

INDOS, ABJECTS, EXILES:  
JOSEPH CONRAD'S CULTURALLY  
LIMINAL CHARACTERS  
IN THE AGE OF NATIONALISM

Submitted to the College of  
Graduate Studies and Research  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts  
In the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

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## ABSTRACT

This essay is an investigation of transnational author Joseph Conrad's engagement with issues of cultural liminality during the years around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through an examination of Almayer from *Almayer's Folly*, Yanko of "Amy Foster", and Cornelius from *Lord Jim*, the common experience of cultural displacement is considered. Conrad placed these three culturally liminal characters in various, carefully constructed social environments. Thus far, these characters have been under investigated in the critical literature, particularly the mixed-culture Almayer and Cornelius. By investigating these three characters and their environments, this essay demonstrates how Conrad depicts cultural displacement in the age of nationalism to be increasingly multifaceted but inevitably disastrous. The essay further reveals the need for more careful critical assessments of the cultural nuances of Conrad's characters.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Ludmilla Voitkovska for her guidance through the rich world of Conradian scholarship. She has been tremendously supportive, and my education has benefited greatly from her tireless dedication. I would also like to acknowledge the staff and faculty of the University of Saskatchewan English department for their ever personable treatment, particularly my second reader Dr. Ella Ophir for her insightful comments. Most importantly, I would like to thank my loving wife, Jeanne, for consistently opening my eyes to new and wonderful ideas.

It is indeed hard upon a man to find himself a lost stranger,  
helpless, incomprehensible, and of a mysterious origin, in  
some obscure corner of the earth.

Joseph Conrad, "Amy Foster"

From the time of his first novel, Joseph Conrad felt compelled to take issue with the common fictional depiction of far-off places and peoples. In his 1895 Author's Note on *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad responded to contemporary criticism of fiction concerned with the "decivilized" parts of the globe. In this note, Conrad suggests that "[t]he picture of life, there as here, is drawn with the same elaboration of detail, coloured with the same tints [...] it is the same picture" (*Almayer* xxvii-xxviii). Conrad's note provides significant insight into his position on racial and cultural differences. It is a revealing introduction to a work which depicts those differences as insurmountable. This theme of the clash of cultures becomes central in his short story "Amy Foster", which again depicts a family torn apart because of cultural differences that cannot be overcome. Conrad was explicit on his intention with "Amy Foster". In a letter to translator Henry-Durand Dravay, Conrad summarized the short story by writing, "Idée: difference essentielle des races"<sup>1</sup> (*Letters* 399). This essential difference of the races similarly informs the narration of Marlow in *Lord Jim*, particularly when dealing with the culturally complex figure of Cornelius. In all three of these works, Conrad thoroughly engages with issues of race and culture, contributing nuanced fictional situations to an age increasingly concerned with the concept of nationality.

The idea of the nation was a growing concern at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Benedict Anderson has traced the history of nationality, stating that what began as a belief of being part of a united linguistic group was coopted by the ruling-classes by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (109-110). By the time of Conrad's writing, the belief that "everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as she or he 'has' a gender" was an accepted response to the changing sociological environment of Europe (Anderson 5). Conrad wrote during this age, when discussions of the nation were of primary importance to philosophers like Ernest Renan. In his 1882, *What is a Nation?*, Renan wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: "Idea: the essential difference of the races" (Conrad, *Letters*, 402).

A nation is a living soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the common possession of a rich heritage of memories; the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to preserve worthily the undivided inheritance which has been handed down (174).

As a transnational writer, Conrad provides a unique perspective into the relationship between an individual and this “spiritual principle” of the nation.

Christopher GoGwilt has demonstrated how Conrad’s work has been used as an historical source in studies of colonialism, “because of its marginal relation to the official records of the historical archives” (139). He argues that “Conrad may play a greater role still in guiding reevaluations of the processes of colonization and decolonization” (139). Particularly in his fiction set in Southeast Asia, Conrad proves to be a keen observer of the ways in which cultural, psychological, and physical differences inform the encounters of different nations. He often features characters who, like Conrad himself, are culturally liminal or between national groups. As Victor Turner writes of liminal individuals, “these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (95). Almayer of *Almayer’s Folly*, Yanko Goorall from “Amy Foster”, and Cornelius from *Lord Jim* epitomize Conrad’s engagement with culturally liminal individuals. These three characters are very different from each other, but they share a common experience of cultural displacement in their particular environment. Each character’s cultural displacement results in their playing an antagonistic narrative role and coming to a disastrous end. Through Almayer, Yanko, and Cornelius, Conrad contemplates the effects of cultural displacement on an individual in the age of nationalism. Conrad enriches his examination by placing his culturally displaced characters in varied conditions, such as a colonial environment, a reverse colonial environment, and a racially mixed society. A close examination of these three characters and environments yields an informed perspective into the particular precariousness of a culturally displaced life in the years around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## I. Almayer's Exilic Condition in *Almayer's Folly*

While initially passed over in favour of later work, *Almayer's Folly* has attracted significantly more attention in the last few decades. Its exotic colonial setting paired with a thorough engagement with race and culture have naturally attracted the attention of those with an interest in post-colonial studies. While much of this attention has been very fruitful, special attention has been given to the character Nina, perhaps because of her obvious links to post-colonial theories. Correspondingly, there has been a certain degree of neglect of Almayer: a neglect of examining him beyond being Nina's father. In Priscilla Walton's understanding of the novel, "one culture is posited against an/Other—the ordered European world against the disordered Malay world—and the two cultures are represented in the characters of Almayer and Mrs. Almayer" (98). Walton continues by stating that the cultures of Nina's parents "function as antithetical binaries" (98).

Nina is the site of intriguing cultural battles, but to consider Almayer a representative of "the ordered European world" is a great misunderstanding. Furthermore, even considering Almayer as demonstrative of "European men's arrogance, distress and folly" is a perspective in need of greater attention (Lane 406). As the Malaysian author and critic Lloyd Fernando states, "It would be too easy to reduce the moral challenges Conrad's characters faced to that of making a choice between Eastern and Western values" (82). Almayer is a character rooted in a definite historical situation. He may have white skin, but he is indigenous to Indonesia. He is ethnically Dutch, but he has never left Southeast Asia. Conrad explores the condition of exile through Almayer's history, his relationships, and through the novel's primary images. Almayer is an Indo and his unique cultural position is demonstrative of how cultural displacement informs Conrad's works in ways many critics have neglected to recognize.

