditional aesthetics into account. Dewey moved away from the notion of a substantialist aesthetics, stressing the aspect of the specific experience of an object or text. The attitude towards such an object constitutes its aesthetic quality. Reception aesthetics, with Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser as the most prominent trailblazers, focused on the various acts of reading in order to analyze the “discrepancies produced by the reader during the gestalt-forming process” (Iser 133). In this process, the reader becomes both observer and participant, because the representation of people and locations in literature is realized by a performative act in the mind of the reader. Winfried Fluck has recently transferred this reader-response model to imaginary spaces, and

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20 A similar tendency was visible in Thoreau’s account of his life in the woods at Walden Pond where he regularly travelled back to Concord on the railroad tracks which passed along the south-west shore.


22 See Buell’s article in this book (5).
asked to what extent space can become an aesthetic object. In order to gain cultural meaning in an ecocritical reading of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” I follow Fluck’s assumption that “physical space has to become mental space or more precisely, imaginary space” (25). Conceptualizing the object as a carrier of an aesthetic function makes it possible, in my reading of “Kilimanjaro,” to transfer its implications to a new ecocritical context. I suggest a re-contextualization of Hemingway’s concept of “whiteness” in the metaphysical Masai term “Ngâje Ngâi” (House of God) in order to concentrate on its function in a changed discourse on African safaris and the trekking industry of Kilimanjaro.

Hemingway’s short story about “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” may not be part of the subgenre of environmental non-fiction which problematizes the interactions between natural and built environment. Nevertheless, the city-nature binary, which Buell identifies as the oldest and most deeply embedded metaphor to come to terms with the experience of urban life, assumes a new dimension by contrasting the immersive power of Hemingway’s fiction with a close up image of the glacier on, let’s say, Google Earth™. Thus, two contrasting representations of Kilimanjaro come into focus: the mental construction produced in the reader’s mind based on Hemingway’s narrative from 1936, and the mental construction created by recent satellite images which can be accessed worldwide via the Internet. Fictional forms of (spatial) representations, as Fluck reminds us, “bring an object into our world but they are never stable and identical with itself” (31). In the case of reading Hemingway’s “Kilimanjaro,” the fictional representation is based on a performative mode. How does this apply to an ecocritical approach?

The dramatic changes to the earth’s environment during the last century have caused the ice on Kilimanjaro to recede. Mountain climbers who hope to see, with Harry, the “great, height, and unbelievable white in the sun” might be disappointed due to the loss of the ice fields on Kilimanjaro, which has been reported since the second half of the 19th century. Since the first tracking in 1912 until 2000, 82 percent of the icecap has been lost. Within only fifteen years, from 1984 until 1999, the glacier of Kilimanjaro lost about 300 meter of vertical ice (Stewart 101). Predictions say that by 2015, the snow may be completely gone. In short, the striking symbol of quasi-religious purification and the sense of heavenly fulfillment, which Harry envisions in his mock flight approaching the “House of God,” hardly translates into a real world experience, which shows mankind diminishing its white purity.

According to studies on the Kilimanjaro ice-fields conducted by Sheffield University in the 1950, industrialization is not the only cause for climate change. The blame also falls on uncontrolled exploitations of planetary resources, a general indifference towards the effects of global pollution, and a slummification of the world. The Complete Trekker’s Guide to Kilimanjaro

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23 See The Ohio State University School of Earth Sciences. 2 Nov. 2008 <http://www.geology.ohio-state.edu/news_detail.php?newsId=1>
warns those who wish to see Kilimanjaro as Hemingway did – “great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun” – need to hurry up (Stewart 104). These trekkers, world travellers and adventure seekers from Western civilizations feed the Kilimanjaro tourist industry, which, in turn, adds to the production of greenhouse gases and waste. Their ever-increasing presence undermines the very dream of purity and cultural authenticity, which is at the heart of the climbing experience.

