From Racial Difference to Racial Indifference: The Neo-Liberal Narrative and Its Colonial Legacy Through the Example of *Washington Black* (2018) by Esi Edugyan

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Abstract

The present article centres on *Washington Black*—a neo-slave narrative whose eponymous hero documents his route from slavery to freedom. The novel offers insight into how the structural legacy of colonialism lives on in (neo-)liberalism, which is understood here as a currently dominant socio-economic system and a set of beliefs rooted in the colonial economy and colonial ideology. The paper investigates how harmful discursive formations once created to justify European civilizing missions and chattel slavery are still being used to belie the reality of structural violence and systemic inequity, where particular groups are being racialised and marginalised at the same time. Through the prism of the novel, the article looks at how the discourse of universal human rights, the idea of a grateful slave, and the myth of self-sufficiency may be employed as the mechanisms of social control over *the Other*.

Keywords: neo-slave fiction; neo-liberalism; colonialism; racism; structural violence

In *Washington Black* (2018) Esi Edugyan takes her readers on a journey across the globe. Her protagonists travel through the West Indian plantations, the American plains and English cities, mapping the routes through which wealth and power have been circulating for centuries. Edugyan's neo-slave narrative captures the moment when the slave economy begins to transform itself into a new, liberal order. However, the novel puts less emphasis on the abolition of slavery as a historical and political process and more on the continuity of social and power structures between the colonial and post-colonial world. Edugyan's characters use elaborate discursive strategies—the discourse of universal human rights, the idea of a grateful slave and the myth of self-sufficiency—trying to hide the fact that the post-abolitionist world is premised on the same mental formations which underpinned chattel slavery. In the novel, hence, the historical reality of African slavery is a point of departure for the readers to critically reflect on the currently

dominant neo-liberal narrative and the extent to which it has been shaped by the European colonial project.

Racial (In)Difference and the Neo-Liberal Narrative
European imperial discourse fetishized difference and propagated a vision of the world where human beings were divided into distinct biological races. As Hannah Arendt notes, racial-thinking appears in the history of Western thought in the eighteenth century; in the nineteenth century, however, it evolves into an ideology, which is a system "based upon a single opinion that proved strong enough to attract and persuade a majority of people and broad enough to lead them through the various experiences […] of an average modern life" (Arendt 1968: 38). Racism, hence, "emerged simultaneously in all Western countries" and became part of "imperialistic policies" (Arendt 1968: 38). It was used broadly to justify the economic exploitation of the slaves and Europe's civilizing mission. As such, it is in the colonial project that we find the source of mental formations which paved the way for many tragedies of the twentieth century, including the Holocaust (Arendt 1968: 39). The political aim of colonial racism was to systematically desensitise the European public towards the suffering of *the Other*, who was not seen as fully human. To use the words of Achille Mbembe, the colonial system "manufactur[ed] a panoply of suffering that, in response, solicited neither the accepting of responsibility nor solicitude nor sympathy and, often, not even pity [from the privileged majority]" (Mbembe 2019: 5). Mbembe argues that such mechanisms live on in today's Western liberal democracies; and the low levels of sympathy displayed by Europeans towards refugees and asylum seekers seem to corroborate his thesis (Gregory 2020).

Neo-slave narratives grapple with such complex issues; they depict racism, economic exploitation and systemic inequities. By definition, neo-slave narratives are contemporary works of fiction that imitate traditional slave narratives written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Originally, slave narratives were a means of self-expression for former African slaves and they played an important part in the abolitionist struggles. Thus, they are naturally connected with the history of the African diaspora, the legacy of slavery and the fight for social justice (Rushdy 1999: 3). Contemporary neo-slave narratives, however, are also "enriched by the study of [historical] slave narratives"

and "the complicated history of race and power relations" that followed abolition (Smith 2007: 168). Not only do they revisit the historical reality of slavery but they also "explore the unacknowledged and elusive effects of the institution of slavery upon slaves, slaveholders, and their descendants" (Smith 2007: 168); moreover, they convey a very characteristic sense of a continuous temporality where the past lives on and permeates the present (Baucom 2005: 24). Neo-slave fiction, hence, is subversive towards the dominant, neo-liberal narrative; it reveals its colonial roots and enters into a dialogue with norms, beliefs and aspirations "integrated into a neoliberal cosmos" such as self-sufficiency, meritocracy, individual freedom, etc. (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 19).