The term 'Indo' must be clarified before discussing Almayer further. Both Almayer and Cornelius are Indo-Europeans, or "Indos" as they came to be known. English writing on these diverse peoples is noticeably confusing in its application of labels. In both English and Dutch, a myriad of terms have been applied to Indos, sometimes as a means of sub-classification. Indo is an abbreviated term which comes from the Dutch *Indische Nederlander*. *Indische Nederlanders* were those mixed culture people who were either ethnic Dutch born in what is now Indonesia (also known as *totoks*), or of a mixed Malay and Dutch heritage (Glissenaar 87). English-speakers generally choose between the terms 'Indo-European' or 'Eurasian', depending on the

individual's particular racial mix. Indo-Europeans are ethnic Europeans born in the Malay Archipelago, while Eurasians are of a mixed European and Malay heritage. I use the term Indo to emphasize that such racial distinctions were not always present, and that in the minds of some individuals at the time, an Indo-European might be considered more similar to a Eurasian than to a European (Butcher 26). When I use the terms Indo-European or Eurasian, I do so primarily to match the terms used in quoted source material.

*Almayer's Folly* is set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a pivotal period in the history of the region, and the general time of Conrad's own visits to Borneo which began in 1887 (Hampson 8, 10). Traditionally, the area had always been under the control of a major power. The centre of that dominant indigenous culture changed throughout history, but one was almost always present (Drakeley 24). When the Portuguese took Malacca in 1511, this dynamic was interrupted and political power fractured into a multitude of locales. However, at the time of this novel, Dutch influence on the region had grown to the point that they became the new regional hegemon (Drakeley 25). Despite the growing influence of the Dutch, Almayer shows disdain for the colonial government of Indonesia. His experience has led him to believe they have "no grip on this country", precisely at the moment when they are beginning to assert their claim (Conrad, *Almayer* 109).

Also changing at this time was the genetic makeup of the Dutch in Indonesia. Until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, concubinage of indigenous women was the Dutch East India Company's preferred relationship type for its employees (Francis 49). Bringing European women was dangerous, and mixed-blood Indo-European children provided a cost-effective way to create the necessary future workforce. With the opening of the canal, more white women came and attitudes changed. As Andrew Francis describes, "Europeans born in the Indies who were entirely of European origin and Dutch nationality [...] were also known as Indo-Europeans, [...] and] gradually came to be considered too Indonesian" (54). In his analysis of *Almayer's Folly*, Francis demonstrates that this feeling of being "too Indonesian" is what is behind the "Dutch naval officers' disdainful attitude to Almayer" (54-5).

Conrad's characterization of Almayer is carefully related to this history of Southeast Asia. Almayer is based on a real, mixed-race man named Olmeijer who was born in 1848 (Karl 243). Since the fictional Almayer appears to have been born at approximately the same time, Conrad's choice to have him born of two Dutch parents makes him something of a rarity. Robert



Hampson notes that “Conrad constantly works to provide temporal depth to his representation. Conrad’s representation of the Malay world is almost always historically situated” (10). The historical situation here reveals that Conrad disregarded both population trends and his personal experience of the real Olmeijer by choosing to make Almayer white. This disregarding of history enables the central plot involving Nina. However, the mutual disdain felt between Almayer and the Dutch government (or its officials) demonstrates that Conrad is also depicting other important cultural relations through his white Indo protagonist.

Even before the novel itself begins, Conrad introduces the reader to issues of exile. In the novel’s epigraph Conrad misquotes the philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel. His version of the quotation from *Fragments d’un journal intime* reads, “Qui de nous n’a eu sa terre promise, son jour d’extase et sa fin en exil?” (Conrad, *Almayer xxv*).<sup>2</sup> In fact, Amiel wrote, “Lequel de nous n’a sa terre promise, son jour d’extase et sa fin dans l’exil?” (Mallios 166).<sup>3</sup> Amiel’s original stresses a natural progression of life where exile is a normal final stage. In his notes to *Almayer’s Folly*, Peter Lancelot Mallios summarizes the passage from which this quotation is taken. He writes that Amiel is meditating on “the fleeting nature of youthful dreams and the inevitability of adult disappointment” (Mallios 166). Adult disappointment, therefore, contributes to the feeling of exile at the end of one’s life. Conrad’s change of grammar stresses that the process is finished, that exile, or the end, has already come for the writer. Conrad’s grammar allows for the possibility that a process with three steps is being described, but also, that all three things (promised land, day of ecstasy, and end) come with exile. Not only was Amiel commenting on Moses during Exodus, but Amiel’s family were also Huguenots forced to leave France following the Edict of Nantes (Mallios 166). He has exile in his personal history and is reflecting on another mass exodus.

The major effect of the epigraph is to introduce the importance of exile to this novel from its very beginning. One of the few scholars to address this concern in detail is Lloyd Fernando. Fernando views the simple East versus West binaries that often arise in discussions of Conrad’s Malay fiction as overly simplistic. He focuses instead on the prominence of expatriates in Conrad’s novels. Fernando defines an expatriate as “one who lives in a foreign country for a greater or lesser period of time without coming to look on himself as one of its nationals” (79).

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<sup>2</sup> Translation: “Who of us has not had his promised land, his day of ecstasy and his end in exile?” (Mallios 166).

<sup>3</sup> Translation: “Which of us has not his promised land, his day of ecstasy and his death in exile?” (Mallios 166).

