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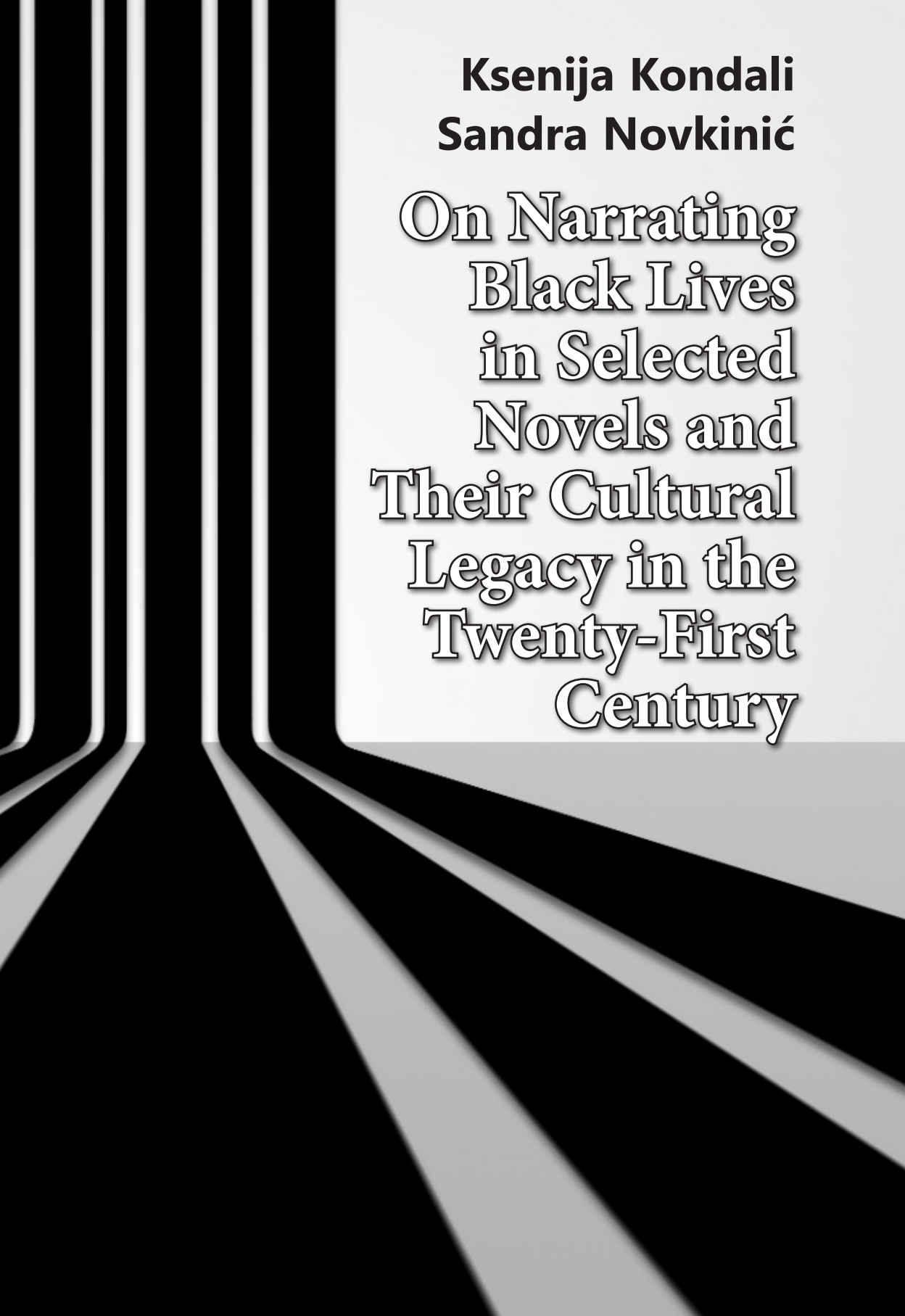

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On Narrating Black Lives in Selected Novels and Their Cultural Legacy in the Twenty-First Century

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Positioned at the crossroads of cultural studies, human rights studies, literary theory, and postcolonial studies, this volume examines the narration of Black lives exemplified by selected literary texts from diverse contexts penned by various authors, united by their original analysis of past and current racially motivated abuses. Recognising the need to engage with hegemony and Eurocentrism in their various literary forms as instrumental in contemporary literary criticism, the book discusses the representation of the Other and the ramifications of slavery in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black* (2018). Employing theoretical foundations from multiple cultural and literary studies, this book sheds light on issues related but not limited to imperialism, systemic violence, race, belonging, as well as the continuing practices and lingering effects of ethnocentric and colonial ideologies. At the same time, the analysis considers the pernicious consequences of widespread human rights abuses against the backdrop of twenty-first-century socio-political, economic and cultural global realities.

Contents

1. Introduction

It has been almost seventy years since two important world events occurred – the decolonisation of former colonies and the enactment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since then, the world has issued an unknown number of laws, charters and conventions to protect rights which should be uncontested – women's rights, children's rights, migrant workers' rights and similar. Such laws, charters and conventions are upheld by new powerful words such as "inclusion," "tolerance," "empathy," and "emotional and social intelligence." However, in the first two decades of the twenty first century alone, the world has witnessed at least three genocides, numerous instances of ethnic cleansing and mass killings[1]. Many of these happened in Africa, hitting the most vulnerable the hardest, including the elderly, women, and children.

The situation in terms of racially motivated violence in Europe and the United States is escalating. In the last three years, the U.S. has experienced the George Floyd protests, accompanied by the destruction of property, violent confrontations with law enforcement and looting. In 2021, there was also the mob attack on the Capitol in Washington, D.C. In Europe and the United States, the third year of the Covid pandemic has led to an increase in domestic violence. Moreover, the same period was also marked by frequent violent, mass protests against the pandemic measures all over Europe. Nevertheless, what is different about Africa is that the continent always appears muted. Internet newspapers and magazines are full of news from Europe, America, and even Australia, but very little can be seen or heard of the events in Africa on account of the scant news coverage on a global scale.

In fiction, however, Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) broke the silence of the Free Congo State horrors. A similar case is that

[1] Timeline of 20th & 21st Century Events Associated with Genocide. Colorado. Department of Education. Retrieved 1 September 2022, from https://www.cde.state.co.us/cosocialstudies/holocaustandgenocideeducation-timeline.

of J. M. Coetzee who wrote *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) during the strong censorship in South Africa. It is only due to his censor's awakened consciousness that Coetzee's novel about the atrocities of torture was allowed to be published. Both works are considered representative of their historical periods and subject to many different kinds of readings, particularly Conrad's canonical novella. Since 1975, when Chinua Achebe first called Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist" (2001, 1789) in public, the academic world has been divided over the literary representation of Africans. In addition to Achebe, many other postcolonial authors gained prominence thanks to the postcolonial readings of works of fiction. While Achebe's critique of the canonical writer Conrad was not the first colonial work to come under attack (the other being Daniel Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719), it cast a shadow on the postcolonial theory itself, contributing to a thorough re-evaluation of theoretical lenses and critical approaches to previous readings of fictional accounts related to Africans and Black[2] diaspora while contributing to the development of Black consciousness.

The current study seeks to explore the reflection of Black histories in selected literary texts from the past three centuries, with Conrad representative of the late nineteenth century, Coetzee of the twentieth century, and lastly, with the most recent example of Esi Edugyan's novel *Washington Black* (2018). As a type of neo-slave narrative which re-visits the colonial past, Edugyan's novel connects the enslavement of Africans and the enduring repercussions of systemic violence on concepts of race, belonging and identity while exposing the hypocrisy of the neoliberal ideas of Enlightenment and the Eurocentric bias about the Other. The substantive dismantling of logocentrism through a critical re-consideration of both theoretical approaches and earlier readings of fiction owes a great deal to postcolonial studies, particularly to its role in debunking the Western society and culture rooted in imperialistic ideology and practices. However, as Bill Ashcroft writes, we have to accept that "post-colonial studies now extends far beyond the original moment of colonization. The field has come to represent a dizzyingly broad network of cohabiting intellectual pursuits,

[2] For a definition of Black Studies/black consciousness, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 27-28.

circulating around the general idea of an ongoing engagement with imperial power in its various historical forms" (2012, xvi). The pioneers of the theory, such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, argue that colonialism was responsible for the damage inflicted on the formerly colonised countries by representing the indigenous cultures and their peoples as inferior, savage and inhuman. The dissemination of such prejudiced knowledge served to facilitate and perpetuate violence, the unjust and violent treatment of the native population and the sustained exploitation of their natural resources. Indigenous people were forced to adapt and mimic the imposed culture, thereby losing their cultural identity. All of this has collectively violated their human dignity and rights, leaving behind permanent emotional trauma stemming from the concept of colonialism that is "insidious in its commitment to the conquest and occupation of minds, selves and cultures" (Gandhi 1998, 15).

Addressing the problems raised in the previous paragraphs is of the utmost importance for several reasons. In the United States, discrimination and human rights abuses remain prevalent. Black citizens lack equal opportunities in terms of access to education and health services and they are disproportionally employed in low-paid jobs, which frequently reduces them to life in impoverished neighbourhoods in substandard living conditions. Black citizens are also more exposed to police brutality and imprisonment. Most notably, black women's health is also endangered by gender-related issues, and many are the victims of domestic violence. The protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd have brought about some changes, however, the pace of correcting past mistakes appears very slow, partly because the postcolonial, and with it related Critical Race Theory, might be viewed as creating more problems rather than solving them, and, consequently, the gap between black and white citizens seems to be growing wider. What differs now from past events is that the separation is typically manipulated and voluntary, and thus it has been observed that "Black women, children and men, as well as non-binary and trans people, must now demonstrate that they are not a threat to the public and the police, while facing the perpetual national, individual and communal threat of being placed under suspicion" (Andreassen et al. 2024, 1).

The problem of Africa has remained unchanged for centuries. Everything which happens in Africa is "somewhere else," "very far from here," it happens to "others." When the Black Lives Matter movement (*#BlackLivesMatter*), in the wake of George Floyd's murder, drew attention to Belgium's colonial past, people were enraged by the horrors committed against the Africans, but that interest seemed short-lived. The nineteenth-century artificial division of African peoples, the abusive treatment of the African population, and the importation of slave soldiers from other countries caused havoc in the twenty-first-century Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of South Africa. According to the Human Rights Watch Report of 2020[3], in both countries, widespread poverty, disease and the most terrible forms of violence have triggered large displacement of civilians seeking refuge. These people either spill into neighbouring African countries, causing other tensions, or travel to Europe or the United States. The issue with Africa is that it has always been represented as savage, uncivilised and inferior which has justified its past and present exploitation. The distance of the continent from Europe, particularly of sub-Saharan countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Africa, often results in the perception that the events there "someone else's problem." Postcolonial theory and literary criticism, which originally emerged as a call to raise awareness of the harm done to the colonised, now seem to have become a self-serving purpose and goal instead of improving the problems they were meant to address. Moreover, when addressing the racial issue in the United States, some of their modifications, i.e. Critical Race Theory[4] seem largely confined to the academic sphere and do not appear to provide a comprehensive approach to the complex problems in the aforementioned African countries.

[3] For more details, see https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020.

[4] As Andreassen et al. (2024, 3) argue, nowadays the field of critical race and whiteness studies, due to its newly acquired centrality in political attention, is burdened by the following ambiguity: "on the one hand, it is a 'tool' that can contribute to activism with a vocabulary that is capable of describing lived experiences; on the other hand, it simultaneously provides 'ammunition' for conservative and populist politicians who feel that anti-racist struggles have 'gone too far'." We witness both aspects of this charge daily in public discourse and practices.

2. Key Aspects of Postcolonialism

2.1. Theoretical Framework: A Brief Overview

Postcolonialism[5] refers to the critical study of the human experience of colonised people, the power relationships and narratives which sustained colonialism[6], and the effects of colonial rule on the postcolonial identity of the natives. The inhuman treatment and suffering of the Indigenous people in particular triggered an extraordinary body of fiction and scholarly works. Despite belonging to many diverse cultural environments and historical contexts, all writings of postcolonial authors have been sparked by the changed consciousness of the oppressed. The primary aims of postcolonial thinkers have been to effect self-empowerment in terms of race, to raise awareness of the diverse negative consequences of colonialism, but above all, to prompt global recognition of the fundamentally evil nature of the imperial enterprise of global dimensions. As Elke Boehmer underscores, "postcolonialism first emerged as a critical approach involved in movements of cultural opposition to empire, itself an early form of globalization" (2005, 248-249). By exposing the reckless neglect of fundamental human rights in once colonised countries, postcolonial theory remains at the focus of critical humanistic interrogation.

It is commonly recognised that four prominent theorists have established the foundation for the postcolonial study: French West Indian psychiatrist Frantz Omar Fanon, Palestinian American public intellectual Edward Wadie Said, Indian scholar and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Indian English scholar and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha. The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe is also essential for this research. A brief

[5] For a cogent explication of the different approaches to this field of study, see McLeod 2007, and for the various designations of postcolonialism, see Quayson 2000, 1-3.

[6] For a useful definition of colonialism, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 45-51.

overview of these four representative figures of postcolonial studies follows, aiming to emphasise primarily issues of interest for this volume.

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a philosopher and political activist of African descent, was born in the French colony of Martinique. He is deeply concerned with the human consequences of colonialism, particularly with racism and its psychological effects. In his famous book *Black Faces, White Masks* (1952), Fanon gives his personal account of being black, stereotyped and judged as inferior, exotic, abnormal, and inhuman. According to Fanon, Black men constantly aspire to prove their full humanity to the whites, which creates a "massive psychoexistential complex" (1986, 14), a long-lasting emotional trauma. To prove their value to the whites, a black person has to adapt to the Whiteness[7] under "white" terms. The adaptation is obvious by, for example, the use of the coloniser's language. Language is needed to learn the culture, the world of the coloniser. Many other of Fanon's ideas continue to inspire new generations of postcolonial thinkers, fiction writers and humanitarians. His thoughts on violence on the international level, the difficulties of new nations and national consciousness, national culture, and mental disorders due to colonialism in particular are still relevant and invigorating for the twenty-first-century socio-political, economic and cultural global environment. The current mission of postcolonial studies is marked by a continuous challenge to respond to the new circumstances, in which, according to Bill Ashcroft (2012, xxxiv), "the realities of globalization and hyper-imperialism appear unavoidable. The centrifugal dynamic of this diverse field of study has enabled it to address the continuing realities of imperialism in all its forms, and it seems likely to continue to do so for some time".

A public figure regarded as the founding father of postcolonial studies is the cultural critic Edward W. Said (1935-2003). Born in Jerusalem and educated in English-language schools, he attended universities in the United

[7] Michael Lund's volume on this topic offers a comprehensive approach and defines whiteness as "a racial formation that functions as a system of social control. […] whiteness, as a racial designator, isn't a biological determinant of who and what people are but instead a social construction" (Lund 2022, 3). The most recent study is the in-depth volume *The Routledge International Handbook of New Critical Race and Whiteness Studies* (2024).

States where he specialised in English literature, re-examining literary works in light of social and political developments. Being influenced by and having personal insight into two distinct cultures, the American and Palestinian, Said illuminates how the Western world sees the Eastern one. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), he provides examples of Western stereotypes and prejudices against Arabic culture as exotic but inferior and degenerate. This misperception served the colonisers as justification for humiliating, looting, and killing the Indigenous people in the Middle East. In a larger context, it falls under the larger designation of colonialism as "the historical process whereby the 'West' attempts systematically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the 'non-West'" (Gandhi 1998, 16).