Like any other economic system in history, neoliberalism, which has dominated the better part of the world since the 1970s, is built on a socio-cultural narrative that promotes certain virtues and uses these as a measure to apportion social rewards. Embedded in that narrative are also ideas about how wealth should be gained and (re)distributed (Mazzucato 2018: xix). Nowadays, however, this narrative is oftentimes used to "justify inequalities of wealth and income, massively rewarding the few who are able to convince governments and society that they deserve high rewards" (Mazzucato 2018: xiii). The path towards a more just society leads through challenging such convictions. Needless to say, neo-slave narratives are a perfect means of doing so. They present the lives and mutual relations of many complex characters implicated in the global economy: field and domestic slaves, manumitted slaves, free Africans, impoverished Europeans, absentee planters, abolitionist, slavers etc. Through their examples, the authors build parallels between the historical colonial project and today's socio-economic reality. Neo-slave narratives, then, automatically set themselves against the long-lasting legacy of the slave economy and reveal the ways in which it lives on in today's world.

As Esi Edugyan claims, her authorial mission is to show the African diaspora as an integral, worthy and creative part of Western societies (Brinder 2018). Edugyan's works explore many avenues in which the colonial project reverberates throughout Western history. For example, in her other novel—*Half-Blood Blues* (2011)—Edugyan writes about the lives of 'the Rhineland Bastards'—people of African and German descent living in Nazi Germany. In that text, Edugyan explores a "biracial experience [which] symbolizes the challenge of reconciling

black and national identities" (Bailey Nurse 2011: 63), and which is evocative of her own positioning as a Canadian writer of Ghanaian origin. The clash between rigid categories of belonging, and the fluid reality of global capitalism, lies at the heart of *Washington Black* as well. The novel's heroes originate from radically different backgrounds, yet they are all trapped within the same system. To use the words of Mbembe again, in the novel, "the order of the plantation, of the colony, and of democracy—do not ever separate, just as George Washington and his slave and companion William Lee never did" (2019: 20). The very tittle of the novel and the name of its main protagonist—*George Washington Black*—immediately convey this characteristic continuity, merging the name of the American revolutionary hero with the name of the slave. They also suggest that the colonial project left behind "the need to recognise the persistence of tainted inheritances and legacies" (Rothberg 2017: 72). Literary narratives, in turn, are no trivial means of "break[ing] the logic of natural descent that stands behind those inheritances" (Rothberg 2017: 72).

Therefore, it is at the heart of her story that Edugyan places the relationship between a (former) master and a (freed) slave; the readers follow their journey from the plantation society to the post-abolitionist world. The complexity of Christopher 'Titch' Wilde and George Washington Black's relationship is one of the most intriguing renditions of the motif in neo-slave narratives. It resembles Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), where Edward Williams—a white slave-owner—and Nash—his former slave—are trapped in a peculiar love-hate relationship which leads them back to Africa. Their inability to communicate, symbolised by Nash's letters to which Edward never responds, leaves them both incomplete, and prevents them from finding a way to discover their common identity (Frątczak 2017: 33-43). Such tensions are echoed by *Washington Black*. The novel is a first-person, retrospective narrative of the former slave, but it is immediately clear that Washington's life-story revolves around a different man, his former master—Christopher 'Titch' Wilde. Washington spends a disproportionate amount of time thinking about Titch, longing for him, or trying to understand his complex bond with him. The novel, then, not only records Washington's life-experience, but also invites Edugyan's readers into the world of former masters and slaves, whose unresolved conflicts continue to shape our present.