Expatriates abound amongst Conrad's characters, from the English to the Buginese and the Arabs. Fernando states that "[w]hile the principal actors in Conrad's Malaysian dramas are undoubtedly Europeans, this common condition of exile in the historical sense makes them kin to their Malaysian brethren" (82). While Fernando mainly concerns himself with a discussion of expatriates, when he considers the epigraph from *Almayer's Folly*, he covertly adjusts his language to speak of exile. Indeed, as exile is the language Conrad uses to preface his first novel, it is the language that must be considered further in this essay. Exile can be defined quite simply as "enforced residence in some foreign land" ("exile", OED). While not technically an exile, Almayer's particular relationship with his Dutch culture of origin demonstrates many of the same challenges. As exiled Russian poet Joseph Brodsky states, "exile is a metaphysical condition" (16). When Almayer is considered in detail, his situation is instructive of many of the symptoms of this exilic condition.

As a culturally displaced individual, Almayer's claim to an existing nationality is tenuous. Returning to Renan's definition of a nation, central to one's nationality is "the common possession of a rich heritage of memories [... and] the will to preserve worthily the undivided inheritance which has been handed down" (174). As an individual born to Dutch parents in colonial Indonesia, what cultural heritage does Almayer inherit? A native of Java, Almayer left home at a young age, "good at English and arithmetic and never doubt[ing] that he would conquer the world" (Conrad, *Almayer* 5). The reader is given very little information about Almayer's childhood and how it shaped him. However, with his skills in math, command of English, and a presumptuous confidence, Almayer's childhood prepared him for international trade. There is no indication of any particularly Dutch heritage: the economic milieu of Southeast Asia has taken precedence. As a young man, Almayer believes the bartering over money between Hudig and Lingard to be "a battle of the gods" (Conrad *Almayer* 7). Almayer shows no signs of having religion passed down to him, so instead, the search for profit takes on religious connotations. Almayer feels so little connection with Batavia, the centre of the Dutch East Indies, that he does not even consider it as a place for his daughter's cultural training. Almayer thinks only of Europe and Singapore (Conrad, *Almayer* 23). The price of the former would be prohibitive, so Almayer sends Nina to the latter to learn European manners, further participating in a new, transnational cultural system.

Almayer's cultural displacement often leaves him trapped in a liminal space between two different worlds. His strongest cultural inheritance is a concept of racial entitlement and what Hampson calls his "fetishizing of originary identity" (105). Almayer dreams of life in the Netherlands of his mother's dreams. As Hampson writes, "it is a fictional and imaginary Amsterdam, but it is, nevertheless, the locus of his identity" (105). Everything Almayer inherited from his upbringing in the Dutch East Indies is a result of growing up in the East. His racial sentiments are a response to the colonial situation; he feels nostalgia for a foreign land; and his love of money, but inability to work for it, separate him from Europeans like Lingard. In a keen examination of Almayer's character, A. James M. Johnson notes that "Almayer's self-enclosed 'wasted life' marks not only a personal failure, but also the bankruptcy of his European heritage" (77). This is not to say that his European heritage has nothing to offer, but it is of little use in Almayer's current world. A new culture emerges from European presence in Southeast Asia, and Almayer serves as its lonely example. While Almayer is located between different cultures, the culture of his ancestors and the cultures of his neighbours, he belongs to none of them. Almayer laments to Nina that he "only knew of one way" to bring her happiness (Conrad, *Almayer* 150). Unfortunately for his daughter, Almayer's way involves what Johnson highlights as "unnatural rigidity" (73). Almayer's unnatural attempt to act firmly, by literally covering up Nina's footprints in order to forget her existence, serves as an example of his cultural confusion (Conrad, *Almayer* 150). Almayer believes in fictional, abstracted notions of Dutch culture, not Dutch culture itself. He has no real experience of what it is to be European, yet his belief in the primacy of European culture restricts him from succeeding in his nation of birth.

Almayer's cultural displacement puts him in a precarious position during his everyday life. One of Conrad's key sources for information on the Malaysian archipelago was author and colonial administrator Hugh Clifford. In his *In Court and Kampong*, Clifford explains that a European living isolated amongst a native population for an extended time, "must put off many of the things of the white man, must forget his airs of superiority" and, to a certain degree, accept the local culture (252). Clifford explains this process of assimilation as problematic but inevitable, since the white man "knows that he will be misunderstood by his race-mates, should they see him among the people of his adoption, but the aching solitude beats down one and all of the objections" (252). Almayer does not assimilate in such a way. He speaks Malay, wears sarongs, and eats a hybrid diet, but these are practical compromises (Conrad, *Almayer* 13, 28).

Rather than giving in to isolation as Clifford says a European would, Almayer never abandons his “airs of superiority”, even at the cost of losing his daughter forever. His claim to European identity is too fragile to allow him to act as a European would. Instead of compromising, Almayer, like a typical Indo-European, becomes trapped in isolation.

Almayer attempts to escape his isolation by selectively choosing when to identify with a particular group. With the Dutch officers, Almayer acts as though he were among countrymen. He confides in them that Malays “are not company for a white man; moreover they are not friendly; they do not understand *our* ways” (Conrad, *Almayer* 96, emphasis added). Here Almayer isolates himself from the native community just as he does with the Dutch colonialists in other situations. He disdains the Dutch colonial administration as ineffectual and reveals that he thinks “the government is a fool” (Conrad, *Almayer* 109). The Dutch officers similarly look down upon Almayer as a simple fool (Conrad, *Almayer* 28). Almayer cannot hide his preference for the English, and the officers let him know his selling gunpowder to Malays makes him lower than an Arab in their view (Conrad, *Almayer* 29). Almayer does not belong with either the Dutch or Malay communities, nor does he wish to associate with them. Almayer’s only personal relationship is with his own child. Other than with Nina, all of Almayer’s relationships have economic ties. The establishment of the British Borneo Company instills Almayer with a sense of ambition. He builds a “new house for the use of the future engineers, agents, or settlers of the new Company” which the Dutch officers maliciously call “Almayer’s Folly” (Conrad, *Almayer* 26, 29). The British never come to Sambir, so Almayer becomes disconnected even further from the Dutch administration. Like his family, Almayer’s house falls into ruins. He built a shell of a building that only becomes a home when he has turned to drugs. Almayer’s Folly becomes a central image, symbolizing not only Almayer’s empty and fractured family, but also his empty cultural heritage. In the absence of cultural links to his present environment, Almayer attempts to create new ones through transnational economic ties. He fails both in his search for money for his daughter, and for a society in which to be a member.