Said explains "the culture clashes" in terms of "Derrida's binary opposition" (Bradley 2008, 2), i.e. coloniser vs. colonised, superior vs. inferior. This opposition lies at the heart of postcolonial theory and is often used in cultural studies to accentuate the differences between the opposite groups; more precisely, two groups cannot coexist, are mutually exclusive, and can be understood only in opposition. The dichotomy itself is based on prejudice and discrimination and acts as a natural boundary between groups. Following Derrida's thought, Said pinpoints that it is precisely in this way that the European intellectuals of the Enlightenment era divided the world and organised it into hierarchies. After imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities globally and spread its language, that very language, imbued with Western cultural values, has become woven into political rhetoric, creating a distorted understanding of the "Third World" cultures, labelled as "others." Nevertheless, in a world where cultural categories overlap, a shift towards universal human values, not fixating on labels, is what ex-colonised population really need. Discussing the legacy of colonialism, Said writes:

> But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. (…) but there seems no reason except for fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things. It is more rewarding and more contrapuntally, about others than only about "us." But this

> also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them into hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how "our" culture or country is number one (or not number one, for that matter). (Said 1993, 336)

According to Said, a culture said to be "inferior" is not a natural phenomenon but a socially constructed category invented solely to accentuate the perceived superiority of the Western culture. One example is writers who, as products of their social system, recreate the values embedded within their cultural system in their texts. To break free from this circular error, authors are both responsible for and obliged to engage people from diverse cultures in order to discover the true motives behind the extension of colonial power through activities and institutions such as education and media, which perpetuate the transmission of cultural knowledge. Said's work has been praised for its humanism. However, Said's work has also been criticised for generalisations and that instead of trying to find a way towards reconciliation, it "does nothing to reshape the Arab stereotypes against the West" and feeds into "a politics of resentment against the West" (Makiya 1993, cited in Albrecht 2020, 5).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian political activist and feminist critic, is a scholar in postcolonial studies who is perhaps most widely known for her seminal article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), where she refers exclusively to the native, colonised population, permanently oppressed, excluded from positions of power, and devoid of agency and voice. The main reason for silencing, according to Spivak, is the association to a less influential culture, achieved through the eradication of the natives' language, traditions, and systems of knowledge. Unable to express themselves, the subaltern inevitably remain imprisoned in their oppression. With this concept in mind, she coined the term *epistemic violence*, defined as "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (1988, 280). Nowadays, Spivak uses her knowledge of colonialist practices to empower marginalised Indian communities, particularly women and impoverished rural citizens. In addition to being a Columbia University Professor in the Humanities, Spivak is also a political activist and critic who runs four elementary schools and helps develop critical thinking abilities in children so as to nurture a new generation of knowledgeable and responsible citizens, able to deal with the

country's multiple issues, such as the escalating violence. Although aware of long-lasting internal differences and inequalities based on gender, caste and class, Spivak emphasises the European arrogance, the idea of *others* and epistemic violence as the main culprits in the process of the domination of the colonisers over the colonised. Epistemic violence, that exerted through knowledge, penetrates all levels of society, threatening both individual and group identity, leading to permanent marginalisation, objectification, victimisation, and, ultimately, exerting a profound influence on all social relationships. Despite being appreciated for her humanitarian endeavours, Spivak's thinking exhibits certain weaknesses and inconsistencies, advocating the same concept from the opposite angle. In her work, Spivak also focuses on the position of women in modern India, doubly endangered, by being Indian and women and is well-known for her feminist contributions. At the same time, in "the field of mainstream postcolonial studies, […] the concept of difference is indeed highly ideological and normative in that it simultaneously *confirms* the 'different other' as such and radically *upgrades* his or her difference" (Albrecht 2020, 29; original italics).

The name of the scholar Homi K. Bhabha often appears in postcolonial literary and cultural studies. He is most notable for elaborating three key postcolonial concepts – *ambivalence, mimicry* and *hybridity*, which allow for and explain the resistance of the oppressed to the authority of the coloniser. *Ambivalence* refers to cultures, seen as opposing dimensions, torn between attraction and repulsion, producing a split in the other's identity. The relationship of the coloniser towards the colonised is also ambivalent (two-powered) and disrupts the direct authority of the coloniser. Ambivalence[8] allows for mimicry and hybridity to take place. *Mimicry* relies on Fanon's concept of *masks* and implies the imitation of the more powerful culture. Imitation refers to changes in language, attitude, attire or even politics. Such mimicking behaviour serves as a survival strategy,

[8] The same concept was introduced by F. Fanon. Fanon, and thus also Bhabha, were influenced by the Lacanian concept of camouflage (masks, mimicry). Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who significantly impacted on cultural theory. Lacan was one of Fanon's teachers while studying medicine and psychiatry in France. For more on "situating the postcolonial" and the key thinkers, see Innes, 2007, especially pp. 1-15.

whereby individuals adopt the patterns of behaviour which bring them closer to positions of power or shield them from danger. While it may have positive evolutionary implications, in terms of culture, mimicry does not imply "equality," and in order to imitate another culture, the individual has to suppress their own cultural identity. For colonised countries, the mimicry of the coloniser's laws or education system can have enduring downsides if not adjusted to the context and traditions of the colonised.

Apart from developing his concept of *mimicry*, Bhabha made a highly significant contribution to contemporary literary theories by formulating the *theory of cultural hybridity*, articulated in his 1994 volume *The Location of Culture*. Approaching cultures as they "come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to – through – an Other," Bhabha contends that "[t]his erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures" (1994, 58). Consequently, hybridity refers to the cross-cultural forms resulting from the enduring interaction between the coloniser and the colonised, ultimately generating the third, hybrid space, which is contradictory and ambivalent, but, along with ambiguity and "in-betweenness" also the key to postcolonialism and postcolonial identity. Rejecting the material conceptualization of pure cultural categories, Bhabha (1994, 37) points out that the hybrid, "Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself […] ensure[s] that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity." In contrast to Fanon and Said, who insist on the oppositions of cultures, Bhabha's concept of hybridity varies in three critical points: (1) it views the process of cultural exchange as equal, (2) it de-historicises and de-locates specific cultures by removing them from their geographical, temporal, spatial and linguistic contexts, (3) it emphasises the value of human life and the freedom of the global world. The first point is particularly relevant for the global, multicultural reality of the twenty-first century, the second one is most commonly mentioned in the context of the current racist rhetoric in North America, and the third holds significance for the concept of humanity as a whole.

Postcolonial literary critics seek to reread and interpret colonial texts from the postcolonial point of view, assess the knowledge transmitted in those texts and question the Western literary canon. The main objections to

the Western canon are as follows: it creates and transmits knowledge of "Third-World" cultures from the "First-World" perspective, it reinforces the idea of colonial hegemonic ideology, and it excludes any works outside Western culture. What all postcolonial authors have in common is the critical examination of texts by tracing aspects of colonial domination, problems of colonial, i.e. postcolonial, identity, mimicry and hybridity, negative perceptions and the representation of "lesser" cultures based on myths, prejudice and stereotypes and the authors' attitudes to the colonial enterprise. However, most fiction has been sparked by the need to express the suffering of colonised people – in their own voices and from their own perspective.

One of the authors famous worldwide for his accounts of colonial and postcolonial life in Africa is Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. His main claim is that the new world can never be accepted, even though the old one is disappearing. Achebe's work served as a model for generations of postcolonial authors and helped the world to see the bias prevalent in Western texts and teachings about Africa. Chinua Achebe drew the world's attention with his critical essay on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, entitled *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1977 as an adapted version of his lectures at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, held in 1975. In this critical text, Achebe exposes the ways Conrad's "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 2001, 1785). Achebe denounces Conrad's portrayal of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* as dehumanising because their religious practices are reduced to superstition, their capacity for speech denied, and their complex geography disparaged as a mere jungle mass, but also points out that Conrad's fictional approach stems from "the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (2001, 1789). Highlighting Conrad's role in presenting Africans as inhuman and thus fostering the myth of black inferiority, Achebe denounces Conrad's representation of "Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (2001, 1790). In his

essay, Achebe urges Europeans to reconsider the image of Africans as presented in Joseph Conrad's novel which is part of the canon and thus contributes to the harmful stereotypes of Africans. At the same time, Achebe's essay prompted an avalanche of scholarly works, sparking division among authors and readers into his supporters and opponents. Most importantly, it spawned ideas and questions which would constitute the core of later postcolonial studies, including "its contention that Western literature often portrays Africa and Europe as opposing one another and having radically contesting values; its examination of negative representations of non-Western people; and its argument that literary history and literary critics alike have been blind to the importance of race" (Clarke 2017, 36).

According to the previous points, the main ideas of postcolonial theorists are:

- the representation of Indigenous cultures as inferior, savage, abnormal, and inhuman,
- the dissemination of such knowledge which enables and perpetuates violence,
- the violent treatment, long-term abuse, and dehumanisation of the colonised,
- the efforts of colonised people to adapt to and mimic the superior culture,
- emotional traumas and long-term damage to the identity of the colonised.

All of the above can be synthesised under the umbrella term *cultural violence.*

2.2. Cultural Violence: Culture and Myths

As for violence, the most known and influential definition is that provided by the World Health Organisation, which determines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm,

maldevelopment or deprivation"[9]. Although clearly expressed, the World Health Organisation's definition does not encompass the different types and subtle relationships between culture and violence. Johan Galtung, however, a Norwegian sociologist and conflict and peace researcher, establishes a relationship between the two terms and defines three kinds of violence: direct, indirect and cultural. It is essential to underscore that Galtung sees and defines violence in terms of its negation, i.e. what is denied to people in terms of basic human needs: (1) survival needs (negation: death, mortality), (2) well-being needs (negation: misery, morbidity), (3) identity, meaning needs (negation: alienation), and (4) freedom needs (negation: repression) (Galtung 1990, 292). Defining cultural violence as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung 1990, 291), he considers it in comparison with other forms of violence. Whereas *direct violence* is the intentional physical harming of other humans and *structural violence* is the result of injustices in society, *cultural violence* is a broader term as it can be used to make direct or structural violence appear less reprehensible or even justifiable. It operates in two ways: (1) by changing the moral filter from wrong to right or acceptable, and (2) "by making reality opaque, so that we do not see the violent act or fact, or at least not as violent" (Galtung 1990, 292). The psychological process behind cultural violence is internalisation. People can be desocialised from their own culture or re-socialised into another. One example of this is when people are prohibited from speaking their native language and forced to speak that of the dominant culture.

In an attempt to create a British (i.e. European/Western) utopia, the modern, fast-developing, nineteenth-century European countries were faced with a cultural lag and associated uncertainties about social roles and objectives. To overcome this problem, the political institutions of the nineteenth century manipulated the consciousness of Europeans (i.e.

[9] WHO (World Health Organization), a specialised UN agency responsible for international public health, founded in 1948. *About WHO*. World Health Organization. Retrieved 18 September 2022, from https://www.who.int/about.

dominantly British and German), promoting the ideals and values which would allow them to rise to power and achieve global dominance. To implement their visions, the nineteenth-century political elite resorted to several modern myths, all of which are still very powerful in the twenty-first century.

The period 1815-1914 in Europe was marked by the spread of Victorian values, perceptions and experiences, the most significant of which being rising nationalism and class conflicts[10]. The political dominance of Britain enabled the spread of British, i.e. European culture and values, to the United States and all parts of the Empire. In addition to national pride based on reason, technological developments and military power, the dominant characteristic was Christian belief, undermined by scientific progress and discovery. This changing view of God also led to changing attitudes to death and the afterlife and gave rise to missionaries who travelled the world to spread the word of God, but also to ensure their own place in paradise. Rapid industrialisation facilitated a new, urban way of life which depended on natural resources for energy, so more colonies were needed to meet this demand. The prevailing chaos in society was kept under control by the strictly imposed hierarchy and the systematic implementation of key values: industry, cooperation, earnestness, sexual repression and rigid social convention. Victorian manners were regarded as the height of civilised conduct and "the Victorian cult of the family and patriarchy […] was strengthened by the belief that the Home was the key way to maintain morality" (Black 2017, 234).

Although patriarchy has deep historical roots, the role of males in society as we know it today was formulated and promoted in the nineteenth century. Victorian men had to be strong, athletic, and ready to die for their country. They were also expected to be stoical and unemotional. Despite the public illusion of a peaceful and harmonious society, men's sexual dominance and violence were considered the norm in the nineteenth century. Numerous violent crimes against women discussed in public were committed by lower-class male perpetrators, whereas those committed

[10] For a useful overview of Victorian history, legislation, cultural and other developments, see Widdowson 2004, 107-151.

in middle- and upper-class families tended to remain concealed behind closed doors. Regarding women as their property, men felt entitled to discipline their spouses. Accordingly, "[t]he restrictive nature of the work available to women and the confining implications of family and social life together defined the existence of the vast majority of women" (Black 2017, 231). Although certain laws sought to protect women such as making rape punishable by death until 1841 and declaring bigamy and sex with under-age girls illegal (the age of consent being 12), justice seemed to remain a dead letter. Consequently, European men who went to Africa and other colonies spread these prevailing ideas to Africa and other colonies. Once in the "wilderness," where no moral or social norms could harm their image or restrain their natural impulses, there was no telling how white men would exercise their manliness.

Motherhood had a special place in the Victorian social order as it was responsible for the nurturing and shaping of individuals into socially acceptable males and females. Middle- and upper-class mothers had to abide by unnatural and strict maternal ideals. Trapped between the role of mother and spouse, women suffered social pressure, domestic violence, economic uncertainty, and a lack of emotional fulfilment. It was therefore a crucial victory when "women's campaigns for fairer divorce laws led to the (First) Married Women's Property Act of 1870" (Widdowson 2004, 118). Manipulated into thinking that they were responsible for marital stability and harmony, women did their best to perform the role expected of them. Low-class mothers, on the otherhand, struggling with poor health, famine and violence, were pushed into prostitution and alcohol abuse, and often witnessed the premature deaths of their infants. Whereas well-off families employed nannies to look after their children, poor children were forced into physical labour as early as the age of four. Harsh parenting spread as the standard of upbringing in other European countries (i.e. Germany). Parents were not supposed to talk to their children or show them any affection. Kissing and hugging were strongly discouraged and, in order to quash what was considered "childish" behaviour, corporal punishment was often administered. In the context of competing European powers and the general nineteenth-century rapid armament, mothers were tasked with

raising sturdy, unyielding and unempathetic future soldiers, capable of protecting the country's and Empire's boundaries.

The foundation of the myth of black inferiority is the *scala naturae* (Latin: scale of nature), better known as the *Great Chain of Being*, used by certain eighteenth-century intellectuals to claim that Africans (also Indians) were made inferior by God and thus suited for slavery. It was at this time that the term *race* was used to denote their inferiority. According to the thought of the day, the inferiority of Blacks was marked by their physical differences. The racial worldview was upheld by the burgeoning field of science and the works of prominent proponents of the ideology of race who based their claims on the interpretations and subjective impressions of travellers, missionaries and explorers. The project of propagating the narrative of fear and disgust towards Africans in the public consciousness through books and articles, including grotesque depictions of Blacks, spread around Europe and the Empire. Africans were also believed to have primitive intellect, to be driven by their exaggerated sexuality and to engage in pagan practices:

> (…) this emphasis on the African's body continued into the Victorian age when Africans were displayed in various European exhibitions as primitive bodies needing the control and training of Europeans. Without such control, it was believed, Africans were the victims of their bodily passions as revealed by the supposed nakedness and sensuousness of the way of life in African societies and as portrayed in numerous stories about the kidnaping and ravaging of white women. (Meisenhelder 2003, 105)

Notably, African black skin was thought to be a disease "a kind of congenital leprosy. The burden of Europeans then (…) would be to cure Africans of their blackness, to 'whiten' them" (cited in Meisenhelder 2003, 105). The task of white people was then, by "combining the efforts of humanity and science, to discover a remedy for it" (cited in Meisenhelder 2003, 106).

3. Joseph Conrad's Representation of the Congo

3. 1. The Horror and the Silence

Most of what we know today of the events which transpired in the Congo during the Atlantic slave trade comes from white European traders' records and seamen's journals. When the harrowing story of the Congo's atrocities and mass killings came to light, several people contributed to launching the first worldwide human rights movement. One of them was George Washington Williams, a black historian and journalist who, during his stay in the Congo, interviewed the natives about their experiences and, in this way, brought many more authentic voices to the issue[11]. Another significant contribution was made by Joseph Conrad with his novella *Heart of Darkness*.

In 1482, King João II of Portugal issued the order for the land around the river Congo to be explored. At that time, this region was home to the thriving Kingdom of Kongo with about two to three million people. Its monarch was ManiKongo, chosen by an assembly of clan leaders. The newcomers were warmly welcomed, most probably because they promised "their magical-fire-spouting weapons," which could prove helpful to ManiKongo "in suppressing a troublesome provincial rebellion" (Hochschild 1998, 20). According to the journals and reports of the Portuguese, the Kingdom of Kongo was "a sophisticated and well-developed state," "the inhabitants forged copper into jewellery and iron into weapons" and "people cultivated yams, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables, and raised pigs, cattle, and goats" (1998, 21). However, they also practiced nudity, polygamy, slavery and human sacrifices, which appalled the Europeans.

[11] Elnaiem, Mohammed. "George Washington Williams and the Origins of Anti-Imperialism." Retrieved on 10 October 2023, from https://daily.jstor.org/george-washington-williams-and-the-origins-of-anti-imperialism/, June 10, 2021.

The established practice of trading in human beings was catastrophic for the Kingdom of Kongo, mostly because the African kings were ready to sell and the Europeans were eager to buy:

> In the Kingdom of the Kongo, the Portuguese forgot the search for Prester John. Slaving fever seized them. Men sent out from Lisbon to be masons or teachers at Mbanza Kongo soon made far more money by herding convoys of chained Africans to the coast and selling them to the captains of slave-carrying caravels.
> The lust for slave profits engulfed even some of the priests, who abandoned their preaching, took black women as concubines, kept slaves themselves, and sold their students and converts into slavery. (…)
> Many of the slaves shipped to the Americas (…) came from the Kingdom of the Kongo itself; many others were captured by African slave-dealers who ranged more than seven hundred miles into the interior, buying slaves from local chiefs and headmen. Forced-marched to the coast, their necks locked into wooden yokes, the slaves were rarely given enough food, and because caravans usually travelled in the dry season, they often drank stagnant water. The trails to the slave ports were soon strewn with bleaching bones. (Hochschild 1998, 24)

However, there is one authentic African voice, that of the Congolese King Affonso I. Affonso quickly learned Portuguese, converted to Christianity and being a "modernizer," sought to acquire European knowledge and weapons to fortify his rule. He also tried to send appeals directly to the Pope in Rome to put an end to the slave trade, but the Portuguese captured and detained his emissaries. Following Affonso's death, the once-powerful kingdom became fragmented and was destroyed by internal conflict. In 1885, having spent a long time planning to establish the Congo as his colony, the Belgian King Leopold II set up the Congo Free State and became its sole monarch, infamous for acts of brutality. In public, he presented himself as a great philanthropist, wanting to help the natives by developing the land by building hospitals and schools and introducing public work which would benefit the Africans; however, instead of helping, he used the territory, abundant in rubber, palm oil and ivory, as a source of personal enrichment. Belgian stations and transportation links (railroads and boats) were established throughout the Congo. The Congo's population, already exhausted by decades of slave raids, plunder and intensified warfare, were

unable to either resist or rebel against the occupation. In order to force the population to meet quotas, Leopold II's agents and private army employed the most brutal methods of coercion, including the kidnapping and slaughtering of the families of Congolese men, the burning of villages and crops, rape, torture, summary executions and the notorious and gruesome practice of severing hands. The population was also decimated by diseases, alcoholism, malnutrition, general exhaustion and the Congo-Arab War[12] (Edgerton 2002).