Reluctant Masters and (Un)Grateful Slaves

Washington's narrative opens in 1830 on Barbados when Christopher 'Titch' Wilde arrives at Faith, his family plantation, managed by his older brother—Erasmus. Alongside Jamaica, Barbados was one of the most important sources of sugar revenue for the British Empire. Early on, Barbados enforced tight rules of racial separation, known as the Barbados Slave Code (1661), and sanctioned the legal discrimination of African slaves as inferior to the Europeans because of their supposed inborn characteristics; as then Europeans believed, African slaves were "heathenish" and "brutal" by nature. The Code served as a reference point for many similar laws, drawn up in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands for example (Beckles 1997: 201). Moreover, Barbados witnessed many unsuccessful slave rebellions and became a symbol of the brutalizing effects of racism and slavery. Edugyan, then, places her readers at the very centre of the plantation economy. Barbados is here shown as a part of the global network of colonial trade as well as a part of the global network of ideas. Titch's family share their lives in-between Barbados and England. He himself has lived in Britain and had become affiliated with the European abolitionist movement. As he says: "[s]lavery is a moral stain against us. If anything will keep white men from their heaven, it is this" (Edugyan 2018: 105). Titch's brother, Erasmus, even though he rarely leaves the island, is well aware of new political trends and by no means happy to see Titch. He knows that his younger brother despises plantation work and calls him a hypocrite; living away from the plantation, it is easy for Titch to be "judgemental" about the family business (21). Erasmus presents himself as a reluctant slaver for whom, as the eldest son and the heir, the plantation work is a burden, keeping him trapped on "this godforsaken island" (26). Nonetheless, he views slavery as natural and necessary and wishes to defend the old order against his eccentric brother.

We thus see the planter society at the end of its life-span, only a few years before abolition in the British Empire, when a radical redefinition of the master-slave relation is looming on the horizon. Within this world, Titch may strike the reader as a progressive man. However, even though he "has a very general belief in the rights of man", he fails when it comes to "applying this personally to people" (Brinder 2018). "[T]hat dichotomy in his personality [is] so interesting to me", Edugyan says about her own character (Birnder 2018). In fact, such a dichotomous way

of thinking is displayed by the majority of her European characters. They recognise the immorality of slavery, but do not view abolition as tantamount to racial and economic equality; they aim to get rid of legal and physical bondage, but do not want to tackle the very root of the problem, particularly the fact that the colonial project viewed the humanity of *the Other* as conditional. As Jacques Derrida writes, Western cultural identity in its present form was shaped by the rejection of the cosmopolitan ideal; through the example of France, Derrida shows that Europe has never truly accepted *the Other* as fully human. In the second half of the twentieth century, this rejection of *the Other's* humanity manifested itself, for example, through tightening immigration and asylum laws; as a result, the (human) right to asylum and refuge ceased being viewed as universal and unconditional (Derrida 2005: 3-24). Hence, the dichotomous way of thinking displayed by Titch is not an anomaly but a symptom of a broader problem; it gives us an insight into a schizophrenic Western mindset where radical ideas of personal freedom and economic liberalism coexist with structural violence. The strategies Edugyan's protagonists employ to reconcile such mutually exclusive ideas teach us as much about the past as they do about the present.

The world presented in Edugyan's novel is built on structural violence, namely the type of violence which is "no longer attributable to concrete individuals and their 'evil' intentions, but […] purely 'objective', systemic, anonymous" (Žižek 2008: 11). Unlike an act of physical violence, which is usually performed by an identifiable perpetrator, objective violence operates in subtle ways (Žižek 2008: 11). Being part of the universally accepted norms, systemic violence aims at concealing power structures within a given society. It becomes visible only when people have the right tools to pierce through the veil of invisibility, so it cannot be challenged unless exposed. This is why it is so interesting to observe how Edugyan guides her readers towards noticing the complex ways in which systemic oppression filters into the lives and minds of her protagonists, just like when Titch educates Washington and exploits him at the same time. On the very day of his arrival on Barbados, for instance, Titch selects George "Wash" Washington—one of Erasmus's field slaves—to be his personal assistant. The way he treats the boy is an open challenge to Barbados's rules of racial segregation. He invites the boy to his table and prepares a

breakfast for him (41). Later, Titch uses Washington to do light chores around the house as well as to further his own scientific ambitions. Titch writes treaties on engineering and nature, but his most important project is to build a flying contraption—an early prototype of an airplane—a task for which he will ultimately use Washington's talents. He thus teaches Wash to read and takes him on pseudo-scientific expeditions around the island:

> In the afternoons we walked the outer wilds of the plantation examining the flora, and then he would send me home to clean and cook, while he continued alone […]. [I]n the evenings, I would stutter and flush and mumble pitifully through the words of a simple book, while Titch sat irritably by, sounding them out. (47)

Inadvertently, he makes it possible for Wash to discover a passion for drawing and lets him develop his talents, but within reasonable limits; Wash's gifts are to be encouraged in so far as they are useful to Titch. Otherwise, he reins in the boy's drive for a free artistic expression and forces him to practice technical drawings.

A similar dichotomy is visible when it comes to Titch's treatment of Washington as different from other field slaves. When convenient, Titch takes full advantage of his superior socio-economic position and has no moral qualms about using slave labour to build his flying contraption on the top of Corvus Peek: "[I need] [w]orkers, Washington […]. Carriers, draggers, haulers, strong arms and strong wrists. We cannot carry the apparatus on our own, can we?" (61). Then he despairs that his brother, wary of Titch's failure, offers him only the "[n]ine sickliest slaves" (69). Titch seems oblivious to the obvious irony of sharing such thoughts with Washington who, despite his sudden promotion, is a field slave. In this, and other fragments, one may note how Titch views field slaves through the prism of their bodies and labour; they are "nothing but an expression of [white men's] wealth in the world", as Washington puts it at one point (342). In the big scheme of the plantation economy, to use a Dickensian metaphor, they are nothing but *Hands*. It is not until many years later that Washington realises the paradox of this situation and confronts Titch about the conditionality of his status:

> *Washington*: That first evening, when Big Kit and I were serving dinner for your brother. You chose me quite deliberately that night. I remember it. You said I was just the right size for your Cloud-cutter. You chose me because I would make the perfect ballast. […]

Titch: It is why I chose you, but it is not why I engaged you to help my experiments. It is not why I befriended you. (404-405)

This exchange between the two protagonists is a seminal moment when Washington fully grasps the fact that slaves occupy an undefined position between goods and human beings; additionally, their status may shift depending on the immediate need of those who hold power over them. Theoretically speaking, trade in human beings was incompatible with English common law. In 1667, however, "motivated by the enormous economic gains expected from transatlantic slavery, a Crown legal position was issued that declared Africans as goods," subjecting them to commercial legislation (Wittmann 2012: 16). For around two hundred years the African slaves were systematically dehumanised as their status was quite literally tantamount to that of commodities.

From the end of the eighteenth century, however, an emotional and humanising component was superimposed on this crude economic matrix; it is signalled by Titch's admission that, despite having intended to use Washington as ballast, he ended up *befriending* the boy. What we see here is a clash between the feelings of empathy towards the slaves, which had been growing in Europe since the late eighteenth century, and the economic necessity of keeping slaves in bondage. European culture devised a devilish trick to reconcile the two realities through romanticising the discourse of slavery. This is why historical slave narratives should be "read in dialectical relation with sentimental novels", travelogues and other texts which were crafted in such a way as to evoke a particular emotional reaction from their readership (Weinstein 2007: 117). The emergence of the sentimental aesthetics among European authors coincided with the growing metropolitan awareness that slavery was morally indefensible. Sentimentalism, then, made "a nod to human similarity" between the master and the slave (Boulukos 2008: 4). One of the tropes through which it operated was the motif of a benevolent master and a grateful slave present in many texts from the period. Such pieces blurred the boundary between masters and slaves by implying that their bond was natural, based on shared humanity, and should be conceptualised as "an emotional relationship" and "a relationship of gratitude" (Boulukos 2008: 2). This illusion of sympathy with *the Other*, which African subjects were to accept willingly, was "offered as a compensation for the failure to stop their suffering" (Boulukos 2008: 69). It was premised on the idea that slaves required