Almayer’s liminal cultural position is further reflected in the labels he is given throughout the novel. In contrast to the confident critical assertions that Almayer is representative of European culture, within the novel he is almost never labelled European or Dutch. Throughout the narrative, people from diverse cultural groups refer to Almayer as ‘white’ and ‘the white man’. This appellation highlights Almayer’s link to his past as a racial connection,

not a cultural one. A description of Dain's background is indicative of the care Conrad put into such cultural labels. In reaction to "an investigation by the Dutch authorities" following "hostilities between Dutch and Malays", Dain finds himself seeking "the white man" in Sambir since "there was no Dutch resident on the river" (Conrad, *Almayer* 65). In *Almayer's Folly*, the labels "Dutch" and its Malay translation "Orang Blanda" are associated with power. It is the name of the colonial power and its administrators, whether residents or officers. Almayer is not a part of their society, either administratively or culturally. On one of the rare occasions when Almayer is called a "Dutchman", it is in the context of "the-one eyed diplomatist" Babalatchi being in a diplomatic mode (Conrad, *Almayer* 46). Almayer may be born of Dutch parents, but he himself is "the only white man on the east coast" (Conrad, *Almayer* 164).

From that coast runs a river, another of the novel's central images. As the subtitle "A Story of an Eastern River" suggests, the Pantai river is just as figuratively important as Almayer's second house. Johnson writes that in first scene of the novel, "The motionless Almayer is enclosed on his verandah as he is enclosed within himself; he is separate from the flow of life and doomed to be unproductive and unsatisfied" (72). A source of constant motion, the river comes to symbolize the "flow of life" and the options available to Almayer. In one direction, the river leads inland to Indonesia where secret riches are found. In the other direction, the river runs to the "sea that leads everywhere", and could bring Almayer to Amsterdam, the object of his dreams (Conrad, *Almayer* 148). These conflicting paths lead an ambivalent Almayer to call the river "his old friend and his old enemy" (Conrad, *Almayer* 128). He does not have the eastern wealth to travel to Europe, nor does he have the western confidence of Lingard to explore the interior. Trapped in the middle of these options, Almayer goes nowhere and stagnates in Sambir.

Well acquainted with navigating through the Malay Archipelago, Sir Hugh Clifford wrote that "[n]o man need ever lose himself in a Malay jungle. He can never have any difficulty in finding running water, and this, if followed down, means a river, and a river presupposes a village sooner or later" (12). In Almayer's case he has a river at his doorstep. Unfortunately, the village on the river provides no salvation to him. As previously discussed, Almayer's identification as a European is too fragile and lacking of substance to make him comfortable with associating with the locals. He is born into an identity with no models and has become culturally lost. The Pantai is the centre of Sambir and acts as a source of transportation and connection in

the community. For Almayer though, the river becomes a barrier, a physical separation between him and the settlement “across the river, there” (Conrad, *Almayer* 41).

The symbol of the river is intricately connected with Almayer’s unique white Indo-European identity. In his discussion of the exilic condition, Brodsky explains that an exile is often a “retrospective and retroactive being. In other words, retrospection plays an excessive role – compared with other people’s lives – in his existence, overshadowing his reality and dimming the future into something thicker than its usual pea soup” (16). The exile’s version of the future is muddled because it is inseparable from his past: “he can’t think of the future in any other than the glowing terms of his triumphant return” (Brodsky 18). When the reader is introduced to Almayer, he is “leaning with his elbows on the balustrade of the verandah, [...] looking fixedly at the great river” (Conrad, *Almayer* 3). The Pantai allows Almayer to reflect on “the wreckage of his past in the face of new hope” (Conrad, *Almayer* 10). His introspective and nostalgic nature results from his obsession with a past that comes even before birth. Almayer’s desire to return with Nina to the Amsterdam of his parents is described in a climactic moment as “the inner meaning of his life” (Conrad, *Almayer* 80). Though it may be abstracted and one generation removed, cultural displacement experienced as exile is the defining characteristic of Almayer’s particular cultural position.

Early on in *Almayer’s Folly*, the narrator mentions Almayer’s “Eastern mind” (Conrad, *Almayer* 9). Mallios suggests that “Conrad probably means ‘Western’ mind here” but decides it is not a major concern since collapsing the distinction between East and West is a major aspect of the novel (168). Such oversights are exemplary of a critical misunderstanding of the character of Almayer. He is completely of an “Eastern mind”, even if it is a white one. His ideas cannot be described as representative of Western culture and thought. Rather, they are reinterpretations of that thought by a white native of the east. His lonely position as an Indo-European, unwilling and unable to join the groups around him, ensures that Almayer is isolated in his native land. He is labelled white, his culture owing more to the local economic region, than his Dutch parents. He possesses an all-encompassing desire to return to the land of his ancestors, so he cannot live in the present. Almayer was forced from conception into residence in a foreign land. He was born into exile.

In his very first novel, Conrad was thus already engaging with issues of cultural displacement. The figure of Almayer demonstrates that it is not enough to believe in a national

identity; others must agree with that belief. Almayer's story presents nationality as an integral component of a person's identity. His lack of belonging to a national group in the age of nationalism has destructive consequences for his own life. While *Almayer's Folly* might not seem directly engaged with exile, the figure of Almayer is indicative of how thoroughly the exilic condition informed Conrad's work. While Almayer plays an antagonistic role in the narrative structure of the novel, attention to the issues of his cultural displacement permits a much greater understanding of his complex character.

## II. A Case for Empathy: Yanko Goorall of "Amy Foster"

"Amy Foster" shares many narrative similarities with *Almayer's Folly*, but its engagement with exile is much more overt. Correspondingly, the insight this story gives into cultural displacement is much more evident. Many critics have thus taken the short story to be directly based upon Conrad's life. In *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*, Owen Knowles and Gene Moore introduce "Amy Foster" as a story which has often been interpreted as Conrad's "most directly autobiographical work, embodying his own residual feelings of insecurity and alienation in the country of his adoption" (11). Rather being analyzed to make tenuous conclusions regarding autobiographical details, "Amy Foster" can instead demonstrate Conrad's treatment of exile in the more direct medium of a short story. In this "colonialist story in reverse", the issues faced by the culturally liminal character Yanko are very much related to those of Almayer (Ruppel 126). Using a setting more familiar to his audience, Conrad offers his most direct treatment of the exilic condition.