3.2. Conrad and the Congo

Prior to becoming a writer, Joseph Conrad worked as a seafarer and travelled to the West Indies, South America, Australia and Africa. Before sailing for Africa, what Conrad knew about it was from other seamen's tales and travellers' and explorers' stories, which frequently appeared in the newspapers and magazines of his time. Thus, when he left for the Congo, Conrad was probably expecting to see the exotic place of his dreams, whereas what he found was the full-blown cruelty of colonialism. Conrad stayed there for less than six months, speaking no African languages and spending time only with his white companions. Nevertheless, he might have gained some insight into the tribal life of the Congolese, which "was in fact much less idyllic than we might wish to imagine" (Hawkins 1982, 164). By the time Conrad reached the Congo, the colony had already been devastated both by the Arab slave trade and Leopold's exploitation, "thus the tribes of the upper Congo-specifically, the Bangala, the Balolo, the Wangata, the Ngombe, the Bapoto, and the Babango-were evidently a great more deal more disordered and violent than tribes in other parts of Africa, such as the Ibo. (…) cannibalism and human sacrifice were rife" (Hawkins 1982, 164). There is no consensus on whether cannibalism was practised because of food shortages, religious rituals or for pleasure. However, according to some historical accounts of the period, the Bangala defined human beings as "la viande qui parle" (Hawkins 1982, 165) ("meat that

[12] The colony was under threat from Zanzibari Arab slave traders, but the fighting was primarily carried out by poorly-armed native Congolese rather than conventional military forces.

talks") and consumed their own dead, enemies and purchased slaves. On the other hand, human sacrifices were primarily related to the belief in the chiefs' afterlife, who, even after the death, would need the services of their slaves and wives. "At Lukolela [a town in the Democratic Republic of Congo] about one-third of a dead chief's slaves and about half of his wives were killed. Also a small child might be placed in the "grave alive as a pillow for the dead chief." Some other practices included beating young boys to death and eating the bodies of victims, whose heads "were then stuck up on a pole before the dead man's house" (Hawkins 1982, 165). Although some practices might have appeared "savage" and "inhuman" to the Europeans, there was no justification for the subjugation of Africa and the atrocities committed by the Belgians in the Congo. *Heart of Darkness* has been interpreted by numerous scholars as making exactly that kind of claim and implied justification[13].

The issue with Conrad's novella is that it was automatically categorised under fiction, not fact, at least until the first photographs of maimed Congolese appeared in European and American newspapers. In many respects, *Heart of Darkness* reflects the cultural and literary shifts of Conrad's time, such as the growing scepticism towards high Victorian values, the *fin de siècle* pessimism about the Empire and the troubling duality of human nature. All of this had previously been explored in Stevenson's gothic novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In contrast to the high literary tradition and romantic portrayal of Victorian heroes, both Stevenson and Conrad show a compromised hero, who, instead of being perfect, is fatally flawed and struggles to reconcile savage instincts with civilised values. However, *Heart of Darkness* also provides a valuable insight into the European perspective on Africans and the exploitation and brutality of King Leopold II's regime. As Edward Said (1991, 94-95) has observed, Conrad's fiction is largely based on "the dramatic protocol of […] the swapped yarn, the historical report, the mutually exchanged

[13] This interpretation has partially been ascribed to Conrad's fictional strategy that makes the novella "a dense, multi-layered narrative characterised by structural complexity, ontological depth, and symbolic denseness. Conrad's combination of elusive imagery with ideological irresolution turns this novella into a grey zone of signification" (Acheraïou 2008, 138). For more on the critical reception of Conrad, see Peters 2013.

legend, the musing recollection," inferring or even overtly stating the presence of "a specific enabling occasion" which thus represents an embodied statement prompting the need to consider both the character and the circumstances for an evaluation of that statement.

Many of the events and descriptions presented in *Heart of Darkness* disclose facts we know today to be accurate and a much better understanding of the significance of Conrad's novella can be gained when compared to the historical records of his time. First, before the Berlin conference at which the destiny of Africa was sealed, to host and impress other European dignitaries, the king converted the Royal Palace in downtown Brussels, previously used only as the king's office, into bedrooms. "On the opening day, dazzled conference participants filed up a new baroque grand staircase of *white marble* to be received by Leopold in a throne room illuminated by seven thousand candles" (Hochschild 1998, 76; our italics). Marlow, Conrad's alter ego and the main character, talks about the city in which "Marlow had a foretaste of the grim, absurd colonial reality awaiting him" (Acheraïou 2008, 140) and which reminds him "of a whited sepulchre"[14] (*HD* 9), indicating Brussels's, i.e. Leopold's responsibility for the upcoming exploitation and massacre. Second, the hypocrisy of the whole colonising mission is also revealed by Marlow, when "he launches into his full-throated panegyric on the River Thames" (Bradshaw 2014, 13), and recollects that he "had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire and make no end of coin *by trade*" (*HD* 9; our italics). Third, the fact that Marlow's story refers to "the scramble for Africa" is evident by the map at the company's headquarters – the colourful map shows "a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and on the East coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer" (*HD* 10). Using this colour code, Conrad indirectly names all the countries which participated in "the scramble" – red hints at Britain, with an additional

[14] Conrad, Joseph. 1983. *Heart of Darkness.* 1899. London: Penguin English Library. All further page references are to this edition of the novel and are incorporated in the main body of the volume.

allusion to Victorian diligence, blue symbolises France, green Italy and purple denotes Germany. Marlow adds that his destination was yellow, "dead in the centre," where the meandering river Congo flows, "fascinating—deadly—like a snake" (*HD* 10). That resemblance of the river Congo to a snake is apparent on every aerial footage of the country, and the rapids of any large river can be perilous, with the Congo being no exception.

Forth, through Marlow, Conrad indicates the secrecy and deception used by Leopold to acquire the colony and describes it as "some conspiracy," "something not quite right" (*HD* 11). In fact, by 1890, slavery had been abolished by most European countries and the United States, compelling Leopold to employ his most persuasive rhetoric to mask his real intentions. He emphasised the threat of the "darkness," the importance of "progress," the "neutrality" of Belgium, altruism, and his dedication to his country:

> To open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress…. It seemed to me that Belgium, a centrally located and neutral country, would be a suitable place for such a meeting…. Need I say that in bringing you to Brussels I was guided by no egotism? No, gentleman, Belgium may be a small country, but she is happy and satisfied with her fate; I have no other ambition than to serve her well. (Hochschild 1998, 77)

The civilising mission aimed to convert "the savages" to Christianity, provide them with clothing, teach them the coloniser's language, and put an end to such practices as polygamy, cannibalism and human sacrifices – as Marlow's aunt says so succinctly – to wean "those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (*HD* 13). For this purpose, Leopold promised to send to the Congo

> scientists, linguists, and artisans who would teach practical skills to the natives. Every post would contain laboratories for studying local soil, weather, fauna, and flora, and would be well stocked with supplies for explorers: maps, trading goods, spare clothing, tools to repair scientific instruments, and infirmary with the latest medicines. (Hochschild 1998, 77-78)

Leopold concluded his speech with some of the other specific goals of colonisation, i.e. "abolishing the slave trade, establishing peace among the chiefs, and procuring them just and impartial arbitration" (Hochschild

1998, 77). The fact that this was not the case is shown in Conrad's description of the Manager and the events at the Central station, which were as "unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work" (*HD* 29). Last, Conrad did not forget to mention the *International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs* (ISSSC), which intrusted an agent called Kurtz to submit a report "for its future guidance":

> The report of seventeen-pages was "eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung. (…). [Kurtz] began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings— we approach them with the might of a deity (…) By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded. (*HD* 64)

The society Conrad mentions probably refers to the *International African Association* (Hochschild 1998, 78), later renamed the *International Association of the Congo* (Hochschild 1998, 110) on whose account the land from the native chiefs was taken:

> They promised to freely of their own accord, for themselves and their heirs and successors for ever … give up to the said Association the sovereignty and all sovereign and governing rights to all their territories (…) and to assist by labour or otherwise, any works, improvements or expeditions which the said Association shall cause at any time to be carried out in any parts of these territories… All roads and waterways running through this country, the right of collecting tolls on the same, and all game, fishing, mining and forest rights, are to be the absolute property of the said Association. (Hochschild 1998, 120)

These contracts, coupled with the type of people Leopold sent to the Congo, sealed the country's future for decades to come. All of this would incite and endorse some of the cruellest mistreatments of the Congolese natives. Yet, as Adam Hochschild emphasizes:

> unlike many other great predators of history, from Genghis Khan to the Spanish conquistadors, King Leopold II never saw a drop of blood spilled in anger. He never set foot in the Congo. There is something very modern about that, too, as there is about the bomber pilot in the stratosphere, above the clouds, who never hears screams or sees shattered homes or torn flesh. (Hochschild 1998, 288)

3.3. The Jungle of Death

At first sight, "the edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black," fills Marlow with ambiguous feelings – it is smiling and inviting, but also frowning, menacing and savage, "always mute with an air of whispering" (*HD* 14), likely to hide "enemies" waiting to attack. These ominous intimations and disparaging comments about black people throughout the novella may be ascribed "to the […] sorry showcase of late-Victorian bigotry" (Bradshaw 2014, 16). Still, Marlow finds no enemies. Instead, he witnesses the cruel exploitation of the native railroad workers:

> Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path (…). Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (…) They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages. Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. (*HD* 17-18)

Marlow is appalled at the scene. The natives, under the pretext of being "enemies" and "criminals," are put to work under inhuman conditions, chained like animals. They suffer from starvation and physical exhaustion, ultimately reduced to "shadows of people," with no strength or will to live. When they reach the end of their endurance, these black natives are "discarded" like worthless machinery and left to die in a place Marlow calls the "grove of death" (*HD* 23) – a cluster of trees, "the gloomy circle of some Inferno" which hides the natives living out their last moments "in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair" (*HD* 19):

> They were dying slowly—it was clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now– nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom … These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near

> my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. (*HD* 19-20)

This image of people approaching the moment of death, with the flicker of life slowly fading from their eyes, the depiction of the absolute powerlessness and resignation with which the natives wait their inevitable end, can only be matched by lines describing the Jewish concentration camp prisoners after they have been "striped, shaved, robbed of earthly possessions, starved, beaten, degraded, and tattooed with a number in a place of a name" (Baldwin 2005, 3). The Congolese, too, were seen by Leopold as an anonymous mass ready to be "gutted of their humanity" (Baldwin 2005, 4) and expected to march, labour, live and die in silence. This is particularly evident, as Conrad ironically conveys, when some serious "white" work is going on, such as accounting. The accountant in Conrad's novella is so dedicated to his work that he does not want to be distracted in any way. The station is in chaos, but the entries must match:

> When a truckle-bed with a sick man [some invalid agent from upcountry] was put in there, he exhibited a gentle annoyance. "The groans of this sick person," he said, "distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate." (*HD* 21)

Errors of judgement made by European officials, i.e. cases of stolen property or the origin of a fire in a shed, resulted in merciless, severe beatings of the natives, another example of "just proceedings" on display:

> A nigger was being beaten nearby. They said he had caused the fire in some way; be that as it may, he was screeching most horribly. I saw him, later, for several days, sitting in a bit of shade looking very sick and trying to recover himself; afterwards he arose and went out— and the wilderness without a sound took him into his bosom again. (*HD* 28)

This particular proceeding served as both a means of prevention and a method of punishment for any transgression – "Serve him right," said the Manager on hearing the beaten man groaning, "Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future" (*HD* 31). Marlow was not convinced and

later on, on hearing the beaten man taking his last breath, he runs away. Moreover, "it is striking that even after witnessing the chaotic ineptitude, casual viciousness and sheer brutality of the Outer, Central and Inner Stations, his core belief in the 'glories' of the imperialist endeavour remains remarkably unshaken" (Bradshaw 2014, 15).

As for Kurtz's "wild and gorgeous" (*HD* 79) mistress, it is impossible to say whether she voluntarily accepted Kurtz as her man and god. "Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve" (*HD* 79-80). Perhaps, by raising her "bared arms" and keeping them up "rigid above her head" when she saw Kurtz being taken away, she was thanking some higher being for finally putting her out of her misery. As she never said a word, the readers will never know the truth. However, one can trust Marlow when he says that the whole Congo enterprise "was just a robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind" (*HD* 6). Still, Marlow, too, was "a part of the great cause of (…) *high and just proceedings*" (*HD* 18; our italics) happening there, presented in Conrad's "use of such essentially retrospective and investigative narrative devices as […] methodical quest" (Said 1991, 95).

3.4. White Shirts and "Beasts"

The European characters depicted in the *Heart of Darkness* belong to several types. The company's officials represent the first type – the chief accountant, the brickmaker and the general manager – all serving as symbols of the European high and upper class and their attention to appearance and so-called dedication to work. They are hollow humans devoid of insight, sensibility and empathy for the suffering of the natives. What is most shocking is the description of the chief accountant, who, amid the chaos, disorder and death around him, manages to maintain an impeccable appearance, dressed as though he were ready to enter the office in any of Europe's metropoles:

> … When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a

> high, starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing and had a pen-holder behind his ear. (*HD* 20)

Conrad is bitterly ironic of his appearance. He was a "hairdresser's dummy," who "in the great demoralization of the land (…) kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt were achievements of character." A few lines later, the reader finds out how this outstanding achievement was accomplished – he "had been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for work" (*HD* 21). The same detachment from reality, i.e. humanity, is shown by the brick master. The brickmaker, entrusted with the making of bricks, does nothing useful, as Marlow notices, "there wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year—waiting" (*HD* 29), spending time plotting his revenge against the company. He is "a papier-mâché Mephistopheles" with nothing inside him "but a little loose dirt, maybe" (*HD* 32), says Marlow.

The same description may be applied to the General manager, the head of the Central Station, who gained his position solely due to his immunity to tropical diseases and his uncanny knack for making people feel uneasy in his presence. He is aware that he has no talents or special achievements; thus, his only worry is his own standing at the company:

> He was commonplace in complexion, in features, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build. His eyes, of the usual blue, were perhaps remarkably cold (…). He was a common trader, from his youth up employed in these parts—nothing more. He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even respect. He inspired uneasiness. (…) Not a definite mistrust—just uneasiness—nothing more. You have no idea how effective such a … a … faculty can be. He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even. That was evident in such things as the deplorable state of the station. He had no learning and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill … (*HD* 25)

In this environment, the company's traders, the "Pilgrims" (*HD* 36), as Marlow calls them, are eager to embark on their journey to a "sacred" place abundant in ivory. While waiting, they are useless and restless, circling around the station like vultures in anticipation of food:

> They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word *ivory* rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. (*HD* 27)

One such agent, Kurtz, "an emissary of pity and science and progress, and devil knows what else" (*HD* 30), establishes his private kingdom, hidden deep in the jungle. Kurtz's primary skill lies in his voice, his eloquence, and his rhetoric which could sway the European people. Instead, driven by the idea that money equals success and power, he opts for the jungle, using any means necessary to get whatever he wanted, and he wanted it all – "'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—everything belonged to him" (*HD* 62).

Empowered by his whiteness, charisma and weapons, Kurtz stays too long at the inner station, playing god and beast. "Heads drying on the stakes, under Mr. Kurtz's windows "(…) black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids" (*HD* 76, 75) are the ultimate sign that the beast in him has triumphed. What was once a great man, is now "an animated image of death" with a "weirdly voracious aspect (…) as though he had wanted to swallow the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (*HD* 78). With one last ray of long-lost humanity, he describes his lost battle as "The Horror! The Horror!" (*HD* 91). Kurtz, in many respects, parallels Leopold himself who was born into a loveless marriage of political convenience. Leopold had no connection to his father, and if he wanted to talk to him, he had to request an audience, and if his father wanted to tell Leopold something, it would be conveyed by one of his secretaries. This harsh parenting turned Leopold into a cold, manipulative, and insensitive monarch with grandiose aspirations. He was also a great orator, a "remarkable man," like Kurtz. As David Bradshaw points out about Marlow's discourse, "it is crucial to bear in mind that the British pluck and plundering he celebrates are entirely of a piece with the single-minded ruthlessness that has driven Kurtz ever deeper into the interior of the Congo on behalf of his Belgian paymasters" (2014, 13).