As Hemingway shows us through Harry, tourists cannot shake off their (guilty) memories of their urban pasts. Like Harry, they embark upon safaris which merely stage the encounter with wildlife within a controlled and restrained organizational grid. The guides have established safe tours, comfortable camps, and ample food supplies replete with wine and whiskey. Harry’s trackers took him through the bushes and after the shooting skinned and slew the animals. Hemingway used the image of the snows on tip of Kilimanjaro in order to evoke a kind of purity which reminded Theodore Roosevelt of familiar images of the mythical American West. At the foot of Kilimanjaro, Roosevelt observed that in “many ways it reminds one rather curiously of the great plains of the West, where they slope upward to the foot-hills of the Rockies” (30). Like nineteenth century paintings which recreated a pure landscape ready to receive the imprint of civilization on the frontier, Hemingway uses fiction to superimpose the nostalgic search for a new natural purity to the African setting. The corruption of this endeavor became apparent by the fakeness of a guided safari tour and the urban memories which dominate the transcultural encounters at the foot of Kilimanjaro. Today, Google Earth™ can take one on a virtual flight from the plains towards Kilimanjaro. The discrepancy between Harry’s illusion of flying towards the “snow” and the disturbing image of the receding glacier on the Internet bring into question the very reasons, which led the protagonist to Africa.

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24 The local communities around the Kilimanjaro rely on the Hemingway tourist industry, which has taken advantage of the popularity of Hemingway’s works to create, for example, Leland’s A Guide to Hemingway’s Paris (1989) or to set up safari trips promoted via the internet under the name of Hemingway. In the appendix on “Bibliography and Further Reading” of Kilimanjaro: A Complete Trekker’s Guide, Stewart argues that among book publications Hemingway’s short story is among the most celebrated and famous accounts (250). To add to the superficial quality of the connection between authenticity and Hemingway’s writings on Kilimanjaro, the name of Hemingway is misspelled consistently throughout the book as “Hemmingway.”

25 A recent travel guide to Kilimanjaro, Africa’s highest mountain, encourages its audience by announcing that “it is possible to reach the 5895m summit without any technical climbing ability” (Stewart back cover). Thus, it encourages would-be tourist mountainers to engage in the fiction of an adventurous African encounter like the one Harry had hoped for.
Conclusion

In the story’s epigraph, Hemingway uses the vernacular term Ngāje Ngāi for Mount Kilimanjaro and gives the meaning of the phrase (House of God), thus distinguishing between cultural insiders (who know) and outsiders (who need to be told). The cosmopolitan traveller Harry claims to love the foreign world he has come to, but he is in fact completely estranged from the location, the people, the language, the African plant and animal life, and what it means to live in such an environment. Paralyzed by his infected wound, Harry escapes to other places in a series of flashbacks that indicate that he has travelled, seen many exotic places, fought bravely in several wars, and met all kinds of people. His mind is filled with stories which promise a productive future for a long literary career. But none of this has anything to do with Africa or Kilimanjaro, to which he remains an outsider.

My analysis of cultural indifference exemplified in the African encounters of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” was not designed to revise the many readings that scholarship has produced. Nor was it my intention to counterbalance the reputation which Hemingway’s work has achieved during the last decades. By following Müller’s call to apply a Rortian reading to Hemingway’s literary oeuvre, I am interested in the moral and ecocritical potential that a story set at the foot of the Kilimanjaro in the mid-1930s can hold in the act of reading in the new Millennium. The combination of a Rortian reading with ecocritical studies shows that “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” can engage the reader in questions of cultural (in)difference and consequences for the environment.
The process of coming to understand that Harry has lived a lie and has deluded himself into thinking that he was an open-minded cosmopolitan, holds a potential to engage the reader in questions of ethical and ecocritical import. The imperatives derived from my reading reveal in Harry what Rorty described as sins of incuriosity and self-satisfaction. From this perspective, it becomes clear that behind the “tourism of doom” industry lurks a cultural and ecological incuriosity similar to the one that Harry brings to Kilimanjaro.

A transcontinental adventure marked by tiredness of western civilization, with the emphasis on ready-made encounters of exotic terrains, is likely to be scarred by cultural indifference. My reading of “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” liberates the text from the familiar accusation that it is Hemingway’s “problem” when he consistently refuses to acknowledge the emptiness of the mythic forms of wilderness his code heroes and the untamed land they allegedly inhabit. Instead, by combining an ethical and ecocritical approach, the reader is led to the address cultural indifference and the city-nature dichotomy as a problem in his very own time. With Cole Porter, Hemingway seems to tell us:

You come to Africa, you come to play;
You have a wonderful time, you go away.
And, from then on, you talk of Kilimanjaro knowingly;
You may know Kilimanjaro, you don’t know Ngâje Ngâi.26

26 This article is an abridged version of the article “Between Ngâje Ngâi and Kilimanjaro: Transcultural Spaces in Hemingway’s African Encounters” that will be published in 2011 in Hemingway and America, edited by Miriam B. Mandel. This version appears courtesy of Camden House, an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
Works Cited