Yanko Goorall is a castaway who comes to be a resident of a small English farming community after his ship wrecks off the coast of Kent. 'The Castaway' was a potential title for "Amy Foster" and, indeed, even as he learns the language and customs, Yanko remains defined by his foreign origins somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains (Watts 227). Kennedy, the local doctor who narrates the story, says that Yanko's "foreignness had a peculiar and indelible stamp. At last people became used to seeing him. But they never became used to him" (Conrad, "Amy" 155). Yanko becomes a kind of half-member of the community. His presence in the community is recognized, but his membership is not. He is in a liminal position, no longer a resident of his home country, but not an accepted member of his new country either. Kennedy puts the difficulty of such a position quite eloquently: "this castaway, that, like a man transplanted into

another planet, was separated by an immense space from his past and by an immense ignorance from his future” (Conrad, “Amy” 168). In order for a member of the community to care about Yanko’s culture, he must become a father. When his son is born, Yanko celebrates in the local tavern by singing and dancing in his native, Goral style. Such behaviour, disdained by the locals, has previously resulted in Yanko being ejected from the bar. Kennedy says that in this case, Yanko did not mind being so excluded as “[t]here was a man now [...] to whom he could sing and talk in the language of his country, and show how to dance by-and-by” (Conrad, “Amy” 172). However, Yanko’s attempts to share his culture with his son prove terrifying to his wife. In this his first decided flaunting of assimilation, even Amy Foster with her characteristic “good heart” cannot stand to hear Yanko speak his native language to their child (Conrad, “Amy” 172). Amy takes their son away and Yanko dies “in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair” (Conrad, “Amy” 175).

Though Yanko Goorall is a fictional character, Conrad invested him with a non-fictional background by referring to specific historical situations. Yanko is enticed away from his homeland by one of “the bogus ‘Emigration Agencies’ among the Sclavonian peasantry in the more remote provinces of Austria” (Conrad, “Amy” 161). The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of massive population increases and high emigration rates across Europe (Taylor 51). These historical emigration agencies often “felt it necessary to practice the most colourful and persuasive arts they could command” in order to benefit from the booming emigration business (Taylor 68). Peasants were frequently swindled out of their possessions. In Yanko’s case, “[h]is father sold an old cow, a pair of piebald mountain ponies of his own raising, and a cleared plot of fair pasture land [...] in order to pay the people of the ship that took men to America to get rich in a short time” (Conrad, “Amy” 157). In this way, Yanko’s plight arises from the socio-economic situation of his homeland (and that of expanding America). He is a product of his environment, something that is emphasized when he arrives to England. Yanko Goorall is not even the man’s real name. It is a fabricated Anglicization of the Polish name ‘Janko’, and his ethnic group, the *Górale* (Watts 228). Yanko’s very identity in England is a misunderstanding, a sign that the only life Yanko can live is one defined by the surrounding community.

Conrad invokes pathos quite overtly with Yanko’s entire situation. Kennedy, the country doctor who serves as the story’s narrator, is explicit in his interpretation of Yanko’s story: “there is not one, it seems to me, that ever had to suffer a fate so simply tragic as the man I am speaking



of, the most innocent of adventurers cast out by the sea” (Conrad, “Amy” 155). When Yanko is first seeking help, he is more likely to be whipped in the face than to be given food or drink (Conrad, “Amy” 159). Kennedy’s partiality for Yanko is made quite evident. He adopts Yanko’s language without any explanation by using terms like “steam-machine” for a train, and he adds in asides to demonstrate Yanko’s innocence (Conrad, “Amy” 156, 160). The principal method of encouraging pity for Yanko though, is through the use of a leitmotif—particular imagery which recurs throughout the entire narrative. Kennedy’s final comparison is the most representative: “he reminded me of a wild creature under the net; of a bird caught in a snare” (Conrad, “Amy” 175). Through the reoccurring imagery comparing Yanko to a trapped animal, the reader is reminded that he is a beautiful sentient creature, but one that people feel justified in treating as inferior. Yanko is trapped because he has no control over the external, exclusivist impulses which cause his suffering.

With “Amy Foster” Conrad demonstrates the importance of empathy when considering an exile in the age of nationalism. It is only through Amy Foster’s “act of impulsive pity [that Yanko] was brought back again within the pale of human relations” (Conrad, “Amy” 163). Amy’s taking pity on Yanko is celebrated as reinvesting him with humanity; treating him as a someone rather than a “something”, as the residents had been describing him (Conrad, “Amy” 164). Furthermore, Yanko only gains his precarious place in the community when he marries Amy, another act based on pity. By demanding an empathetic response from his readers in regards to Yanko, Conrad demonstrates the difficulties of life as an exile. Yanko is the character most demonstrative of how understanding cultural displacement requires imagination, empathy, and openness. His story is instructive of how readers should consider Conrad’s other culturally liminal characters, even if they play a much more antagonistic narrative role.

### **III. The Abjection of Cornelius in *Lord Jim***

After the remarkably discursive and analytic first half of *Lord Jim*, Conrad shifts to a romantic narrative style as readers are introduced to the world of Patusan. The novel’s second half relies on a much more familiar narrative style, including the use of the novel’s first identifiable villain. The first half of the novel features lengthy meditations on the nature of honour, “the honour...the honour, monsieur! ...The honour...that is real—that is!” (Conrad,

*Lord Jim* 107). Following such meditations and discussions of how a good person might slip into bad conduct, Cornelius is described as an unambiguously hateful character.