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow is more biased than Conrad, but both explore the fine line between what separates human from beast. As later expressed

by Golding in the *Lord of the Flies*, "maybe there is a beast (…) maybe it's only us." The beast is the reason "why things are what they are" (Golding 1999, 206). Whilst Marlow questions his moral values, he is forced to concede that Africans are "us" even though he does not like their behaviour, does not understand their language, or finds them ugly and savage. He otherises them and "His inability to think of Africans as human beings from the same planet as himself is typical of a European colonialist mindset that led to genocidal massacres not just in the Congo Free State but elsewhere in the world" (Bradshaw 2014, 18). Once the individual has examined their own consciousness, and found the hidden "beast" within, it must be restrained and silenced since it is such restraint which defines the behaviour of humane men, of those who are "man enough":

> (…) if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell? —but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as those on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won't do. (*HD* 45-46)

Like Conrad, Marlow returns from his journey suffering from a disease, but unlike Marlow, who has "nothing" to say, Conrad writes his novella, which remains a lasting testament to human greed, inhumanity and the annihilation of "the brutes" (*HD* 65).

4. Coetzee's Portrayal of South Africa

4.1. Introduction: South Africa's Apartheid

During the time of J. M. Coetzee's early writing, there was strict censorship in South Africa, intended to "keep white people as ignorant and uninformed as possible from what was going on in the townships, in the prisons and in the torture cells" (De Oliveira et al. 2019, 2). The system forbade any form of art which challenged the political agenda of apartheid; thus, authors and editors faced numerous problems, especially those who sought to write and publish books about the regime's oppression, violence and brutality. Many books written at that time were banned, and the voices of their authors silenced.

In addition to the Soweto massacre[15], Coetzee was also particularly shaken by the death of Steven Biko. Police torture was common at that time, and so were the government's efforts to conceal it from the public. In a letter written to his friend, the writer Sheila Roberts, Coetzee expressed "all his dismay and discontent" (De Oliveira et al. 2019, 4) regarding Biko's death and also confided the suspicion that his death would be covered-up:

> Biko's death has cast a pall over everyone. It would seem that the pathologist is going to report that he was murdered; my guess is that the government is then going to brazen it out – refuse to hold an inquiry or else hold some kind of low-level cover-up, such as an internal police inquiry – and the hell what people think. (cited in De Oliveira et al. 2019, 6)

Coetzee, who wished to write about torture chambers, employed various tactics to circumvent censorship and ensure the publication of his novel in South Africa – "the only place he believed his work would be fully

[15] *Soweto uprising* (1976) – the South African police killing of around 600 people, many high-school children. Protests started as a revolt against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction into Black schools. Retrieved 15 September 2022, from https://www.britannica.com/story/the-soweto-uprising.

meaningful" (2019, 3). Some of the strategies he used were choosing a British publisher and setting his novel in a nameless Empire, thus articulating in a forceful yet vicarious manner his resistance to hegemony. As Dominic Head argues, Coetzee's "works present a sophisticated intellectual challenge to the particular form of colonial violence embodied in apartheid, though, in some quarters, this has been seen as an oblique rather than a direct challenge" (1997, 1).

4.2. Barbarians and Enemies

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) is an allegorical tale about a nameless magistrate stationed a nameless frontier settlement of an unnamed Empire. Outside the settlement, there is a desert, where the barbarians hide, ready to attack. Colonel Joll, the Third Bureau's security officer, comes to the village to investigate rumours about the impending attack and save the Empire's frontiers. To extract the information, Joll uses the most brutal methods of torture. During his temporary absence, the captured nomads are allowed to go back to the desert. Only one nomadic girl, crippled and blinded by Joll, remains in the settlement. The magistrate offers the girl a job and a place to live, but he is fascinated by her scars and endeavours to heal them. He ultimately decides to return her to her people and leaves the outpost. Upon his return to the settlement, he is captured, tortured, beaten and humiliated for conspiring against the Empire. When the Empire's soldiers start dying in the hostile desert environment, the survivors flee, leaving the magistrate to reassume his duties. The barbarians never come.

What is presented in the novel is not understanding, but the process of attempting to understand. So, it follows that the magistrate never arrives at a final complete explanation of anything. "One of the reasons for the Magistrate's sense of 'stupidity' — in itself an epiphenomenon of his skepticism — is his knowledge that Empire's structures of knowledge and ways of seeing, which inform his understanding and perception, are local rather than universal in nature" (Marais 64, 2011). The inconclusiveness of the novel is suggestive of a blindness to history. After all, the texts which

collectively form a colonial history – the slips, the girl, Joll – continue to confine him. In her work, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, Jane Poyner asserts that "he has learnt that he has learnt nothing" (2009, 68). Such a realisation serves as an ethical awakening to the madness that engulfs him.

The novel is a complex ethical investigation of degradation and violence inflicted upon *others,* and the questions of law, justice and abuse of power, told in the magistrate's, i.e. Coetzee's own voice. In the novel, everyone is oppressed, but the magistrate finds the courage to speak up, question his moral conscience and show his humanity. Compliant with the censorship-driven oblique narration, "*Barbarians* adopts the guise of an extended moral parable, the story of a man of conscience standing up to the terrors of imperialism, to be found within as well as without" (Head 1997, 4). The native people depicted in the novel are of various kinds – some are peaceful pastoralists, herdsmen and fishermen, while others are fierce-looking nomads wielding bows and arrows. Some live closer to the town walls, while others dwell deep in the desert. The aboriginal fisherfolk are even older than the nomads and live off fishing, trapping and catching red worms. They dress in skins and fear everyone. The nomads have recently started visiting the settlement for trade "exchanging wool, skins, felts and leatherwork for cotton goods, tea, sugar, beans, flour." Barbarian leatherwork is particularly prized – "the sturdy boots they sew" (Coetzee 1980, 27).

Suddenly, the news comes from the capital of "unrest among the barbarians"– some tribes have reunited and started to attack the safe routes for trade and travelling, there have been "clashes with border patrols," and even "the provincial governor has been killed." "The barbarian tribes are arming" (1980, 6), and both the Empire and the settlement must be protected from the upcoming war. Although this is not the first time such distressing stories about the barbarians have circulated, the magistrate continues to view them as little more than scary tales:

> Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark

> barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking up the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe. (1980, 6)

The magistrate, an empathetic and just man, attuned to life in nature and knowledgeable of aboriginal ways, becomes extremely alarmed when a group of nomads is captured and brought to the town for questioning by the Third Bureau – the most important division of the Civil Guard. A dozen fishing people are taken by force from their homes and dragged to the settlement – covered in dust, exhausted, sick, hungry and parched. The group is left standing on the main square with a crowd of white settlers staring at them like circus animals. When bread is brought for them to eat,

> the old man accepts the bread reverentially in both hands, sniffs it, breaks it, passes the lumps around. They stuff their mouths with this manna, chewing fast, not raising their eyes. A woman spits masticated bread into her palm and feeds her baby. (1980, 13)

However, after spending several days in the town, the natives become accustomed to the abundance of food, they relax and smile at everyone and "grow excited as mealtimes approach." To the townspeople, their habits are "frank and filthy" – "one corner of the yard has become a latrine where men and women squat openly and where a cloud of flies buzzes all day" (1980, 13). This, together with their hot tempers and loud quarrelling, becomes too much even for the magistrate. However, he is more preoccupied with the thought of how little it takes to lure these simple people away from their way of life – a few more days of the easy life like this and its exotic foods –bread, sugar, tea (and alcohol) – and he will have "a race of beggars" (1980, 13) on his hands.

The magistrate asks himself how these "savages" (1980, 13) can possibly be enemies of the Empire. He sympathises with the natives and the constant coughing and crying of the baby fills him with rage. When the baby finally stops crying, he sends the guard to see what was wrong. When he finds the lifeless body of the child under its mother's clothes, "she will not yield it up" and the magistrate has to tear the infant from her embrace:

> After this she squats alone all day with her face covered, refusing to eat. Her people seem to shun her. Have we violated some custom of theirs, I wonder, by taking the child and burying it? I curse Colonel Joll for all the trouble he has brought me, and for the shame too. (Coetzee 1980, 14)

When the nomads are free to go, they leave one woman behind. The magistrate finds her on the street begging. After some investigation of the strange case, he discovers that she was tortured, crippled and blinded by Colonel Joll. Since begging is illegal, the magistrate offers her a job helping out in his household. As it is getting cold, the woman has no choice – either she accepts the offer or starves and freezes to death. The job turns out to be the magistrate's attempt at whitewashing, and the woman is subsequently emotionally and sexually abused.

Finally, one day, Joll returns from one of the desert tours with a group of notorious "barbarians." The soldiers celebrate and laugh in triumph. They are greeted by a cheering crowd because the people can finally see the much-hated enemy. The nomads, dragged along by the soldiers, are shackled to each other, rendering them immobile. At this point in the novel, the magistrate, accused of conspiring with the enemy, has been stripped of his authority, endured the torment of isolation in prison, suffered a lack of food and hygiene and is ultimately left to roam the town free, like a beggar. The display of absolute power continues in "the Kafkaesque J. M. Coetzee" (Boehmer 2005, 254).

Four of the nomads are made to kneel on the ground in front of the other nomads and the curious crowd:

> One of them writhes his shoulders in pain and moans. The others are silent, their thought wholly concentrated on moving smoothly with the cord, not giving the wire a chance to tear their flesh. (…) The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. (…) ENEMY… ENEMY… ENEMY. (…) Then the beating begins. The soldiers use the stout green cane staves, bringing them down with the heavy slapping sound of washing-paddles, raising red welts on the prisoners' backs and buttocks. With slow care the prisoners extend their legs until they lie flat on their bellies, all except the one who had been moaning and who now gasps with each blow. The black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood. (…). Then the flogging is over, the soldiers reassert themselves (…). Over his head,

> exhibiting it to the crowd, Colonel Joll holds a hammer, an ordinary four-pound used for knocking in tent-pegs. (…). "Not with that!" I shout. (…) "You would not use a hammer on a beast, not on a beast!" (Coetzee 1980, 71-74)

In Nazi Youth training style, "Colonel of Police Joll" (1980, 72) urges one little girl from the crowd, gathered to watch the sadistic show, to participate in the flogging –

> Go on, don't be afraid!" (…) A soldier puts a cane in her hand and leads her to the place. She stands confused, embarrassed, one hand still over her face. Shouts, jokes, obscene advice are hurled at her. She lifts the cane, brings it down smartly on the prisoner's buttocks, drops it, and scuttles to safety to a roar of applause. (1980, 73)

White settlers do not give a thought to what they participate in. *Panem et circenses*[16], as Juvenal said two thousand years ago. As for the Empire's enemies, "pitiless, pitiless," said Conrad's Manager, "That's the only way." – "Transgression–punishment–bang" (*HD* 31).

Coetzee's scenes of physical and mental abuse, humiliation and torture are almost palpable and progress from horror to nightmare. As the town has no proper prison, the captives are thrown into a hut, a storeroom with no windows and, after being badly beaten, are left there to lie in their own urine. The magistrate sees the prisoners, "the boy's face is puffy and bruised, one eye is swollen shut" (Coetzee 1980, 2). However, that is not enough, the torture continues during the night and screaming can be heard all around the granary.

Moreover, the magistrate also discovers that Joll threatened to sew the boy into the same shroud in which the old man's dead body had been wrapped. "Sleep with your grandfather, keep him warm" (1980, 5), Joll told the boy. Instead of being subjected to this gruesome act, he was given about "one hundred little stabs" with a knife which Joll inserted and turned "delicately, like a key, first left, then right" (1980, 7). The doctor, called in later to treat the boy's wounds, never asked "how the boy sustained his injuries"

[16] Latin "Bread and circuses" or "bread and games": the phrase was coined by Roman poet Juvenal to decry the selfishness of common people and their neglect of wider concerns due to ignorance (quoted in Adrete 2021).

(1980, 8). The boy told the "truth" – he, his father and his tribe all participated in the uprising.

The captured barbarian woman underwent the same procedure in the presence of her father. The soldiers heard "screaming," but "did not want to become involved in a matter" they "did not understand" (Coetzee 1980, 26). "They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain." She watched him being humiliated before the torturers broke both of her ankles and blinded both of her eyes, with a brazier. Creatures which "believe in nothing" "marked" her, and "thereafter she was no longer fully human" (Coetzee 1980, 56). And no one was there to help.

Coetzee never provides any precise details of this torture, but from what can be inferred when reading between the lines, it corresponds to the description of the horrors people endured in *Block 11* in Auschwitz or any other Nazi torture chamber. Apart from flogging, the public humiliation of Jews who violated racial law, was another favourite activity of the German state police (*Gestapo*) or *SS* (*Schutzstaffel* or *Protective Echelon*) officers, the black-uniformed elite corps and self-described *political soldiers* of the Nazi Party, founded by Adolf Hitler (…) as a small personal bodyguard. Their police and military power became so illimited that it virtually became a state within a state. Like Leopold's in the Congo Free State, or the Third Bureau's all around the Empire.

Warrant Officer Mandel, who replaces Colonel Joll during his absence, seems to have had the same training. When torturing the magistrate, he is not interested "in the levels of pain," but in the total subjugation of the body and its basic needs – in demonstrating the meaning of what it meant "to live in a body, as a body" (Coetzee 1980, 80). Mandel "forgets" to feed the prisoner and when the mood takes him, he comes and gives the magistrate lessons in humanity. The randomness of the attacks is nerve-wracking. Whenever Mandel is bored, the magistrate is the source of fun for the drunken and idle soldiers and the crowd – he is made to run naked around the yard while being beaten on the buttocks with the cane, or to do tricks and jump the rope:

> It cost me agonies of shame the first time I had to come out of my den and stand naked before these idlers or jerk my body about for their amusement.

> Now I am past shame. (…) Is there a point at which I will lie down and say, "Kill me–I would rather die than go on"? Sometimes I think am approaching that point, but I am always mistaken. (1980, 81)

At some point, Mandel, whose breath smells of liquor, orders the magistrate to dress up in a woman's calico smock. He is marched under the mulberry trees, where the crowd has gathered and is waiting. His "clear blue eyes, as clear as if there were crystal lenses slipped over his eyeballs" give away nothing of his intentions. Like Joll, he is so well-trained and experienced that "the care of souls seems to have no more mark on him than the care of hearts leaves on the surgeon" (1980, 82). Under the tree, there is a ladder. A salt-bag is slipped over the magistrate's head, his hands tied and a rope tightened around his neck. He has to climb. "Through clenched teeth, in a fury" (1980, 83), Mandel urges him to climb to the top. At one point, the magistrate loses his footing and dangles in the air, his mind going blank. The crowd watches on:

> How long will a crowd of idlers be content to watch a man stand on a ladder? (…) This is not a contest of patience, then: if the crowd is not satisfied the rules are changed. But of what use is to blame the crowd? A scapegoat is named, a festival declared, the laws are suspended: who would not flock to see the entertainment? What is it I object to in these spectacles of abasement and suffering and death that our new regime puts on but their lack of decorum? What will my own administration be remembered for besides moving the shambles from the marketplace to the outskirts of the town twenty years ago in the interests of decency? (1980, 83-84)

The rope is then tied around the magistrate's wrists. He is ready to be shown "another form of flying" (1980, 85). When hoisted, someone kicks him, and his body starts swaying. The magistrate screams and shouts in pain. There is laughter at Mandel's remark that his screams are the "barbarians' language." Despite his excruciating pain, seeing two little boys watching the spectacle, the magistrate's thoughts are directed at them and the world they will inherit.

4.3. "Fallen Creatures"

Throughout the novel, the magistrate fights several battles with his conscience, seeking to comprehend how it is possible for torturers to harm other human beings, the effects torture has on their victims and on themselves, his own role in this, the system of government in which no justice exists anymore, what kind of world this will be for our children, and what kind of people they will become. In the first half of the novel, he is so appalled by the events that he does not even know what to do. Despite Joll's superior rank, the magistrate senses evil in him and tries everything to soften him by boosting his ego and telling him that the nomads are only destitute people and not enemies. However, apart from disengaging on a moral level and pretending not to hear the screams emanating from the granary, there is little he can do. He investigates what happened in the torture chamber, questions the soldiers present, tries to offer the emaciated boy comfort and summons the doctor to tend to his wounds. Following Joll's torture of the whole group of natives, the magistrate orders that the room be cleaned, with soap and water, everything restored "as it was before" (Coetzee 1980, 16) – as if the horror had never happened:

> What they have undergone in these few days I do not know. Now herded by their guards they stand in a hopeless little knot in the corner of the yard, nomads and fisherfolk together, sick, famished, damaged, terrified. It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. (…) Thus it is that, administration of law and order in these parts having today passed back to me, I order that the prisoners be fed, that the doctor be called in to do what he can, that the barracks return to being a barracks, that arrangements be made to restore the prisoners to their former lives as soon as possible, as far as possible. (1980, 17)

When the magistrate saves the barbarian woman from a life of begging by offering her a job and a place to stay, it also represents the opportunity to cleanse his conscience – he was the one who let the gates of the town be opened to the torturers. In tending to her wounds, he engages in a daily ritual of washing, massaging and oiling her feet, legs and tendons. Soon this washing ritual extends to encompass her whole body, allowing the

magistrate to examine and contemplate her scars, all the while envisioning what she was like when she was "unmarked" (1980, 24). Although he forces her to say how the wounds were inflicted and wants to know about her feelings towards "those men," the woman remains silent. The magistrate understands that he belongs to "them" in her eyes, nevertheless, he expects her to say what he wants to hear – as a sign of gratitude for saving her from the street. The few sentences she exchanges with him are simple, short and honest:

> Come, tell me why are you here.
> Because there is nowhere else to go.
> And why do I want you here?
> You want to talk all the time. (1980, 28)

Only at the end of the novel does he discover that while with the other maids, she was friendly and fun and never complained about anything. He also learns that he made her very unhappy because he was always "somewhere else," "she could not understand him," and did know what he wanted from her. "Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry" (1980, 106). After the girl is returned to the nomads, the magistrate is declared an enemy of the Empire.