their masters' protection and moral guidance as well as conjured up a false image of slavery as an *easy* or *chosen* way of life (Boulukos 2008: 4). The echoes of this line of thinking are also found in the trope of a good servant shaped around the same time. It reverberated through many debates on African slavery, abolition and the English poor as natural *slaves* to higher social classes and the prisoners of their own flawed characters. Much like British subjects from other parts of the Empire, they were said to require the constant care and vigilance of their (moral) superiors (Shilliam 2018: 10).

Despite its inherently discriminatory nature, sentimentalism did place the question of African slaves and their humanity at the centre of the European debates. Also former African slaves, writing down their (hi)stories and advocating for abolition, drew from sentimental conventions. Therefore it comes as no surprise that *Washington Black* too writes back to this cultural tradition; instead of perpetuating it, however, it confronts the legacy of the sentimental discourse on slavery, making the readers aware of how it was used to silence, rather than empower, *the Other*. There are many moments in the novel when Titch and Washington resort to sentimental ideals in order not to disturb the ideological illusion they live under. For example, at one point Titch asks Washington whether he would prefer to be free or remain in bondage, to which Wash replies: "[o]h, no, Titch, I would rather be your property" (105); he immediately adds a comment for the reader that "I had thought I was saying what he [Titch] wished to hear" (105). Washington, wary of offending Titch, assumes that the display of gratitude for bondage is expected of him; Titch, on the other hand, already tired of being Washington's guardian, would love to see in his slave a desire for freedom. Washington's apparent apathy solidifies Titch's conviction that Washington is helpless and will continue to depend on him even when liberated. Yet another of Edugyan's characters—Titch's cousin, Philip— uses the romanticised vision of bondage as a defence mechanism against the accusations of immorality and brutality. He tries to convince Washington that a slave's existence is somehow more free than that of his masters:

> Perhaps it is easier for you [Washington] … Everything is taken care of for you. You needn't worry about what the coming days will hold, as every day is the same. Your only expectations are the expectations your master lays out for you. It is a simple-enough life. (118)

As one may thus note, romanticising slavery blurs the boundary between legal subjugation and a voluntary relationship of dependence. It enables the representatives of the white majority to superficially reconcile their humanist ideas with the legal and economic reality of slavery, creating an image of slavery as a predominantly emotional bond. This transformation is a perfect example of how "nanoracism" is being born, namely how cultural ideas born out of economic necessity weave themselves into the structures of thought and feeling propagated through literature and culture (Mbembe 2019: 59).

From this perspective, one may begin to comprehend Washington's life-long obsession with Titch; their individual relationship becomes an allegory for economic and cultural relations between former slaves and slavers. Despite winning his freedom, Washington is trapped in Titch's orbit as the categories against which he tries to define himself at this point, that is, freedom, humanity and personhood, were first presented to him by Titch; they as much help Washington define himself as an independent individual as place him constantly in relation to his former master. In trying to figure out his place in the world, then, Wash is no less conflicted than Christopher. He is torn between admiration and resentment for the man who set him free from bondage, and then refused to take responsibility for his actions, leaving Washington to fend for himself. Washington's (self-)doubts may remind one of Fanon's observations on the paradoxes of the colonial self, which is forever imperfect and incomplete if set against the white (wo)men's world (2005: 17). As Washington says: "I desired, despite every apprehension, to find Titch. […] My life had been one life before he had taken me up […]. My current life, I realized, was constructed around an absence" (324). Edugyan's novel, however, does not focus solely on the incompleteness of Washington's self; it goes a step further in showing that Titch too is defined through the prism of his relationship with Washington. Putting it differently, Washington and Titch are forever linked and marked by the institution of slavery, which is part of their lived experience and their identity.