In spite of his position as resident villain, Cornelius has been overlooked in Conradian criticism. In his pioneering 1938 article “The Rajah Brooke and Joseph Conrad”, John D. Gordan laid the foundation for our understanding of some of Conrad’s historical sources in *Lord Jim*. Gordan demonstrates the great influence of Brooke’s work on Conrad’s novels and *Lord Jim* in particular, but he does not mention Cornelius once (634). Conrad shaped the character of Cornelius without any influence from his Brookian source material. More recent studies, such as Agnes Yeow’s “Here comes the Nazarene”, an informative examination of half-castes across Conrad’s fiction, similarly ignore Cornelius, a mixed-race individual himself. Despite being the subject of the article’s title, Cornelius is reduced to an introductory technique, and his unique situation is not examined at any length. Even the *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Conrad* does not list Cornelius. While it includes an entry on Gentleman Brown, Cornelius is passed over, proof of Zdzislaw Najder’s claim that “[c]ritics of Jim’s decision to let Brown go tend to overlook another factor as well: if not for Cornelius’ treason, Brown himself would not have had a chance for his revenge” (93).

The lack of attention given to Cornelius has resulted in an insufficient understanding of his complex character. The figure of Cornelius is a masterstroke, a careful construction demonstrating Conrad’s thorough understanding of the colonial situation and the precariousness of a liminal identity. He is informative of both the historical context of the region and of Marlow’s racial and cultural perspectives. A careful examination reveals that, as with Almayer and Yanko, Cornelius’ narrative is intricately instructive about the effects of cultural displacement. Cornelius’ own cultural liminality is inseparable from his villainous narrative role.

When considering Cornelius’ cultural displacement, tracing the source of his name is instructive of his own origins and narrative role. Tom Schultheiss has noted a biblical source from the Acts of the Apostles, a book which also includes the word ‘Nazarene.’ This biblical Cornelius was a Roman centurion and the first gentile to convert to Christianity (Schultheiss 195). Schultheiss also mentions Cornelius from *Hamlet* before disapproving of Conrad’s choice of name because “[t]he reader’s ambiguous response marks the reference as a point of distraction which Conrad might better have avoided” (196). The name is portrayed as a distraction from

Conrad's seemingly "straightforward and explicit presentation of Cornelius as a figure of betrayal" (Schultheiss 196).

Upon closer examination, however, the presentation of Cornelius is not as straightforward as Schultheiss might claim. In fact, another source for the name is even more revealing of Conrad's characterization. In 1606 a man named Cornelius Matelief led the first Dutch siege on Malacca, a battle which initiated Dutch takeover of the Portuguese colony (Bastin & Winks 72-3). It may appear curious for *Lord Jim*'s Cornelius, "a Malacca Portuguese", to have such a noticeably Dutch name, but it is reflective of the unique multicultural situation in Malacca (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 159). Cornelius is a Dutch name for a person from a British territory, but labelled by others as Portuguese. When Cornelius speaks of his own nationality, he is explicitly clear. He says, "I am an Englishman [...]. From Malacca" (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 267). While Cornelius might be quite clear about his origins, Conrad raises questions of nationality, race, and identity by locating him in Malacca, a place with such a complex colonial history. Critics have had a similar difficulty in accurately labelling Conrad's own politically complicated origins (Voitkovska 112). Nonetheless, by choosing the name Cornelius for a "Portuguese" from British-controlled Malacca, Conrad concisely represents the complex historical situation that this oldest site of European colonialism in the area entails. Cornelius—who despite all of these European concerns, is also part nondescript 'Asian'—is a thorough product of colonialism and representative of the mixed history of the Malay Archipelago. As a resident in Patusan, he too is culturally displaced.

Cornelius is demonstrative of Conrad's depiction of a culturally displaced individual in a racially mixed environment. He stands out in *Lord Jim* because Marlow does not call him a "half-caste" as he does most other mixed-race people (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 173). Despite his "sour yellow little face", Cornelius is culturally quite close to Europeans (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 236). Cornelius speaks English and Portuguese, and he pays careful attention to his manner of dress. Even if his clothes are in a sorry state, Marlow notices Cornelius' European hats and his change of wardrobe depending on the day of the week (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 266). Indeed, Cornelius is a Eurasian. The socio-political conditions of these diverse mixed-race peoples changed depending on which colonial power was in control. The Portuguese officially "encouraged the development of an Eurasian population in Malacca by offering dowries to Malay women who married Portuguese men" (Jayasuriya 131). Interracial marriage was less of a concern than sinful sexual

conduct, as many Portuguese “were quite ready to have mistresses—three or four for one man was not uncommon in Malacca, according to the complaints of the missionaries, while some prodigies of virility and resource were said to have had half a dozen” (Bastin & Winks 51). Even if there were never many Portuguese in Malacca at one time, a substantial population of Eurasians would no doubt have resulted from such relations. During Dutch control of Malacca, these locally-born Portuguese were one of many Eurasian groups in the Dutch Indies. Partly in efforts to maximize their power with a small population, “Eurasians were legally recognized by the Dutch government as being Europeans” (Butcher 26). As Portuguese power waned in Southeast Asia, Eurasians from around the region gravitated to Malacca, “the most conducive location for these ‘Portuguese’ groups who were ethnically mixed but were identified as Portuguese” (Jayasuriya 131).

Such tolerant policies towards Eurasians changed during the British period in Malacca. While culture linked European Portuguese and Dutch with their Indo counterparts, race became increasingly important towards the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time of British control, and of Conrad’s exposure, Europeans were beginning to move to Malaya, so “[i]n the latter part of the 1880s and early 1890s the number of Europeans [in Malaya] increased rapidly” (Butcher 28). The people referred to as Europeans however, were not necessarily from Europe, as, “In Malaya the term ‘European’ encompassed not only people from various parts of the British Isles and the continent of Europe but also Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, Americans, and other who traced their ancestry to Europe” (Butcher 24). Essentially, European meant white. Census data shows that Eurasians also traced their history to Europe. However, Butcher presents this as a problem so that “a certain number of people were included under the heading of ‘Europeans’ even though in all probability they would not have been regarded as such by the great majority of the European community. Probably all of the ‘Portuguese’ were Eurasians from Malacca” (Butcher 25). These ambiguously-European Eurasians were beginning to be challenged by the influx of white European immigrants. Many of the European newcomers were taking subordinate government posts, positions that were before held by Eurasians (Butcher 17, 28). Despite their long history of usefulness in the area, during the time of *Lord Jim*, Indos like Cornelius were becoming the victims of increased British control in the area.