And so it was. The isolation and the confinement leave a deep mark on him – he lacks water, food, space, sun, and clean clothes – he is deprived of every basic human need. The basic food he is given makes it hard for him to move his bowels, so he writhes in pain most of the time. He yearns for the exercise time when he can feel the wind on his face and the earth beneath his feet, see other faces and hear human speech:

> After two days of solitude my lips feel slack and useless, my own speech seems strange to me. Truly, man was not made to live alone! I build my day unreasonably around the hours when I am fed. I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast. (1980, 55)

Who are the people who believe in nothing? How do they sleep? The magistrate presses Mandel for answers he is not able to find:

> Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? (…) I have imagined that one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don't you

> think? Some kind of purging of one's soul too—that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to everyday life—to sit down at table, for instance, and break bread with one's family or one's comrades? (1980, 88)

Savages, barbarians, animals, machines –who is who? Are there any humans left or we are all just fallen creatures?

Across the ocean, the "granite" and "unteachable" quality of the "First World civilised citizens, caused 'a plague' of black bodies dangling from the trees" (1980, 85). According to the official records, from 1882 to 1968, 4,743 Black people were lynched under the pretext of justice. Although many people understand lynching as a "simple hanging," the victims were usually subjected to horrific torture, in front of their families, torturers and a crowd of spectators[17].

[17] *History of Lynching in America*. NAACP. Retrieved 20 September 2022, from https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america.

5. Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*

5.1. Introduction: African Enslavement in Transatlantic (Re-) Consideration

The postcolonial critical exploration of the voices which were previously elided or muted in mainstream public discourse and collective memory has dedicated considerable attention to the origin, development and nature of slavery. Over the decades, the body of both fictional and non-fictional texts in English focused on African enslavement has been growing, also engaging in the daunting task of dismantling the harmful constructs of race and the justifications of abuse of Africans as well as its enduring legacy. Literary and analytical responses have increasingly taken on a global character, especially following the "Black Atlantic" paradigm (Gilroy 1993) and considering "the transnational circuits of exchange – economic, social, political, affective – that take British colonial history for a ride" (Blevins 2016, 1). In the three decades since the publishing of Paul Gilroy's seminal work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* in 1993[18], its impact on the re-examination of black historical and cultural texts from a new perspective has been widely recognised and critically developed. Gilroy's theory opposes the entrenched notions by cultural historians characterised as "nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches" (1993, 15) to the Atlantic in favour of considering "the Atlantic as a single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (Gilroy 1993, 15). By advancing "the Black Atlantic" paradigm as a

[18] Gilroy's study is dedicated to the previously neglected interrelationship between the Black Atlantic and modernity, where the former is theorised as a counterculture of modernity (1993). In a wider yet related context, Simon Gikandi (2011) undertakes to explore the culture of modernity in Europe whose taste, standards and practices of beauty and high culture derived from the construction of explanations built to justify slavery and the transatlantic system of human bondage and dehumanisation.

"rhizomorphic, fractal structure of […] transcultural, international formation" (Gilroy 1993, 4), Gilroy extends the specific aspects of this framework of the Atlantic world beyond its geographic connotation, but as the nexus of dislocation, economic operation, resistance, and black subjectivity, since the time of Christopher Columbus' colonising expeditions:

> The history of the black Atlantic since then continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory. (Gilroy 1993, 16)

Through the advancing of a different notion of the black consciousness and black self, Gilroy articulates and advances black subjectivity as "a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole" (Gilroy 1993, 158). Invariably, black post-slavery[19] literature deploys the transatlantic context and contests the grand narrative introduced with colonial historical discourse to build on individual and collective memory of the denied past. It is therefore of essential importance for black post-slavery literature, which are frequently "narratives of loss, exile, and journeying… [to] serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory" (Gilroy 1993, 198). This literary output thus necessitates the context of the diaspora to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this cultural production since the diaspora's "striking doubleness that results from this unique position – in an expanded West but not completely of it – is a definitive characteristic of the intellectual history of the Black Atlantic" (1993, 58). In many ways, Gilroy's conceptualisation of the "Black Atlantic" as a socio-spatial category which resists national structures simultaneously reconsiders slavery[20] and its related ramifications of racially-motivated violence as depicted in a growing number of diverse literary texts. These literary representations and other forms of creative works on this topic were often ignored in metanarratives supportive of established Western concepts of subjectivity and mainstream

[19] For an illuminating overview of the term, see Rossi 2015.

[20] For a detailed history of the gruesome conditions of the Middle Passage see Morgan 2007.

approaches to nationhood. As with numerous other theories, Gilroy's Black Atlantic notion has also been subject to re-consideration, specifically criticism of its lack of social representation of all transatlantic sites, those of Africa, Canada, and the Caribbean.

In recent decades, the previously lacking dimension of a comprehensive transatlantic approach has been provided in several critical volumes, most notably by Ian Baucom in *Specters of the Black Atlantic* (2005), exploring, *inter alia*, the Canadian postcolonial gothic. A similar shift in literary focus from the previously dominant topic of U.S.-American slavery is central to Arlene Keizer's 2004 book *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004). In Keizer's view, "[…] the history of slavery is not merely a nightmare from which contemporary, New World black writers are trying to awaken; instead, the 'peculiar institution' serves as a catalyst and site for theories about the nature and formation of black subjectivity" (Keizer 2004, 1). Keizer, along with other scholars, places particular emphasis on the transnational aspect of the legacy of chattel slavery, the African diaspora and the representation of identity issues.

Consequently, the enslavement of Africans during the colonial exploitation of European powers constitutes a pivotal point for a comprehensive investigation of transatlantic influences and identity building. The necessity for the inclusion of this dimension and, more specifically, Canadian texts on slavery in this framework, has been raised by several authors, including Winfried Siemerling in his 2015 volume *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past*. In it, Siemerling remarks that both "contemporary black Canadian writing as well as earlier texts and testimony" did not pay adequate attention to slave history and the black Atlantic as an "important aspect of Canadian culture" and investigates the reasons why it was not "more central to previous literary theory and discussion in Canada" (2015, ix). At the same time, despite the rootedness of black Canadian writing in diasporic issues, "theories of the black Atlantic and studies of the hemispheric reach of transatlantic slavery have routinely marginalized slavery and post-slavery in what is now Canada" (Siemerling 2015, 4). In a related vein, Steve Blevins acknowledges the importance of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* as it "helped consolidate and constellate the transhistorical and transnational

turns" evident in the cultural production about "the postcolonial present of black presence in the post-Thatcherite era" (Blevins 2016, 12, 13). Blevins' book *Living Cargo* documents the outcomes of the historiographic turn to examining the slave trade and slavery within contemporary Black British cultural works with a distinct focus on the "human bio-cargo as a critical concept," i.e. the concept-metaphor of Black life as "human bio-cargo." Drawing on the dehumanising discourse of eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries' abstraction in terms of the triangular trade and related violence of human enslavement on a global scale, Blevins recontextualises this aspect of the past with a heightened affective dimension.

5.2. Narratives of Slavery and Challenges of Representation

Decidedly, it was the affective quality of representations of slavery which also circumscribed slave narratives, i.e. storytelling in the form of memoirs of former slaves. As traumatic testimonies or narratives of "traumatic pasts, literary afterlives" (Erll 2011), these texts constitute a "commemorative recuperation of Atlantic slavery and the suffering it created" (Eckstein 2006, 117-18)[21]. Among contemporary fictional examples which reinscribe and memorialise "[t]he unspeakable traumas of Atlantic slavery" (Eckstein 2006, 162), a considerable number adhere to the tradition of these slave narratives, in what has been recognised as the genre of neo-slave narratives, or "contemporary narratives of slavery" (Keizer 2004, 3), offering a broader framework of interpretation. These novels generally revisit the often-eradicated Black Atlantic past and revive the voices and experiences of slaves. Thus, neo-slave narratives constitute efforts to revisit and counter metanarratives concerning transatlantic slavery through creative means, aiming to explore the way it is represented in global terms, including its enduring consequences. Ashraf Rushdy introduces the term "Neo-slave narratives" (with capitalisation in "Neo"), which he defines as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person of the antebellum slave narrative" (1999, 3).

[21] Another critical overview on a related topic but with a different selection of primary texts is offered in Kondali 2016.

Originally coined by Bernard W. Bell in his 1987 book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* as "neo-slave narratives", i.e. with a hyphen, such texts are "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell 1987, 289). Rushdy's use of the term is more restrictive and distinct, as he contends (1999, 233n), as the reference to "modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of New World slavery" so as to establish the "lasting cultural meaning and social consequences" (Rushdy 1997, 533). While analysing the ways in which contemporary texts revisit the classic slave narratives, characterised by "the use and celebration of 'oral' modes of representation" (1997, 533), Rushdy also notes the impact of the Black political, artistic and aesthetic movements on literary creativity. Due to the fact that "slave narratives were a means of self-expression for former African slaves and they played an important part in the abolitionist struggles," this critic underscores that "they are naturally connected with the history of the African diaspora, the legacy of slavery and the fight for social justice" (Rushdy 1999, 3).

These critical works mark the inception of dedicated theoretical studies on fictional texts which are variously defined, thus illustrating the development of this scholarly field. Angelyn Mitchell, author of *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*, introduces the term "liberatory narratives" (2002, 4) to refer to those fictions which aim to "to engender a liberatory effect on the reader" (2002, 6). Mitchell asserts that late-twentieth-century narratives build on their nineteenth-century precursors by engaging multiple additional issues, including black subjectivity. The preference for "liberatory narratives" over "neo-slave narratives" is for several reasons: "the liberatory narrative is self-conscious thematically of its antecedent text, the slave narrative; is centred on its enslaved protagonist's life as a free citizen; and is focused on the protagonist's conception and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self" (2002, 4). According to Valerie Smith, regardless of their nomenclature, the number and diversity of these novels are continually growing, providing significant and resonant texts because

> they provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses, among them: the

> challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) 168 for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom. (Smith 2007, 168-169)

Since the late 1960s, the issue of transatlantic slavery and its ramifications have been advanced by both neo-slave fictions and critical volumes about this field of studies, gaining particular momentum with the publication of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). As critics have pointed out, this "landmark novel represents in many regards the culmination of the neo-slave narrative tradition," but it "also marks … a watershed moment with regard to the cultural and poetic scope of neo-slave narratives as well as with regard to the kind of relationship to the past they articulate" (Saal and Ashe 2020, 7). The novel, like most of Morrison's oeuvre, is a historical narrative which constitutes what in her influential 1987 essay "The Site of Memory" she terms "a kind of literary archaeology" of the slave experience, which has been omitted from official records or is available only as fragments in colonial archives and historical discourse. It is the task of the contemporary author to illuminate the slaves' lives through imaginative literary creations, rendering them no less true or reliable (Morrison 1987, 112-13)[22]. Morrison's mission to shed light on slavery and the interior world of slaves has been embraced by many contemporary authors, in particular the African diaspora, who reintroduce the ignored or silenced voices of slaves into their texts through personal experiences and thus accomplish "the recreation of history as a tale of endless black suffering" (Byerman 2005, 6). Most recently, the literary and critical output on this topic has been advanced by a transnational and transcultural methodology, including Markus Nehl's *Transnational Black Dialogues* (2016), which explores the genre of neo-slave narratives by focusing on "the link between the history of slavery and twenty-first-century black life; who enter into an intertextual discussion with African diaspora theory, slave narratives,

[22] In a related vein, Timothy Spaulding discusses postmodern narratives of slavery which challenge the dominant historical representation and especially the positivist approaches of modern historiography by disengaging from realism in literary expression (2005, 18-19).

earlier neo-slave narratives and African American literature" (Nehl 2016, 29). These narratives, notably those of twenty-first century postcolonial realist aesthetics, probe a broad spectrum of issues which challenge the deeply entrenched epistemological methods and cultural transmission. Among the questions addressed, Siemering quotes the following: "What are the responses made possible by fiction to historically silent and silenced stories, to absent and repressed testimony, and to disrupted chains of transmission? What are the possibilities and limitations of literary genre in this respect?" (Siemerling 2015, 159). At the same time, narratives of slavery contribute to the debate about the dynamics between white people, black people and indigenous people within the framework of colonialism and enslavement characterised by the postcolonial "Third Space," i.e. Homi Bhabha's "in-between space" (1994), epitomising alterity and hybridity.

These narratives are also largely concerned with the African diaspora and its journey across different locations within the Black Atlantic, typifying the complex processes of racial and national identity. As a former part of both the British Empire and French colonial administration, Canada should be placed in the postcolonial context, in other words, "it may arguably be thought of as a postcolonial country" (Hammill 2007, 28). The issue of the postcolonial has been the nexus of numerous debates, most convincingly argued by critics such as Faye Hammill who claims that "The Canadian preoccupation with categories of identity, together with its complex history of conquest, settlement and colonisation, irresistibly invite a reading of its literature in postcolonial terms, even as these factors make such reading projects awkward and challenging" (2007, 28). The following section of this volume delves into some of the Canadian literary developments, with a particular focus on national belonging and the construction of race as epitomized by the life and work of Esi Edugyan.

5.3. (Black) "Canadianness" in Literature

Edugyan's work exemplifies the major shifts in Canadian literature since the early 1990s, as outlined by Coral Ann Howells (2003, 1), with a focus on women's fiction written in English. She traces these changes through two major characteristics, the first being "the increasingly familiar

presence of Canadian women's fiction on international publishers' lists together with the high visibility of Canadian women writers as winners of international literary prizes." The other phenomenon reflects the changing concept of Canadianness evident in "the substantially growing number of novels by women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, who make the traditional image of "white" Canada look rather outdated" (Howells 2003, 1). Along with the changes in Canadian literary production came the fast transformation of Canadian literary studies and the national literary canon on several grounds. Faye Hammill (2007, 3) numbers among them the fact that "scholars and educators are increasingly attending to the divergent literary inscriptions of Canada in the work of different ethnic, regional or linguistic groups, focusing in particular on writing by ethnic minority authors and Native Canadians." Tightly linked with this shift is also the close attention to the ways in which whiteness is constructed as a dominant category[23]. And, further exemplified by Edugyan herself is another key change: "the marked increase, since about 1990, of the status of the most widely read Canadian authors on the international cultural scene: the phenomenon of the literary superstar has changed the way Canadian literature is perceived, both at home and abroad" (Hammill 2007, 3).

A Ghanaian Canadian author who was born and raised in Calgary, Edugyan has written several novels which were met with wide acclaim, including the 2018 novel *Washington Black*, and her first nonfiction book *Out of the Sun: Essays at the Crossroads of Race* in 2021. She has been nominated for and won numerous literary awards in Canada and abroad, and her literary success has also propelled her writing fellowships and writer's residences in several countries. Edugyan's own position (voiced in interviews) as a Canadian writer of Ghanaian origin cannot be overlooked or dismissed as extratextual. In her writing, Edugyan actively demonstrates her concerns and interest in Black histories and complex subjects such

[23] As a reminder, whiteness does not constitute a finite category; rather, it "is continually manufactured and sustained through language, laws, policies, science, representations in the news or popular culture and other media, and other channels. It is shaped and reshaped over time, through other ways of defining, interpreting, and categorizing who or what is to be thought of as white" (Lund 2022, 4).

as Canada's slave trade, racism, and the historical grand narrative, deeply rooted in her personal experiences, as she reveals in an interview:

> I was born and raised in Calgary. In all of my school years, slavery in Canada was never mentioned. This was not something that was in the curriculum in the 1980s. That's quite striking. The underground railroads [the network of secret routes and safe houses established in the US during the early to mid-19th century to help enslaved African Americans reach Canada] seems to have been our central Canadian story. That we were a place of refuge and very welcoming. That's not quite the full story. […] From the 1600s into the 1800s, we had slavery on our territory. There were people who were enslaved, mainly working as domestics in households. That is something that is very much a part of our history, but we don't discuss it. (Edugyan 2022, n. p.).