When Edugyan brings her protagonists together for the last time, they meet in Morocco, where Titch is staying on one of his pseudo-scientific trips. "Washington […] I dreamed you would come" (393), says Titch the moment his eyes rest on a familiar silhouette. However, when Washington demands more details about the nature of the dream,

Titch is unable to explain himself: "I cannot imagine my meaning" (396), he says. Washington, then, is like a spectre haunting Titch's life, and yet—unlike Washington—Titch seems unable to make sense of this fact. He and Washington mirror each other on many levels; they are idealists, dreamers, amateur scientists. In a different world, they could be real friends. In the one built by Edugyan, however, they lack meaningful communication:

> How strange, I [Washington] thought, […] that this man had once been my entire world, and yet we could come to no final understanding of one another. He was a man who'd done far more than most to end the suffering of a people whose toil was the very source of his power. He had saved my very flesh, taken me away from certain death. His harm, I thought, was in not understanding that he still had the ability to cause it. (406)

What we see here is a quiet resignation on Washington's part, who seems to accept the fact that he and Titch will never be truly able to understand each other. Titch has spent his entire life running away from reality; first, he defined himself against his family's legacy and the stigma of slavery; later, he ran away from Faith with Washington, saving and liberating his favourite slave. Then, however, he tried to get rid of the boy, finding the responsibility of caring for his life far too heavy a burden. Hence, much like at the beginning of their common journey, Titch seems to remain ignorant about the true role he himself plays in Washington's life and in the cultural and social reality built around the slave economy. At the end of the novel, Titch claims to have learned that the key to a good life lies in one's ability "not to worsen [the suffering of other people]" (415), but his good intentions have not always been matched by his actions. Worse still, there is no readiness on his part to boldly look into the past and examine it.

The World After Slavery

The friendship between Titch and Washington is not sustainable as it merely masks the economic and political reality on which their relationship was built. Such ambiguity is not a peculiar characteristic of their relationship, however, but a deeply ingrained cultural norm. (Neo-)liberal society—constructed on the pillars of the colonial economy—developed a vast array of mechanisms the aim of which was to "manage" racial and economic inequity without challenging the status quo

(Michaels 2007: 13). Today's big corporations, for example, employ the discourse of cultural diversity to satisfy social demands for justice while benefiting from social inequities on a global scale (Michaels 2007: 104). Hence, the colonial process of the simultaneous racialisation and exploitation of *the Other* is also a systemic feature of the neoliberal order which does not only apply to the descendants of the African slaves. In *Race and the Undeserving Poor*, Robbie Shilliam notes that today's moral stigmatisation of the impoverished and the marginalised should be read within the context of British imperial history; African slavery was "a fundamental reference point" in many debates on social welfare and the poor laws, with "the 'slave' and thereby the condition of blackness" being synonymous with the undeserving poor (Shilliam 2018: 7).

This conflation of ideas stems from the rational tradition, represented inter alia by Adam Smith, which taught that the institution of slavery had a degrading effect on the slaves' character. It discouraged the development of "desirable characteristics" such as reliability, industriousness etc., which one should expect in a labourer; if not guided properly, the English poor acquired undesirable 'slave-like' features which, in turn, had a negative impact on the economy. The abolitionist debates, then, "did not so much dispute the need to sustain plantation production" as reflected on "the form of labour deployed for this purpose" (Shilliam 2018: 15-16). Such debates continued in the post-abolitionist world, where "middle-class reformers" looked at "the colonial native and home poor" as somehow similar and thus requiring moral guidance (Shilliam 2018: 35). Even so, the neo-liberal narrative is premised on the myth of meritocracy, individual success and individual freedom. These myths are so powerful that they hide the fact that the Western neo-liberal order "has consistently been midwifed by the most brutal forms of coercion, inflicted on the collective body politic as well as on countless individual bodies" (Klein 2007: 19).