Conrad demonstrates the implications of British involvement in a racially-mixed environment through his British narrator. Marlow is not interested in the economics behind Jim’s

replacing Cornelius. The trader Stein no longer desired Cornelius' services, so Marlow saw an opportunity for Jim. Instead, Marlow's attention is directed towards the underlying threat of what Conrad's contemporary, Sir Hugh Clifford, called de-nationalization. Clifford's idea that white races are at risk of corruption by long periods of time spent with Oriental races is examined by Robert Hampson (93). The fear of de-nationalization runs through Marlow in his project of telling Jim's story. As Hampson notes:

the circulation of the *Patna* story among the larger colonial community serves to undermine the European position of authority. The *Patna* incident creates an oral community in which the diverse groups mentioned by Marlow and by Brierly are all levelled. This is the larger crisis that Jim's jump provokes (131).

Similarly, Marlow is invested in ensuring that Jim's superior European—and particularly British—stature is maintained in Patusan. As a dejected figure of cultural hybridization, Cornelius represents everything Marlow is adamant in protecting from Jim. While Marlow is so careful in delivering a subtle and accurate representation of Jim, he is overtly disdainful of Cornelius. Whether deserved or not, Cornelius is depicted like a caricature, and the reader is not provided with any other perspectives. He is the victim of Marlow's narrative violence.

Behind Marlow's disdain of Cornelius is his need for clearly defined and hierarchical racial divisions. In one of his particular moments of clarity, Marlow comments on how Jim appeared at the top of the hill in Patusan where

[h]e dominated the forest, the secular gloom, the old mankind. He was like a figure set up on a pedestal, to represent in his persistent youth the power, and perhaps the virtues, of races that never grow old, that have emerged from the gloom. I don't know why he should always have appeared to me symbolic. Perhaps this is the real cause of my interest in his fate (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 192).

In this instance Marlow realizes that his concern with Jim is “symbolic” of a larger *racial* concern. Correspondingly, Marlow's overt disdain for Cornelius is representative of the very same concerns about race. As an Indo, Cornelius presents a problem for Marlow's racial

divisions: is he part of “the old mankind”, or of one that has “emerged from the gloom”? Marlow chooses not to answer such questions. He noticeably avoids the term “half-caste” with Cornelius, a term he applies to other rather unfortunate characters, such as the lemon-peel faced man whose “flowing English seemed to be derived from a dictionary compiled by a lunatic” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 173). Instead, Cornelius is represented as a subhuman. He is likened to a veritable zoo of animals: an insect, a fish, a cat, and a vermin, among others (Conrad 207, 210, 211, 235). In this respect, the description of Cornelius is similar to that of Yanko, except that empathy has been replaced with disdain. Marlow’s most powerful comparison comes in the form of equating Cornelius with a beetle. He describes Cornelius as “creeping across in full view with an inexpressible effect of stealthiness, of dark and secret slinking. He reminded one of everything that is unsavoury. His slow laborious walk resembled the creeping of a repulsive beetle, the legs alone moving with horrid industry while the body glided evenly...” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 206).

Readers are not given many clear reasons to challenge Marlow’s hateful treatment of Cornelius. However, when Cornelius is free of Marlow’s perspective, he is presented in a much more generous light. Gentleman Brown may be a criminal and a villain, but the exclusionary concerns of the age of nationalism are not as important in his seafaring way of life as they are to Marlow. Correspondingly, Gentleman Brown’s portion of the narrative is much more balanced in its treatment of Cornelius. In Brown’s tale, which remains mediated through Marlow’s retelling, the Malacca Portuguese is depicted as quite useful (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 273). Even Jim utilizes Cornelius as a cross-cultural go between “because he could speak English, was known to Brown, and was not likely to be shot by some nervous mistake of one of the men as a Malay” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 289). However, no matter how Brown’s story complicates the presented image of Cornelius, Marlow retains final control over his narrative. In Marlow’s eyes, Cornelius is an insect who, through his unsavoury actions, “redounded [Jim’s] glory” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 206). Cornelius is used as just another means for Marlow to elevate his fellow Englishman Jim “up on a pedestal” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 192). Within Stein’s collection of insects, it is a butterfly that he calls a “masterpiece of Nature” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 149). Within Stein’s collection of employees, Marlow depicts Cornelius as a beetle and Jim as a butterfly. By doing so the narrator foregrounds the superiority of Jim’s British background over a lowly character of mixed cultural heritage.

Another essential difference between Jim and Cornelius is their definability. Marlow finds countless ways to attempt at representing Jim, but he is confident with using a single word

to describe Cornelius. Abjectness, Marlow says, “was [Cornelius’] characteristic; he was fundamentally and outwardly abject, [...] It was the element of his nature which permeated all his acts and passions and emotions; he raged abjectly, was abjectly sad; his civilities and his indignations were alike abject” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 206-7). Cornelius is a relatively minor character, but during his few appearances, Marlow calls him abject 16 times. The dynamics of this word demonstrates the perceptiveness of Conrad’s English. Abject can be defined as: “Of a person, an action, a situation, etc.: of low repute; despicable, wretched; self-abasing, servile, obsequious” (“abject”, OED). Cornelius is conniving, and his consistent efforts to rid Patusan of Jim are certainly despicable. However, the second half of this definition reads: “Cast down, brought low; of low status; downtrodden, desperate” (“abject”, OED). Here, responsibility for the abject person’s condition becomes displaced and ambiguous. An abject person is not only of low repute: he or she has been cast down by others. Even if Marlow intends the first definition, to portray Cornelius as a wretched individual, by implication he is causing the second. It is Marlow’s purposefully negative portrayal that “casts down” and abjectifies Cornelius.