With her latest novel *Washington Black* Edugyan revisits and reconsiders the suppressed and neglected aspects of the Canadian past, while also contributing to contemporary narratives of slavery. By remembering and re-imagining slavery through the story written as a memoir by a former slave with the eponymous name, she examines racial issues, the Black diaspora, migration, the sense of belonging and nationhood. Edugyan thus joins "twenty-first-century black writers [who] continue to write about formerly ignored or marginalized aspects of slavery and, in doing so, enter into a dialogue with both the antebellum slave narrative and twentieth-century neo-slave narratives" (Nehl 2016, 32). Edugyan candidly comments on the elided past of Canada's involvement in the slave trade, her own positioning in Canada and the current race-related developments in North America in her response to the question as to whether she feels any pressure or duty to write about race:

> I did start this book soon after the murder of George Floyd, [so] I felt deeply compelled, rather than obligated, to write about race. Race and racism play their part in my life. *Washington Black*, for instance, is a book about race and racism, but it's also very much a book about a young boy finding his feet and establishing his place in the world and discovering that he's gifted. Character, for me, will always trump ideological explorations of race. I want to explore the lives of people. (Edugyan 2022, n. p.)

Her profound sense of purpose and need to write about race expressed in this statement is Edugyan's contribution to the ongoing debate over race

relations, identity, and nationalism exemplified by her novel *Washington Black*. Additionally, Edugyan echoes Toni Morrison's reference to "literary archaeology" (1987) in her creative revisiting of the world of slavery, a subject which had previously been obscured by incomplete and biased accounts in official records and dominant discourse.

In a lecture for The Henry Kreisel Lecture Series at the Canadian Literature Centre entitled "Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home," delivered in 2014, Edugyan comments on the possibility of home and forming a sense of attachment to a specific home or nation, stating that "I do not think home is a place… I believe it is a way of thinking. Dreaming of elsewheres is one of the ways we struggle with the challenge of what it means to be here – by which I mean at home, in ourselves" (Edugyan 2014, 33). In her deliberations on the sense of belonging or not belonging, Edugyan upholds a complex understanding of the self, with a liminal positioning within the transnational framework of identity formation, recalling Bhabha's in-between space in the rejection of rigorous binaries. In the same lecture, Edugyan pursues another argument that deals with the periodisation and labelling of contemporary literature, and reluctant to apply any definitive terms, claims that

> the age of post-colonial literature has passed, at least for us. We do not live with an empire exerting its fist over us on a daily basis. Post-colonial narratives were written against, and in the wake of, being silenced. They were an act of self-assertion, a necessary counterweight here in Canada to mainstream stories about a homogenous, particular segment of the population. Post-colonialism encouraged a chorus of voices, where for a long time there had been only one. […] But today, in Canada and Britain and the US, a novel written from a "minority" perspective is hardly controversial. If anything, it has become the new dominant kind of narrative. […] We have entered a different age, a post-post-colonial age. I write with the awareness of those who paved the way, but without the challenge or responsibility of shattering their same barriers. (Edugyan 2014, 15)

In this modern era and different world as argued by Edugyan, the preceding circumstances of the slave and post-slave world which shaped the cultural and literary production at the time are reevaluated to incorporate the narratives of slavery within the context of contemporary considerations

of the multiplicity of transnational identities. Her latest novel, *Washington Black,* epitomizes many of these points and is the subject of the following section.

5.4. *Washington Black*: A Narrative of (Post-)Slavery

Edugyan's third novel, published in 2018, described by the author herself "as a post-slavery narrative" (2020, n. p.), represents a blend of different genres, including a trauma novel, a narrative of slavery, an epic adventure, a novel of ideas, of quest and pursuit, as well as a "contemporary postcolonial historical novel" (Dalley 2014). But more importantly, "Edugyan's neo-slave narrative captures the moment when the slave economy begins to transform itself into a new, liberal order" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 62). Set in the 1830s, the narrative depicts the escape of the eleven-year-old slave Washington "Wash" Black from a sugar plantation in Barbados owned by callous master Erasmus Wilde who, as the narrator-cum-protagonist states: "He owned me, as he owned all those I lived among, not only our lives but also our deaths, and that pleased him too much" (Edugyan 2018, 4-5). The novel's opening scenes provides a description of the ironically named Faith plantation. Through a retrospective account from a former slave, the narrative adopts the first-person voice, employing the standard devices found in historical slave narratives: "I was born in the year 1818 on that sun-scorched estate in Barbados. So I was told" (Edugyan 2018, 13). Barbados, situated in the Caribbean, played a pivotal role in the British Empire's sugar trade, while also setting a troubling precedent by introducing harsh racial separation laws, essentially sanctioning the inferiority of African slaves in comparison to Europeans. The ensuing legal discrimination and abuse of enslaved Africans was further applied across other colonies. "Moreover, Barbados witnessed many unsuccessful slave rebellions and became a symbol of the brutalizing effects of racism and slavery" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 66). The conditions and sense of self of the protagonist are laid bare in the following description:

> I was a field nigger. I cleared the cane, only my sweat was of value. I was wielding a hoe at the age of two, and weeding, and collecting fodder for the

> cows, and scooping manure into cane holes with my hands. In my ninth year I was gifted a straw hat and a shovel that I could scarcely lift, and I had felt proud to be counted a man. (Edugyan 2018, 13-14)

After several slaves commit suicide, a plan orchestrated by Washington's protector-slave, a woman named Big Kit, who intended to take Washington to the afterlife in Dahomey with her, the planter Erasmus Wilde devises a particularly cruel and perfidious deterrent: he orders the decapitation of the bodies the slaves who have taken their own lives, announcing to the gathered slaves: "'No man can be reborn without his own head', displaying the dismembered body parts around the plantation on spikes" (Edugyan 2018, 12). According to Dominic Davies, with the inception of attempts "to extend white ownership of black bodies into the afterlife, the novel centres the plantation as a necropolitical heart of darkness […]: it is both a dehumanised and dehumanising space" (2020, 11). Thus, the Barbadian slave world offers "Wash" no mercy until Christopher "Titch" Wilde, the plantation owner's scientist brother, arrives from England to conduct experiments on his hot air balloon/airship he calls "the Cloud-cutter," "a fantastical boat, with two fronts, and oars hanging out," suspended beneath "an enormous smooth ball in a kind of webbing" (Edugyan 2018, 45). Titch embodies the ideals of the Enlightenment, driven by scientific rationalism, and represents an antipode to his brother Erasmus who instructs Titch about the chattel slavery rules, correcting his reference to the servants over dinner: "They are not the help, Titch. They are the furniture" (Edugyan 2018, 23), therefore validating the novel as a narrative of slavery also by the commodification of human life. After all, as postcolonial critics remind us, "Many of the pseudo-objective, 'scientific' discourses by which colonialism justified its practices flowed from the need to rationalize such an indefensible commercial exploitation and oppression, on a mass scale, of millions of human beings" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013, 214).

Washington Black is set in the decade when the United States initiated a concerted federally authorised and organised territorial expansion under President Andrew Jackson who "took the most dramatic action. Jackson believed, 'It [speedy removal] will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters'" (Wright and Locke 2019, 321). The so-called Indian Removal Act (1830) and other

measures were designed to facilitate the expansion of cash-crop plantations made profitable thanks to slave labour. At the same time, the narrative reveals the world of slavery and planter society during the time the Slavery Abolition Act (1833) was passed in the British Empire, sparking a re-examination of socio-economic and racial relations. Furthermore, the novel contributes to the depiction of slavery as essential to the development of modernity on a global scale with a racialised foundation, revealed in Washington's impression when he met his new master: "a white man who possessed the power of life and death over me. I was but a child of the plantation, and as I met his gaze with my own, my mouth soared with dread" (Edugyan 2018, 41). While it is not the focus of the novel's plot, the gendered dimension of the violent system of oppression depicted in *Washington Black* should not be overlooked, as the narrative subtly illustrates it, such as in the episode when Washington realises a house slave girl whom he likes is pregnant:

> It was a common-enough occurrence at Faith for a woman to be taken with child, though actual births were rare, given the conditions in which the mothers toiled. But this I had never expected, Émilie being just eleven, and beautiful and inviolate and God's own angel. It was a slap to me that the fighter might be any man on the land, even the master himself. (Edugyan 2018, 61)

As the novel's eponymous protagonist intimates, not only does the systemic violence and injustice subject the enslaved to cruelty, but they are also integral to the socio-economic and cultural systems founded on colonialism, and characterised by the racialisation and marginalisation of the Other. The novel traces the relationship between the master's brother and the slave in their ambiguous new dynamics which starts when Titch chooses Washington as his manservant due to his suitability as an adequate stabiliser for the hot-air balloon, explaining it in the following manner: "'Your real task', you see, will be to assist in my scientific endeavours', [...] you are precisely the size that I need [...] The weight, you see, that is the key to the Cloud-cutter'" (Edugyan 2018, 36). Intertwined with the issue of otherising is "the novel's centrally conjoined question of Washington's humanity and freedom" conveyed through "[m]etaphoric couplets of heaviness and lightness, flight and flightlessness, and mobility and immobility" (Davies

2020, 13). While Titch instructs Washington to read, write, take measurements and carry out tasks useful for his experiments, he also expresses his abolitionist beliefs: "'Negroes are God's creatures also, with all due rights and freedoms. Slavery is a moral stain against us.' [...] Only years later would his phrasing strike me. In that moment I only thought with horror of the master's discovery of these reports" (Edugyan 2018, 104-105).

Washington's life takes a radical turn when he becomes the sole witness to the Wilde family's cousin committing suicide with a gun: "For though I was very young I understood beyond all doubt that his death must mean my own. I would be blamed; Titch could do nothing to shelter me" (Edugyan 2018, 125). Titch arranges their nighttime flight on the Cloudcutter across the sea to Virginia after colliding with a ship mast. Their subsequent travels take them through different areas of North America, Europe, and North Africa, exemplifying the triangular trade and structure common to global picaresque novels, with episodes set in various parts of the world. For Dominic Davies, "*Washington Black*'s troubling of the bildungsroman occurs not only structurally, but also geographically, wherein its different spaces are contrapuntally unsettled in the manner of Gikandi's own re-evaluation of Enlightenment modernity" (2020, 9). In this manner, the novel incorporates history as both a subject and narrative form, but for the protagonist it is science which emerges as the nexus of his identity.

5.5. Enlightenment Science and Slavery

Throughout the novel, Edugyan explores the opposition of different worlds and concepts: slavery and freedom, belonging and marginalisation, individual care and systemic hegemony, the world of nature and human nature. Thus, we trace the development of Washington's talents in the various stages of his life, at the same time observing his transformation, since not only is his aptitude for science nurtured, but his awareness also undergoes a shift as he grows increasingly uncertain about the power distribution and racial norms embedded within the slave society. Increasingly, the master-slave/servant relationship evolves into a new dynamic of scientist-protector and apprentice, albeit remaining bound by the structural

constraints inherent in post-slavery. Wash's growth as a person of skills, primarily as an illustrator, overlaps with his development as a former slave who sees his talent for science and overall progress as a means to come into his own, to assert his independence from Titch and the white man's domination. Although Washington strives to embrace the Enlightenment principles and his sense of possibilities, he is continuously reminded of the bleak reality in which he is marked as a racialised Other, subjected to dehumanisation:

> It had happened so gradually, but these months with Titch had schooled me to believe I could leave all misery behind, I could cast off all violence, outrun a vicious death. I had even begun thinking I'd been born for a higher purpose, to draw the earth's bounty, and to invent; I had imagined my existence a true and rightful part of the natural order. How wrongheaded it had all been. I was a black boy, only – I had no future before me, and little grace or mercy behind me. I was nothing, I would die nothing, hunted hastily down and slaughtered. (Edugyan 2018, 165)

Regardless of how much he advances in the world, he encounters constraints on account of his background which even his talents and achievements cannot overcome. While he admits how he used to see "science as the great equalizer" (Edugyan 2018, 297), the realities of the structural discrimination and hegemony overshadow his ambitions, hopes, and potential for equitable recognition. Hence, at a certain point in the novel, after a number of personal and professional challenges, Washington starts work as an illustrator for Goff, whom he describes as: "a greatly celebrated marine zoologist, a man whose books I had studied with a religiosity and fervour rarely given to anything" (Edugyan 2018, 256). Goff takes Washington under his wing, supporting his invention of tanks for the transportation of marine wildlife from Nova Scotia to London and the exhibition in the Ocean House facility. Just as with Goff's books which Washington illustrates, the scientific venture is marred by his disappointment that he will never be recognised for the project which was accepted by the Zoological Committee in London for a permanent exhibition of aquatic life:

> My name, I understood, would never be known in the history of the place. It would be Goff, […] who would forever be celebrated as the father of Ocean House […] Goff was not a bad man—he did not like to take credit for my

> discoveries in principle […] I understood too the greater conundrum—for how could I, a Negro eighteen years old, with no formal scientific training, approach the committee on my own, or even be seen as an equal in the enterprise? (Edugyan 2018, 316)

The structural limitations are made evident for Washington whose sense of pride in the project's accomplishment is diminished, revealing it to be a mechanism of white social control: "Washington's success, then, will never belong to him. It needs to be legitimised by white men, much like the historical slave-narratives were authenticated by the white people whose prefaces preceded the text" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 75). In the end, Washington summarises his life and work against the background of systemic inequalities and limitations:

> I had sweated and made gut-wrenching mistakes, and in the end my name would be nowhere. Did it matter? I did not know if it mattered. I understood only that I would have to find a way to make peace with the loss, or I would have to leave the whole enterprise behind and everyone connected with it. (Edugyan 2018, 385)

The novel's ambit is broad, with each location and episode of symbolic significance, serving as a reminder of the relevance of space in addressing the issues of race and identity because these concepts are intricately intertwined. As Katherine McKittrick writes, "the struggle of asserting black in/and Canada necessitates an understanding of geography that is ongoing, connected to, yet displaced from, white geographic domination" (2006, 96). Thus, Titch and Washington travel to Nova Scotia where Titch unexpectedly and unfathomably heads out into the Arctic storm, leaving Washington behind. At the age of sixteen, Washington is left on his own, with his face disfigured from an early scientific experiment with Titch, seeking clues as to Titch's fate and the reasons for his abandonment. His experiences in different locations in Nova Scotia depict his otherisation due to his skin colour and scars, but also how "the history of black subjects in the diaspora is a geographic story that is, at least in part, a story of material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements" (McKittrick 2006, xiv). His journey, largely a quest for answers to why Titch rejected him, eventually takes him to the heart of the British Empire

when Washington and his partner, Goff's daughter Tanna, pay a visit to Titch's childhood home and mother. These spaces represent Washington's reference points – margin and centre ‑ the Faith plantation and another estate, the Wilde country house in England. Davies lists two main reasons for the importance of these locations: "first, they are the most relatively distant locations included in the novel's diegetic world; and second, they constitute two ends of an economic process, one the site of extracted labour and capital, the other of its eventual concretisation" (2020, 10). This passage from the novel, interwoven with suspense and gothic elements, encapsulates the structural dominance spawned at the "big house," which reached across the world, to determine the fates of millions, including that of Washington Black:

> Finally we reached the edge of the great estate. Driving up the gravel path, through the silver maples, we glimpsed buildings so rotted it was impossible they should be standing. [...] I felt myself nearing the centre of a great darkness, a world from which my childhood, Faith – the endless suffering and labour there – was but a single spoke on a vast wheel. Here was the source, the beginning and the end of a power that asserted itself over life, death, the very birth of children. (Edugyan 2018, 327-328)

Washington recalls the course of his life against the global system of colonial exploitation and abuse of the Other which continues in post-slavery and is "also a systemic feature of the neoliberal order which does not only apply to the descendants of the African slaves" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 73). The world he describes is a baffling juxtaposition of violence, human bondage, and labour extraction on the one hand, and the propounding of liberal values on the other. Towards the end, when Washington finally manages to track down Titch in a Moroccan desert settlement, Titch and Washington discuss their relationship and the way Titch chose him for his servant-assistant in his own words: "'Do you suppose just anybody could have grasped the complexity of those equations? You were a rare thing.' 'Thing?' 'Person. A rare person'" (Edugyan 2018, 405). Titch's statement is not a mere slip of the tongue, but a reflection of their inability to engage in a meaningful conversation and, more ultimately, of deep-seated logocentric world-views and the "European imperial discourse [that] fetishized difference and propagated a vision of the world where human

beings were divided into distinct biological races" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 63). Washington comes to realise the principle of commodification at work in their relationship and the systemic abuse built around the slave economy: "'I was nothing to you. You never saw me as equal. You were more concerned that slavery should be a moral stain upon white men than by the actual damage it wreaks on black men'" (Edugyan 2018, 405). By echoing Titch's liberal ideas from the early days of their encounter, Washington demonstrates the concept of "the empire writes back" (cf. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002) in response to the enduring legacy of colonialism and systemic violence based on race and ethnicity, with ongoing controversies in today's world.

At the same time, the affective aspect of Edugyan's narrative strategy should not be overlooked: "Edugyan treats this complex issue in a very personal way; the reader becomes invested in her protagonists, their idiosyncrasies and inconsistent behaviours, which gain a more universal dimension" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 77). Consequently, *Washington Black* seems to belong to those literary texts which, as Markus Nehl maintains, "examine the connection between the period of slavery and forms of systemic racism in the twenty-first century" (2016, 34).

