

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

Overheard at The Berlin Conference (1884–85)

Great Britain (**GB**): *Free Trade* will gild Africa—
and whitewash golliwogs.

Kingdom of Portugal (**KP**): To capture blackamoors
and their picaninnies in nets—
as if fish—

or in chains—
as if dogs—

ends here, if not before now.

United States (**US**): Borders cancel battles; treaties nix tussles.

French Republic (**FR**): Granted snow-pure *Christianity*,
Caucasian Reason,
and European *Civilization*,
Africa will be less savage and Africans less black.

German Federation (**GF**): *Cannibalism* ceases where *Capitalism* succeeds.

GB: Either we deliver *Justice*,
or Africans will consider us plagues.

US: So our *Revolution* instructed George III.

FR: So our *Revolution* educated Louis XVI.

GB: But the *Haitian* revolt proves that *Ruption*
breeds *Destruction*.

GF: The weak state smiles at *Fraud*
and whips the *Poor*.

Kingdom of Belgium (**KB**): In recompense for our *Governance*,

we bid Congolese toil at maximum efficiency.

FR: *Profit* lets railroads slide through jungle
and statues stare down lions.

GF: Europe must stop the brazen *Plunder*
that makes all Africa a penal colony.

KB: *Progress* is tapping Congo copper and diamonds and rubber,
while despairing, dark souls kneel to our paleface God.

GB: Does not Belgium beleaguer the Congolese?

KB: Great Britain cannot lecture any *Power* at this table
on correct conduct in colonies.
Just ask America!

US: *Enmity* can be *Amity*:
Just set a dollar value for Africa.

GB: Quite! During *Slavery*,
you were masters at weighing the value
of black wenches, studs, suckers.

US: Well, John Bull taught Uncle Sam well.
We Yanks had great teachers in *Slavery*,
from you who once played our masters.

FR: Negroes must toss out Xango
and idolize Descartes.

GF: Apply too much the whip,
and bleeding blacks will learn
it's scholarly to lie.

KB: We want what Germany wants:
Exotic primitives paying dividends in *Treasure*!
Let Belgium capitalize on the Congo!

GB: Good governors seek neither undue *Profit*

nor undeserved *Reward*.

US: Fiddlesticks! Your empire requires
the plucky cheating of unlucky peoples.

GB: We deliver good manners and good grammar.

KB: Does that compensate coloured Natives
for loss of *Land, Labour, and Liberty*,
the swindling of *Profit and Progeny*?

FR: Overcome bad policies with better.

GB: We civilize half-naked shakers of spears:
We dress em up with cloth-bound Shakespeare.

KP: Africans like games and comedies;
laughing, they sweat; laughably, they starve.

KB: Why can't we wing our blue-sky flag o'er Africa,
which is elsewhere British, blood-red, as maps shout!

US: If Europe ain't gracious in Berlin,
this already too-long 19th Century
will truncate the impingin' 20th,
usherin on *Genocide*.

GB: Crikey! That's just what's ongoing on your Great Plains—
graveyarding the Redskins of the Great Republic!

US: *Destiny* is manifestly ours.

FR: Beware! *Destiny* is fickle.

GB: *Imperialism* is long-term,
a matter of centuries,
not puny human life spans.

KB: Yet, your history is rife with wars.

KP: The atlas is our blueprint for ledgers of black ink.

GF: Etch this pale parchment in ink,
and Venus conquers Mars.

US: Colour our section of Africa—
Liberia—
a bright yellow,
denoting *Caution*.

GB: Pshaw! Liberia is ex-Yank blacks thumping
African blacks!

GF: To enrich—finally—white banker's coffers.

KB: We bear the Great White Burden—
in the Congo—that Pit of Darkness.

KP: But Britain looks a hyena, stripping flesh.

GF: Let no one here skim other's territories!

GB: We have dynamite, an arsenal,
enough to guarantee any treaty.

US: So, John Bull pledges *War*
if his boats don't hog all our waves!

GB: Why do you indulge such crazy, ghastly *Hate*—
those massacres done by ghost-masked lynchers?

KP: Great Powers mustn't sound vexatious,
nor meddlesome, nor insolent.

GF: Ambassadors, come to agreement!

US: All you Old World states currently crowd
the whole world with cadavers.

GB: Dig through your own corpse-ridden history.

FR: First, police the debauching *Butchery*
that daily blights the Congo!

KB: Well, France plays the plundering pirate
in Barbary Arabia.

US: We have no designs on Africa.
We seek no “lion’s share” of booty:
It’s Britain who flashes fang and claw.

GB: Uncle Sam looks as kindly as Uncle Tom,
but his jaws drool white lies.

US: Your grubby chronicles cheer on beheadings.

KB: The Congo conjures *Opportunity!*

GB: Self-appointed saints, you play blameless martyrs.

GF: Is this Europe?
A clutch of unflattering politicians?
Where are the statesmen?

KP: The former *Imperialism* was unmitigated *Horror*.
The priest Las Casas has scribed the devilish proof.

GB: One failure is the incomplete gobbling
of Liberia.

FR: True: Your short-cut, Sierra Leone land grab
cut short Alfie Russell’s presidency.

US: Thus, our gunboats float, off Monrovia—
to keep both “Frog” and “Bulldog” out.

KP: Africa rots, so why not just cart away gold?

GF: A Treaty makes for congenial *Imperialism*.
We must come unto Africa
with our *Elegance* unencumbered—

and also bring a lantern glare,

so th’Africans squint at *Splendour*.

We'll not be repugnant parasites—
degenerate, ghoulish—

but show appropriate *Virtue*,
doling out Christ and whippings,
classrooms and hangings

(a measure of *Discipline*
to erase *Lethargy*).

Nothing else is mandatory.
Anything else is lackadaisical.

Ambassadors, all shake hands now.

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