Conrad provides a clue for Marlow’s choice of the word abject. Marlow describes Cornelius as being “perpetually on the point of gnashing teeth” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 204). The gnashing of teeth by abject villains links Cornelius with the Bible. Strikingly, Psalm 35, “A Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies” reads: “the abjects gathered themselves together against me, and I knew *it* not; they did tear *me*, and ceased not: / With hypocritical mockers in feasts, they gnashed upon me with their teeth” (*KJV* Psalm 35:15-6). This reference strengthens the implication that, to Marlow, Cornelius is an enemy. However, such an exclusionary perspective challenges the philosophical claims regarding nationality Marlow has been making throughout the novel. For example, Marlow muses that “[e]ach blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it draws its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his faith together with his life” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 161). Marlow’s nationalistic claim is threatened by transnational individuals, culturally liminal figures like Cornelius. From whence does Cornelius draw his strength? Marlow goes on to account for such difference by claiming that “few of us understand, but we all feel it though and I say *all* without exception, because those who do not feel do not count” (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 161). Marlow makes it clear that he is willing to exclude anyone who opposes his perspective in order to uphold his own nationalist ideals. Cornelius is a

perfect example of someone who does not count. In Marlow's eyes it is entirely acceptable for Cornelius to be tossed aside and abjectified.

In fact, Marlow's exclusion of Cornelius is essential to maintaining his clearly defined concepts of racial hierarchy. Marlow finds Cornelius' behaviour so repugnant that he wishes to think of it as inhuman behaviour. In Marlow's hierarchical perspective, Cornelius is like the jettisoned object discussed by Kristeva. He is "radically excluded and draws [one] toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). Throughout the novel Marlow defines Jim as "one of us" (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 303). This concept of 'us' is what Anderson calls a nation or "an imagined political community" (6). Nations are constructions of the individuals who compose those groups and Marlow is heavily invested in what it is to be a British man. In *Lord Jim* it is made clear that any notion of "us" is dependent on a native "them", whether they are found in Patusan or anywhere else (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 263). Cornelius is the abject of this dichotomy, the liminal indicator that such divisions are trivial and that humanity comes in many different colours and moralities. Considering *Lord Jim* in light of Kristeva's theory of abjection helps reveal that it is essential for Marlow to label Cornelius as abject. In Patusan, Marlow is "on the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if [he] acknowledge[s] it, annihilates [him]. There, abject and abjection are [his] safeguards" (Kristeva 7).

Conrad even makes this protective ideological impulse explicit. When he hears of Cornelius' actions when Jewel's mother died, Marlow reflects that this scene:

had the power to drive me out of my conception of existence, out of that shelter each of us makes for himself to creep under in moments of danger, as a tortoise withdraws within its shell. For a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, [...] But still—it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One *must*—don't you know?— (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 228).

Marlow makes Cornelius abject because he annihilates Marlow's "conception of existence" based on cultural and racial hierarchies. While Marlow believes one "*must*" act in such a way, he is not concerned about the repercussions for others. Cornelius may indeed be abject, but Marlow, the narrator, is equally responsible for making him so.



This examination does not intend to be a defense of Cornelius. No matter how much he is victimized, Cornelius has the choice to act in less selfish ways. It is important, though, to study Cornelius beyond Marlow's claims about him. Cornelius is a finely crafted character who is representative of the complex history of this colonial era. While Cornelius' role is emphatically antagonistic, he also suffers due to Eurocentric world-views and a changing geopolitical situation. He is demonstrative of how culturally liminal individuals are excluded in order to strengthen the imagined communities of more dominant nations. Through Marlow, Conrad provides a stark depiction of how a person reacts when his or her nationalistic worldview becomes threatened by a cultural and/or racial outsider. Abjection—casting the culturally displaced away—proves to be the solution.

Now, are readers to take the stories of these culturally displaced characters as representative of Joseph Conrad's experience? Is Yanko Goorall's story an analogy for the feelings felt by the author, also a Pole settled in Britain, as so many critics have suggested (Knowles and Moore 11)? Should scholars go searching for evidence of similar feelings or events in Conrad's letters? To put it succinctly: no. Najder convincingly argues that such biographical details "would not add anything interesting to the artistic structure or intellectual content" of the work being studied (4). Instead, knowledge of biographical details, "allows us to select the proper 'dictionaries', appropriate historical and cultural frameworks of reference in interpreting [Conrad's] stories and novels" (Najder 9). In this way, biographical details are important, not because of what they teach us about Conrad, but because of what they teach us about our world. In this case, Conrad's being a Polish immigrant to England is important. His familiarity with cultural displacement becomes a significant result of his own culturally liminal position. As Najder elaborates:

What may have seemed to be a private code, deciphered only by biographical investigations and pointing to esoteric meaning, turns out to be a cultural language, a public system of signs, which carry meaning independently from the reflections of the novelist's own personality (15).

The experience of cultural displacement Conrad reveals to his readers is not about his own transnational life, but it is informative of what such a culturally liminal life can be like.

At the end of their respective narratives, all three of the characters considered die lonely deaths. Almayer expires in the empty building he hoped would house his future partners, individuals he imagined himself more similar to than his neighbours or countrymen (Conrad, *Almayer* 29). Yanko dies of heart failure after his own wife can no longer tolerate his cultural difference (Conrad, "Amy" 175). Cornelius is removed from a community which finds him abhorrent, unceremoniously murdered as he "screeched like a frightened hen" (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 296). Through these three culturally liminal characters, Conrad draws attention to the challenges of cultural displacement. He demonstrates emphatically that, in his age of nationalism, a harmonious balance of separate cultures is impossible. Established racial hierarchies and developing conceptions of nationhood are threatened by culturally liminal individuals, making these people antagonistic to popular ideals. Even when the characters examined have a loving family member, the conflict of cultures tears them apart. Conrad demonstrates a culturally displaced life to be inevitably precarious and the liminal individual in each story is left to "perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair (Conrad, "Amy" 175). The centrality of these concerns surrounding cultural displacement warrant greater critical attention. As long as characters like Cornelius continue to be passed over and their villainy unquestioned, critics will remain complicit with the nationalistic narratives of individuals like Marlow. In order to progress from the past, the historical and psychological detail Conrad invested in his characters must be recognized. Through further analysis of these nuanced details, Conrad's culturally displaced characters can be provided with a more understanding critical home.

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