6. "We the People"

> We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.[24]
>
> *Constitution of the United States*, 1787

6.1. Free and Equal?

After two centuries of chattel slavery, the status of Black people in the United States, as free and equal citizens, was regulated by three post-Civil War Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution – the 13th (1865), 14th (1866) and the 15th (1870). The first abolished slavery, the second granted them citizenship, and the latter the right to vote. The prominence of Black people in public life enraged some whites who openly started the use of terrorist intimidation and violence against Black citizens. The campaign was upheld by new laws and restrictions. Suffrage was limited by specific demands, i.e. literacy tests and poll taxes, and free and cheap labour was guaranteed by introducing the so-called Black Codes[25]. Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Black Codes were revived in the form of the notorious Jim Crow Laws. These laws introduced the near-total segregation of white and Black peoples' lives, including residential areas, schools, churches and hospitals. Miscegenation was justified by the need to maintain the social and cultural "purity" of the whites, but the

[24] *Constitution of the United States*. United States Senate. The constitution was written in 1787, ratified in 1788, and in operation since 1789. Retrieved 28 September 2022, from https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm

[25] A version of Slave Codes, issued in 1865-1866.

main reason was the preservation of absolute political power, which had started to wane. The pillar of this power structure was both profit and the established patriarchal roles of the white man as the guardian of family and community, and the chaste, morally pure wife, mother and daughter.

In order to instil a profound sense of terror and extreme insecurity, especially among the coloured population, hate organisations like Ku Klux Klan were founded. The Klan was organised like an Empire, whose tasks and roles were established in its first prescript in 1867; at the highest level there was a great wizard, followed by a hierarchy of grand dragons, grand titans, grand cyclopes, grand giants, furies, hydras and goblins. They had a uniform consisting of white hoods and long robes, and a holy book, named the *Kloran*. Although the Klan's Act was declared unconstitutional (1882) and its crimes investigated, the organisation continued to spread terror and manipulate the desired political landscape. During the first peak of the Klan's campaign, between 1868 and 1870, many of its victims disappeared without a trace[26].

The negative depiction of Black people in the newspapers incited mob lynchings. When Henry Smith, a mentally disabled Black farm worker, was accused of "raping and dismembering the four-year-old daughter of the local sheriff," and the event appeared in the news, his punishment became a public spectacle with around 10,000 men, women and children watching. The victim was called a "brute," "fiend," "inhuman monster," and a "black beast" (Livingstone 2012, 1):

> An elevated platform was erected for the execution. Smith was escorted to it and securely tied down. And then, as the throng of ten thousand men, women, and children looked on, the spectacle began.
> His clothes were torn off piecemeal and scattered in the crowd, people catching the shreds and putting them away as mementos. The child's father, her brother, and two uncles then gathered about the negro as he lay fastened

[26] The Klan's prescript gained its name *Kloran* in 1920, and in the same year, the Klan expanded its bias and hatred towards foreigners, organised labour, Roman Catholics, and Jews. In 1991, former Klan grand wizard David Duke ran for governor of Louisiana and won slightly over 50 percent of the white vote. *13th Amendment*. History. Retrieved 2 October 2022, from https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/thirteenth-amendment.

> to the torture platform and thrust hot irons into his quivering flesh. (…) After burning the feet and legs, the hot irons—plenty of fresh ones being at hand—were rolled up and down Smith's stomach, back, and arms. Then the eyes were burned out and irons were thrust down his throat. Next, Smith was burned alive.
>
> The negro rolled and tossed out of the mass, (…) only to be pushed back by the people nearest him. He tossed out again, and was roped and pulled back. Hundreds of people turned away, but the vast crowd still looked calmly on. (2012, 1-2)

At this point, two facts come to mind. First, the mass witch hysteria occurring in Early Modern Europe and the early colonies in the "New World." The witch hunt (or witch purge) lasted from around the 1450s until the 1700s and resulted in up to 80,000 women being tortured and burnt to death. Witchcraft was considered heresy, and any collaboration with the "devil" a serious matter in need of its own manual. The complex guide on how to identify, hunt and interrogate witches is known under the name *Malleus Maleficarum*, or, The Hammer of Witches (Mackay 2009). Second, in colonial times, the number of Irish settlers in America was close to that of the British and they were a constituent part of the white mass demanding the preservation of their "purity"[27].

6.2. Equal but Separated

The long period of segregation, marginalisation and ostracism denied Black citizens any opportunity for equal development. Black people could only find low-paid jobs, if any at all, and families struggled to make ends meet on meagre incomes, often in neighbourhoods with high-crime rates. Few Black families could afford to provide their children with quality education and health care. The verbal, physical and emotional abuse of African Americans was an everyday occurrence, and many Black men, women and children often experienced instances of unwarranted, excessive police brutality. The lack of prospects for leading a healthy life meant

[27] Retrieved 15 September 2023, from https://www.history.com/news/when-america-despised-the-irish-the-19th-centurys-refugee-crisis.

that young Black men, often children, were caught in a vicious circle of imprisonment, joblessness because of a criminal record, and renewed imprisonment for some petty crime, or no crime at all. However, what was worst of all was the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness since the positions of judges and police chiefs were occupied by former Confederate commanders and soldiers, their sons and grandsons.

From the 1950s onwards, things started to change. In 1960, Ruby Bridges' parents decided to send their six-year-old daughter to an all-white school. The protests were so vehement that Ruby and her mother had to be escorted to school by federal marshals each day that year. Furious white parents withdrew their children from school, and Ruby spent that day in the principal's office. Only one teacher, Barbara Henley, a native white Boston teacher, was willing to teach Ruby, and Ruby remained her sole pupil until the end of that school year. To reach the school, Ruby had to pass through crowds "screaming vicious slurs at her." One woman was "holding a black baby doll in a coffin." Ruby's father lost his job; her grandparents were "evicted from the farm where they had lived for a quarter-century." However, some white people aided the family with emotional support and money. "Ruby graduated from a desegregated high school, became a travel agent, married and had four sons"[28]. Although the Civil Rights Act (1964) ended the application of the Jim Crow laws and prohibited all kinds of discrimination (on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex or national origin) in employment practices such as hiring, promoting, and firing and was intended to improve voting rights, employment, public accommodation, education, and more, for many Black citizens this development came too late. According to psychiatrists and other health experts, living through so many years of stress and trauma took a physical toll on entire generations of Black Americans and their offspring. Moreover, constant exposure to emotionally toxic environments can give rise to adverse childhood experiences, which may ultimately lead to all kinds of impairments (social, emotional and cognitive) and spawn various health-risk behaviours.

[28] Michals, Debra. 2015. *Ruby Bridges*. National's Woman History Museum. Retrieved 25 October 2021, from https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ruby-bridges.

When a community experiences a collective trauma, i.e. slavery, their descendants can experience and show "adverse emotional and behavioural reactions to the event that (…) similar to those of the person himself or herself"[29]. This phenomenon is known as *intergenerational* trauma (also called transgenerational, multinational, secondary traumatisation) and can involve

> shame, increased anxiety and guilt, a heightened sense of vulnerability and helplessness, low self-esteem, depression, suicidality, substance abuse, dissociation, hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, difficulty with relationships and attachment to others, difficulty in regulating aggression, and extreme reactivity to stress.[30]

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is a concept based on Joy DeGruy's twelve-year qualitative and quantitative research in both America and Africa. According to DeGruy, PTSS is a condition which stems from viewing African Americans as inherently/genetically inferior to whites, centuries of chattel slavery, and the perpetuation of the trauma due to years of institutionalised racism. In other words, PTSS is a "multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression plus the absence of opportunity to heal or access the benefits available in the society" (DeGruy 2005, 114). The (mal)adaptive survival behaviours are passed down through generations and involve:

> Vacant Esteem – Insufficient development (primary esteem), along with feelings of hopelessness, depression and a general self-destructive outlook.
> Marked Propensity for Anger and Violence – Extreme feelings of suspicion perceived negative motivations of others. Violence against self, property and others, including the members of one's own group, i.e., friends, relatives, or acquaintances.
> Racist Socialization and (internalized racism) – Learned Helplessness, literacy deprivation, distorted self-concept, antipathy or aversion for (…) members, mores, customs and physical customs associated with own identified cultural/ethnic group. (DeGruy 2005, 114)

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[29] *Intergenerational trauma*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved 30 October 2021, from https://dictionary.apa.org/intergenerational-trauma.

[30] Ibid.

Understanding the above processes is of the utmost importance for both individuals and communities seeking to increase their resilience and well-being. Many anti-racism programmes have borne fruit, but the need for adequate self-coping and self-soothing strategies remains essential.

Given that a great deal of postcolonial literature is the result of black people demanding that their voices be heard, the following two sections will explore two different types of experience, as presented in the selected works of the Black American authors Austin Channing Brown and George Yancy.

6.3. *I'm Still Here* and Its Backlash

Austen Channing Brown, born in 1984, is a new generation American female writer, public speaker and social activist fighting for racial justice in the contemporary United States. Her 2018 nonfiction memoir, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, became a bestseller in the wake of the George Floyd[31] murder and nationwide protests. Early in her career, Brown focused on the social problems of homelessness, youth engagement, and church operations. Nowadays, she works as a media producer and creates content which focuses on the experiences of Black women, dismantling the foundations of white supremacy.

After gaining a Bachelor of Arts in business management, Brown obtained her M.A. in social justice. Growing up in a predominantly white environment, Brown faced attacks against her being "Black, Christian and Female in White America." Consequently, combining facts from African American history and Brown's view on them, *I'm Still Here* is an account of her struggle with racial and gender identity issues. In addition to inspiring change in the broader culture, her book was also intended to inspire a world of justice, celebrate "the rich complexity of Blackness, in a

[31] George Floyd is a Black man who died after being handcuffed and forced to the ground with a police officer kneeling on his neck, which prevented him from breathing. The event was captured on video and sparked a national uprising and mass protests worldwide. McKelvey, Tara. 21 April 2021. *George Floyd: The murder that drove America to the brink*. BBC News. Retrieved 22 September 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56825822.

world made for Whiteness," and "empower Black women"[32] who, like her, might often feel lonely and isolated. The memoir is written in an informal tone and employs casual vocabulary. Various themes are explored in the book, including white supremacy, white fragility, white guilt, the white-washing of white people in communication with Black people, loneliness and the impossibility of forming friendships either at school or at work, the confusion about her own identity, the importance of maintaining her "Blackness" and the role of friends in shaping that identity.

For some readers, Brown's memoir can be a difficult read. However, when all presumptions, personal biases, generalisations and stereotyping are set aside, several important insights can be gleaned. First, Brown uses numerous terms regarding race which might be unfamiliar to a typical reader, i.e. *white fragility* and *white guilt*. In fact, a whole chapter of Brown's account is dedicated to *white fragility,* and she openly expresses her weariness with *white guilt*:

> I don't have much use for white guilt anymore. I used to interpret white guilt as an early sign of a change in heart, a glimpse that a movie, program, or speaker had broken through and was producing a changed mind. While that may or not may be true, for those on the receiving end, white guilt is like having tar dry all over your hands and heart. It takes so much work to peel off the layers, rub away the stickiness, get rid of the smell. Unsolicited confessions inspired by a sense of guilt are often poured over Black bodies in search of their own relief. (Brown 2018, 55)

The book offers a valuable insight into the state of mind of a 34-year-old Black Christian woman in the intricate web of race relations today.

In 2015, the New York Times published George Yancy's letter to its wide readership. Yancy is a Black professor of philosophy at Emory College of Arts and Science, an editor and a public lecturer with critical race theory, critical whiteness studies and African American philosophy as his main fields of interest. He is also the author of many books, including *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America*,

[32] *Austin Channing Brown. Justice, Joy, Storytelling & The Celebration of Black Womanhood.* Austin Channing Brown. Retrieved 5 September 2022, from http://austinchanning.com/.

published in 2018. The letter published by the New York Times was entitled "Dear White America," and the response Yancy received from white readers form the nucleus of the book. Here is the introductory part:

> Dear White America,
> I have a weighty request. As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror, as James Baldwin would say. Did you hear that? You may have missed it. I repeat: *I want you to listen with love*. Well, at least try. (Yancy 2018, 27)

In explaining his appeal to the readers, and urging them to accept some responsibility, Yancy draws a comparison to his being sexist and complicit in degrading and objectifying women. Nevertheless, he is a philosopher, refuses to live a lie, and considers himself a decent human being. Yancy says:

> Again, take a deep breath. Don't tell me about how many Black friends you have. Don't tell me that you are married to someone of color. Don't tell me that you voted for Obama. Don't tell me that *I'm* the racist. Don't tell me that you don't see color. Don't tell me that I'm blaming whites for everything. To do so is to hide yet again. You may have never used the N–word in your life, you may hate the KKK, but that does not mean that you don't harbor racism and benefit from racism.
> After all, you are part of a system that allows you to walk into stores where you are not followed (…) As you reap comfort from being white, we suffer from being Black and people of color. But your comfort is linked to our pain and suffering. Just as my comfort in being male is linked to the suffering of women, which makes me sexist, so, too, you are racist. That is the gift that I want you to accept, to embrace. It is a form of knowledge that is taboo. Imagine the impact that the acceptance of this gift might have on you and the word. (Yancy 2018, 30)

The central theme of *Backlash* (2018) is Yancy's discovery that despite the twenty-first-century equality rhetoric, racism in America is still very much alive. George Yancy is regarded as one of the most prominent and important philosophers of race in America today.

7. Making Monsters

> In the end, it comes down to values […] We want the world our children inheirt to be defined by the values enshrined in the UN Charter: peace, justice, respect, human rights, tolerance and solidarity.
>
> António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General[33]

7.1. The United States of America

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black male, entered a grocery shop to buy a pack of cigarettes. On the day of the murder, he was unemployed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Mr Floyd was known in the neighbourhood as a nice person. Still, when he paid for the cigarettes with a twenty dollar bill, the teenage employee believed it was counterfeit and reported it to the police. According to the 911 transcript, the employee also added that Mr Floyd was awfully drunk, not in control of himself and not acting right. However, court transcripts from police body cameras showed that Mr Floyd was cooperative and apologising to the officers. The struggle started when the officers tried to put Mr Floyd into their squad car. He told the officers he was claustrophobic:

> When Mr Chauvin arrived at the scene, he pulled Mr Floyd away from the passenger side, causing him to fall to the ground (…) He lay there, face down, still in handcuffs. That's when *witnesses* started to *film* Mr Floyd, who appeared to be in a distressed state.
> Mr Floyd was restrained by officers, while Mr Chauvin placed his left knee between his head and neck.
> For more than nine minutes, Mr Chauvin kept his knee on Mr Floyd's neck (…). The transcript of bodycam footage from officers Lane and J Alexander

[33] *The United Nations. About Us*. Retrieved 10 November 2022, from https://www.un.org/en/about-us.

> Kueng show Mr Floyd said more than 20 times he could not breathe as he was restrained. He was also pleading for his mother and begging "please, please, please."
> At one point, Mr Floyd gasps: "You're going to kill me, man."
> Officer Chauvin replies: "Then stop talking, stop yelling. It takes heck of a lot of oxygen to talk."
> Mr Floyd says: "Can't believe this, man. Mom, love you. Love you. Tell my kids I love them. I'm dead."
> A female *bystander* told the police: "His nose is bleeding, come on now."
> About six minutes into that period, Mr Floyd became non-responsive.
> In videos of the incident, this was when Mr Floyd fell silent, as *bystanders* urged the officers to check his pulse.
> Officer Kueng did just that, checking Mr Floyd's right wrist, but "couldn't find one." Yet the other officers did not move.
> At 20:27, Mr Chauvin removed his knee from Mr Floyd's neck. Motionless, Mr Floyd was rolled on to a gurney and taken to the Hennepin County Medical Center in an ambulance.
> He was pronounced dead about an hour later.[34]

Mr Floyd's modern-day lynching is only one of numerous cases of police officers using unwarranted excessive force against Black Americans. Only in rare cases have the perpetrators been prosecuted[35]. During 2020, Black people were also subjected to other forms of abuse, i.e. "non-lethal force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, at higher levels than white people"[36], more Black people were on probation or parole, and, in general, were more likely to be imprisoned than white people[37]. Following Mr Floyd's tragic death, *The Black Lives Matter* movement *(#BlackLivesMatter)*[38], an organisation which

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[34] Our italics. *George Floyd: What happened in the final moments of his life.* (16 July 2021). BBC News. Retrieved 12 November 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726.

[35] See also other cases of police brutality: *George Floyd: Timeline of black deaths and protests*. (22 April 2021). BBC News. Retrieved 12 November 2022, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52905408.

[36] Statista. 17 November 2021. *Percentage of people in the U.S. without health insurance by ethnicity 2010-2021.* Retrieved 1 December 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/200970/percentage-of-americans-without-health-insurance-by-race-ethnicity/.

[37] Human Rights Watch Report (2021): United States. Retrieved 1 December 2022, from https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/united-states.

[38] Founded in 2013. *Black Lives Matter Movement*. Howard University. Law Library. Retrieved 5 December 2022, from https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM.

fights racial injustice by combating and countering acts of police violence, helped organise worldwide protests. The protests drew attention to Europe's and America's colonial past and the disparities in how laws are enforced.