In *Washington Black*, the duality of the system is clearly visible. The world of liberal ideals continuously intertwines here with the world of violence and the commodification of human life. Titch and Wash's journey starts in Barbados and leads them to other parts of the globe, all of which remain part of the same economic and cultural network. They escape the island on a ship which carries slave goods destined for the European markets (145). Then they go to the USA which, at that time, is literally divided into the liberal North and the slaving South. There, they

meet Edgar Farrow, a churchman and an amateur scientist, who helps slaves escape to Canada; in his free time, Farrow studies human corpses and his house contains dismembered bodies; also, the underground tunnel through which he smuggles the slaves leads through an empty grave (172). It is in his house that Washington fully grasps the fragility of his physical existence and the fact that, for people like him, the realm of freedom coexists with the realm of death. Also, the idea that the value of his life is measured in solely monetary terms never leaves Washington; after their escape from Faith, Erasmus issued a price on his head. He is chased by a man named Willard—a fanatically racist Scottish bounty hunter—who follows Washington across continents, but when they finally meet, Erasmus is already dead and Willard had changed careers:

> I am still an investigator of, shall we say, human errors, but for a business venture that insures cargo being shipped overseas. It is fine work. […] I earn more money in insurance than was ever paid me scrambling after niggers and misfits. (293)

The link between hunting slaves and insurance is symbolic. The most (in)famous anti-slavery court cases were fought over the right of merchants to insure slaves like goods, and historical insurance policies stand for the ultimate form of dehumanisation of *the Other*. The intimate connection between the two embodied by Willard shows how capital quietly adapts to the changing socio-political environment. The order of the plantation is never far from the world of business, and though one can no longer buy and sell human beings, one can continue to make money by exploiting the labour of many to enrich the few.

Yet another myth exposed in the novel is the conviction that, in a (neo-)liberal world, individuals are solely responsible for their life success or failure. In this paradigm, structural racism and economic inequality become invisible, which fuels a false belief that "challenges [to one's economic and social progress] stem from individuals rather than our institutions and collective thinking" (Burke 2018: 1). Neo-liberal culture celebrates individual achievements as the ultimate expression of equal opportunities, offered to all members of the society (Moore 2019: 48). One's life success is measured in terms of one's ability not to rely on the state or community for support. Every individual is thus expected to have a "life project" whose ultimate goal is absolute self-sufficiency and material gain (Moore 2019: 54). Such an

approach "overshadows the structural image of the problem" (Mbembe 2019: 93), as the poor, and the groups which have been historically disadvantaged, are blamed for their failures and treated as morally deficient. Edugyan's Washington is the exception that proves the rule. Even though Titch helps him discover his talents, he progresses on his own and wins a solid footing in a liberal world. However, he never loses sight of the structural limitations imposed on him as a former slave.

Initially, Washington has great hopes to win fame through science: "I had long seen science as the great equalizer. No matter one's race, or sex, or faith—there were facts in the world waiting to be discovered" (297). Science, however, bends here to ideologies and becomes a mechanism of social control. It is not only misused by racists who misquote Aristotle to justify their own prejudice (297), but also abused by pseudo-liberal elites who go to great lengths to keep Washington in his place. At one point, Washington starts working with a renowned British scientist—Goff. Initially, Washington illustrates Goff's wildlife books, which are then marketed under Goff's name only. Later, Washington is designing an innovative project of tanks, in which marine wildlife from Nova Scotia is transported to London and then displayed in the Ocean House. The satisfaction from this venture is overshadowed by the realisation that it will never be known under his name:

> My name, I understood, would never be known in the history of the place. It would be Goff, not a slight, disfigured black man, 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*? (316, emphasis mine)

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, "vouch[ing] for the integrity of the narrator […] lest a suspicious reader think that a slave remembers too much, writes too well, or has had experiences too romantic to be believed" (Weinstein 2007: 115). In such a way, Washington's talents are employed for the benefit of the society which—simultaneously—denies him the right to full representation.