According to the *Human Rights Watch Report* (2021), due to racial disparity, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by Black communities in terms of the risk of infection, more serious forms of the disease and related mortality. The pandemic has also had a severe economic impact on Black citizens, which in turn has aggravated their mental health problems, i.e. anxiety and depression, and related anti-social behaviour both in families and communities. The situation has been compounded by governments' inadequate approach to the problem. Due to their employment in low-wage service positions and unsafe working conditions, which enabled the rapid transmission of the disease, women's health was particularly affected. In 2020, 12 percent of Black people in the United States had no health insurance[39]. In the same year, some localities and the state of California finally acknowledged the link between such disparities and the legacy of slavery and considered various forms of reparations to address them. In the meantime, while traditional forms of slavery may persist due to deeply embedded traditional beliefs and customs, various forms of modern slavery have emerged such as forced labour (bonded, debt and migrant workers, domestic servitude, work in the construction and garment industries, agricultural work and forced prostitution), trafficking (the exploitation of people by coercion or use of force, i.e. prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation) and child labour.

Nonetheless, it is not only child labour which poses a threat to children's development. In 2020, when schools were closed due to the pandemic in all U.S. states, and many switched to online learning, "one in five school-aged children did (or do) not have access to a computer or high-speed internet at home"[40]. In 2016, amidst a complex political landscape, Hillary

[39] Statista. 17 November 2021. *Percentage of people in the U.S. without health insurance by ethnicity 2010-2021.* Statista. Retrieved 1 December 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/200970/percentage-of-americans-without-health-insurance-by-race-ethnicity/.

[40] Statista. 17 November 2021. *Percentage of people in the U.S. without health insurance by ethnicity 2010-2021.* Retrieved 1 December 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/200970/percentage-of-americans-without-health-insurance-by-race-ethnicity/.

Clinton's previous public refererence to young black offenders as "super-predators" (1994) played a decisive role in Donald's Trump rise to the Presidency (2016).

In 2020 alone, President Trump succeeded in limiting access to women's health care and withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Agreement[41]. He described the corona virus using racist language, adopted an aggressive stance towards protesters demanding racial justice, treated immigrants and asylum seekers inhumanely, and praised authoritarian leaders. "His administration continued to provide military assistance and approve arms sales to countries with poor human rights records"[42]. In February 2020, pressed by U.S. voters, President Trump ordered U.S. forces to withdraw from Afghanistan. In 2021, the president himself instigated an attack on the Capitol. Previously, under his presidency, the U.S. withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council[43].

7.2. The Republic of South Africa

Since the first democratic elections in1994, South Africans have been referred to as the *Rainbow People*. This term was meant to symbolise the country's national unity and harmony under its charismatic leader, Nelson Mandela. Nowadays, however, over a decade since Mandela's death, South Africa has experienced such a surge in violence that, in 2018, the Global Peace Index listed it "as one of the most dangerous places on earth"[44]. Although the underlying reasons and consequences of this wide-scale violence bear similarities to those in the United States – prolonged periods of

[41] The International treaty introduces regulations about pollution reduction and addresses climate change.

[42] Statista. 17 November 2021. *Percentage of people in the U.S. without health insurance by ethnicity 2010-2021*. Retrieved 1 December 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/200970/percentage-of-americans-without-health-insurance-by-race-ethnicity/.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Heinecken, Lindy. 15 January 2020. *What's behind violence in South Africa: a sociologist's perspective*. The Conversation. Retrieved 10 October 2022, from https://theconversation.com/whats-behind-violence-in-south-africa-a-sociologists-perspective-128130.

deprivation, inequality, and humiliation, South Africa differs in terms of the years of torture under apartheid.

Torture, as described by Coetzee, still exists in South Africa today. Most of it occurs in prisons because of the victims' status of criminal suspects, which appears to "justify" the inflicting of extreme suffering. Even if they survive, these victims are usually overlooked. Given that this phenomenon has far-reaching consequences for families, communities and the society as a whole, putting an end to this practice is of the utmost importance for South Africa. According to Human Rights Watch (2021), 2020 in South Africa was marked by widespread outbursts of racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Despite the national action plan to combat such issues, law enforcement officials fail to respond to these incidents[45], and foreign nationals are subjected to verbal and physical attacks by mobs. As reported in this source, police officers often take an active part in mobbing.

In addition to the women's rights issues already mentioned in the United States chapter, South Africa is also "facing a crisis of gender-based violence (GBV)"[46]. In September 2020, three bills to amend the Criminal Law were introduced to address the problem of sexual offences and domestic violence. Thus far, the perpetrators had managed to avoid the consequences of such crimes. However, despite this new legislation, South Africa continues to see a rise in violence against women. According to the 2021 statistics, there were 9,556 rapes[47] in three months alone – an increase of 71 percent from the third quarter of 2020.

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[45] Human Rights Watch: South Africa (2020). Retrieved 10 October 2022, from https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/south-africa.

[46] *South Africans must end torture now*. 26 June 2016. Retrieved 10 December 2022, from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/06/south-african-must-end-torture-now/#:~:text=Today%2C%2026%20June%2C%20marks%20the,or%20degrading%20treatment%20or%20punishment.

[47] J. M. Coetzee addresses this issue in his novel *Disgrace* (1999).

7.3. The Democratic Republic of the Congo

For ordinary people, life in the DRC is a nightmare. Since its independence from Belgium in 1960, the country has lived through two civil wars: the First Congo War (1996-1997) and the Second Congo War (1988-2003, also known as the Great War of Africa)[48]. The country is marked by widespread ethnic hostilities and terrorised by armed militia and rebel groups. To date, no government has managed to achieve lasting political stability, and corruption and misuse of the country's resources pervade all levels of authority. The population suffer from starvation, malnutrition, disease, general exhaustion and all kinds of abuse, including torture, forced disappearances and arbitrary imprisonment.

All peaceful protests culminated bloody confrontations and human rights defenders face threats, intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and detention from both state authorities and armed groups. Nobel Laureate Dr. Denis Mukwege[49] has received death threats for his advocacy of justice for serious crimes. He is most recognised for his efforts to end violence against women whose systematic rape and mutilation is used as a means of terror and displacement of the population. According to Mukwege, men in the DRC grow up surrounded by aggression and this is all they learn. They were exposed to violence both in childhood and wartime and feel a sense of shame for not being able to act like "men."

Apart from the impact on women, the situation in the DRC also has severe effects on children. Dr Claudia Seymour[50], who went to DRC to work as a child protection advisor to the UN peacekeeping mission, published her research in a book called *The Myth of International Protection: War and Survival in Congo* (2019). Here are some excerpts:

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[48] A war between Uganda and Rwanda for control of the lucrative eastern region (Seymour 2019, 3)

[49] Denis Mukwege (b. 1955), a Congolese physician noted for his work in treating victims of sexual violence.

[50] Her research investigates all forms of violence and how young people engage with conflict. She has 19 years of experience working with multiple UN bodies. *Dr Claudia Seymour*. SOAS. Department of Developmental Studies. The University of London. Retrieved 20 December 2022, from https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff61086.php.

> When I arrived there [early 2006], life expectancy at birth was barely fifty years, while health care and other basic services were almost entirely absent throughout large parts of the country (…).
> One obvious indicator of this failing social system was the rapidly rising population of street children. By 2006, their numbers in Kisangani had swelled, as children living in households on the furthest edges of precarity were pushed out of their homes, blamed by adults for all possible household hardships, from AIDS to the breakdown of families, to the suffocating impossibility of meeting daily survival needs.
> 19 November 2006: Sunday night. I light a candle in honour of La Vie, the corpse of the boy we uncovered this morning. His body mutilated by the black-grey scars of a hot iron (…) How old had he been? No one knew. A child of the street, mourned in trembling wails by his street sisters, by the angry and clenched fists of his street brothers—to everyone else, he was a life worth nothing. (Seymour 2019, 4)

Children[51] forced to live on the street are easy targets for child trafficking, sexual slavery and military recruitment. According to the UNICEF's report from 2018, "in the Kasaïs region alone, between 5,000 and 10,000 children have been associated with the militias"[52].

When Coetzee's magistrate confronts Colonel Joll with his responsibility for the atrocities and calls him an enemy who deserves to hang for his crimes, Joll calmly responds that there will be no historical account because the matter is "too trivial":

> Captain Joll: You seem to have a new ambition. You seem to want a make a name for yourself as the One Just Man, the man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom to his principles. But let me ask you: do you believe that that is how your fellow-citizens see you after the ridiculous spectacle you created on the square the other day? Believe me, to people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman. You are dirty, you

[51] The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) was adopted in 1990, and came into force in 1999. Like the United Nation's Convention, the Children's Charter is an instrument which defines the universal principles and norms for the status of children. *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.* Child Rights Resource Centre. Retrieved 9 January 2022, from https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/african-charter-rights-child/.

[52] The crimes perpetrated by UN peacekeepers and the role of the U.S. in selling arms to the DRC are purposedly left out because of the complexity of the issue.

> stink, they can smell you a mile away. You look like an old beggar-man, a refuse-scavenger (…). You have no future here.
> You want to go down in history as a martyr, I suspect. But who is going to put you in the history books? These border troubles are of no significance. In a while they will pass and the frontier will go to sleep for another twenty years. People are not interested in the history of the back of beyond.
> The magistrate: Those pitiable prisoners [nomads and fisherfolk] you brought in - are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel! (…) You are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need–starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!"
> Captain Joll: Nonsense. There will be no history, the affair is too trivial. (Coetzee, 1980: 79)

Nonetheless, some of the history of the "back beyond" has surfaced and become of interest. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2018 and the awakened consciousness in Europe, the statues of King Leopold in Belgium were removed[53] and relocated to museums. Moreover, Belgium's minister Alexander De Croo has raised the budget for humanitarian aid and is urging other countries to do more. However, until peace is restored and the level of corruption curbed, little humanitarian aid will reach those in need. On 30 June 2020, Belgium's King Philippe expressed his *deepest regrets* for the past injustices inflicted on the Congolese during 75 years of colonial rule. A parliamentary commission was set up to examine Belgium's colonial past[54].

To conclude this chapter, there is no better voice than that of the magistrate:

> Now herded by their guards they stand in a hopeless little knot in the corner of the yard, nomads and fisherfolk together, sick, famished, damaged, terrified. It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert (having put a meal in them first, perhaps, to make the march possible), to have them dig,

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[53] *Belgium removes statue of King Leopold II in wake of Black Lives Matter movement*. 1 July 2021. ABC News. Retrieved 24 December 2022, from https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-01/belgium-removes-king-leopold-congo-independence-black-lives/12408672.

[54] Ibid.

with their last strength, a pit large enough for all of them to lie in (or even to dig it for them!), and, leaving them buried there forever and forever, to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions.

But that will not be my way. The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble. Thus it is that administration of law and order in these parts having today passed back to me, I order that the prisoners be fed, that the doctor be called in to do what he can, that the barracks return to being a barracks, that arrangements be made to restore the prisoners to their former lives as soon as possible, as far as possible. (Coetzee 1980, 17)

8. Conclusion

In today's world, despite numerous improvements, including those in education, and critical discussions about inclusion, we often witness violations of the human rights of diverse individuals and population groups, including Black community members. When acts of violence committed by white population members against Black victims result in fatalities, the public outcry is strong, but often short-lived. At the same time, the rise in anti-racist and other organisations for the promotion of the human rights of Black people, such as The Black Lives Matter movement, also reinforces the impression that positive developments are taking place in the field of combating racist practices, but this is only superficially true. Due to the long-term exploitation of resources, the lack of possibilities to develop their full potential, and the historic systematic psycho-physical abuse by white imperialists and supremacists, the majority of Africans live on the brink of poverty and starvation. The situation is somewhat different and slightly better in the United States, where in principle Black Americans enjoy more equitable opportunities and conditions than Africans, but compared to the white population in the US, the disparities remain far from satisfactory. The problem compounded by the fact that the colonial and racist ramifications of fractured identity and troubled history are felt from generation to generation, thus forming an endless vicious circle of neglected needs, distorted self-image, mental health problems, violence, and complex traumas. These issues are only partially addressed in the media, highlighting the need for a comprehensive examination through various theoretical and critical perspectives, but also within a broader context. This is why our analysis extended the research of Black narratives to encompass South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Notwithstanding obvious differences in their experiences of colonisation and its aftermath, all three countries continue to experience persistent challenges stemming from slavery and systemic violence, including cultural violence.

Characterised by a high level of heterogeneity, the texts selected for this study illustrate both the necessity and relevance for a wide range of literary perspectives of Black narratives in order to fully explore the significance of the colonial past as well as the conjunction of transnational settings and historical representation. Set in different geographical regions and historical periods, the material analysed in this volume addresses a range of human rights violations through the history of colonialism and its aftermath. Some of these instances are exemplified by literary works, starting with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as representative of the late nineteenth century literature in English, and continuing with J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* for the analysis of race relations and apartheid almost one hundred years after Conrad. The third and most recent literary example in this study is Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black* (2018) which re-considers the conventions of the Anglophone historical novel and neo-slave narratives linked to post-slavery and Black subjectivity in Canada. Such a diverse range of material also alludes to the extensive literary and cultural creations on racial and ethnic identity, as well as other issues, shaped by the complexity of individual societies and narratives about Black subjects.

Although Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been criticised as a racist work, numerous literary scholars regard it as an important text about the inhumanity of imperialists towards the Indigenous communities in Africa. Thanks to Chinua Achebe's critical response and the endeavours of other scholars, Conrad's work and those by numerous other authors belonging to the literature of the imperial centre have been re-visited in the light of the inscriptions of power and colonial history which either support or resist the monologic hegemonic accounts of the past. Through their literary works, other authors, such as J. M. Coetzee, demonstrate that the long years of torture and humiliation of Africans by colonial and white supremacist forces still cast a long shadow, resulting in harrowing recollections and diverse setbacks in South African society. Coetzee makes a strong statement in literary form, condemning the brutality of human beings while encouraging communities and individuals to reflect on their moral values and principles as a prerequisite for the comprehensive advancement of all humanity. The work of the Ghanaian Canadian novelist Esi Edugyan

has not only become an influential part of the Canadian literary canon, but has also contributed to the heightened interest in the previously elided or muted voices of people of African descent in Canada and other predominantly white societies. In exploring concepts of identity, belonging and nation, Edugyan's latest novel *Washington Black* spans the geographical and temporal scope of the British Empire, offering a deeper understanding of the diverse (and contested) histories it contains, while also inviting readers "into the world of former masters and slaves, whose unresolved conflicts continue to shape our present" (Frątczak-Dąbrowska 2021, 65).

Although there are occasions when some postcolonial authors remove certain literary texts from the colonial historical and cultural context, they make the valid claim that in colonial literature Indigenous cultures are typically represented as savage, and therefore the transmission of such knowledge fosters the inhumane and unjustified views about the presumed innate superiority and inferiority of human beings. Postcolonial writers also correctly recognise that in such a manner colonised people were exploited and abused to the degree that they still struggle for basic human needs in many decolonised countries, while also suffering deep emotional trauma from the enduring consequences. The feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness experienced by Black persons are exacerbated by the fact that the situation in the affected communities seems to improve only on paper, but not in practice, and especially not in the realm of human conscience.

Johan Galtung's typology of violence clarifies why the aforementioned process of change is so protracted. When talking about violence, the most difficult aspect to grasp is how and why people hurt other humans. For Galtung, the phenomenon is cultural in that culture is used to depict "others" as less intelligent, less worthy, and less human, which then leads to a change in the moral filter from wrong to right or acceptable, or to the fact that people just do not see anything unfair about it. Galtung's argumentation is exemplified by colonialism, but also the Holocaust and George Floyd's murder. In the United States, the rampant and unwarranted use of excessive police force often with impunity has been detected and challenged by anti-racist organisations and protests. A similar and equally abhorrent instance of structural violence is the gender-based abuse of

women, supported by the cultural constructs of traditional masculinity, the myth of the perfect mother and other harmful norms and practices.

Thanks to the twenty-first century technological advancements and the momentum in the aftermath of The Black Lives Matter movement, there has been increased visibility of and interest in literary and theoretical-critical works which address the gaps and omissions in a disrupted, silenced and otherwise inaccessible past which can aid us in comprehending our contemporary era and situation. One of the most fruitful outcomes of the current research in this area centres on transnational literary and theoretical negotiations of colonialism and (post)slavery. In addition to this new approach, there has also been renewed and widespread attention to postcolonial and other studies (including critical race studies) aimed at highlighting the importance of prior critical contributions in this field (e.g. Fanon, Spivak, Bhabha, and Said). Such contributions remain relevant for our present situation, particularly the current cultural politics in the United States.

With this volume we hope to have been able to make a modest albeit critical comment on the intricate interplay between colonialism and structural violence still evident in today's globalised world and, in so doing, chart additional understandings of this highly engaging field of challenges to white hegemony. Simultaneously, our book underscores the awareness that the anti-racist, decolonial, and other campaigns and movements for justice, individual and collective well-being are not achieved through a singular approach. They occur at the intersection of critical knowledge, the politics of solidarity, justice, and a new sensibility towards institutional, economic, cultural and other changes necessary for building a more equitable and balanced global reality.

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