Frustrated with such exploitation, Washington wants to abandon Goff, but he is convinced by Tanna—Goff's daughter—to continue the

work; she calls on Washington to persevere for the sake of "[m]en as talented as you, who will never get the chance of anything" (306). She argues that the truth will eventually come out and, one day, Washington may have his name known. At this point it is worth paying attention to Tanna herself; as Goff's daughter, she grows up sheltered by her father, but she is never fully accepted into the English society because of her tainted legacy—the colour of her skin betrays mixed ancestry. She falls in love with Washington and grows to hate Washington's obsession with Titch; she takes it upon herself to convince Washington that he was being used by Christopher, who never saw him as his equal: "You were a cause to him, not a person—however much he protested otherwise. You were something to be used to further his own crusade" (309). However, her own way of thinking is no less dichotomous than Titch's. She is not as severe on her own father as she is on Titch when he expresses his dismay of her romantic relationship with Wash, or when he exploits Washington's talents; she also treats Washington like an exemplary former slave whose life-story proves that some slaves are capable of achieving a certain level of success and thus integrate into the liberal society. As she says: "I told [my father] Washington Black would never be a slave, even if he was born in chains," to which Washington replies:

> *Washington:* And you speak of slavery as though it is a choice. Or rather, as though it were a question of temperament. Of mettle. As if there are those who are naturally slaves, and those who are not. As if it is not a senseless outrage. A savagery.
>
> *Tanna:* What I am saying is that you are strong. You are standing on your own two feet. You are embracing your *self-sufficiency*. (268, emphasis mine)

Tanna's words portray the institution of slavery as implicitly connected with (human) nature and link Washington's (self)-worth with his ability to navigate the market economy. She thus draws a parallel between one's value as a human being and one's socio-economic standing where one's economic success testifies to one's character and morality. African slaves as a group, then, are not automatically considered worthy of a full participation in mainstream society. It does not mean, however, that particular individuals, like Washington, with proper merits and following the right rules, cannot be admitted to this privilege. In such a way, one individual's success overshadows the structural nature of discrimination.

Hence, "[even] when he [Washington] becomes physically free […] he is still who he is," namely "a black man" and a former slave (Brinder

2018). Edugyan's characters live in a world permeated with racism and they are not always aware that they themselves contribute to the problem. It is therefore symptomatic that once Washington's personal achievements begin to outgrow the limits imposed on him by the dominant majority, he is written out of his own history:

> 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. (385, emphasis mine)

In the end, Washington seems resigned to the fact that he alone will not win against the system. He knows well that his silencing would not have been possible without the participation of many other characters, some of whom he grew to love and respect. Yet they chose to remain blind to structural inequalities, or simply found the status quo comfortable. The reader, however, could answer Washington's question for him, saying that his presence and achievements *do matter* and that they should have been recognised and given due credit. Edugyan's novel, then, not only unveils the universal mechanisms of discrimination that sill operate in the West, but also brings people like Washington—the victims of structural violence and marginalization, be it because of the colour of their skin, ethnic origins or socio-economic status—back to the centre of Western history, which means back to their rightful place.

　　As one may thus conclude, *Washington Black* is a novel about the structural legacy of colonialism and its impact on today's world. 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. The author shows how people manage to reconcile paradoxical beliefs and investigates why they feel emotionally disconnected from *the Other*. The most lasting legacy of the colonial mindset, Edugyan seems to be saying, is the lack of empathy towards those who once were not considered fully human. Reversing the effects of the centuries of exploitative economy is a Herculean task. The colonial order created social, emotional and cultural entanglements between the beneficiaries of the system and the exploited minorities, which, with time, morphed into the dominant culture and socio-economic order, becoming an invisible part of the neo-liberal order. As Bruce Robbins writes, "[i]f you can't imagine it

otherwise, you will not see it as wrong, hence open to being righted" (Robbins 2017: 28). The utmost value of Edugyan's text, therefore, lies in the fact that she pushes her readers to question many a comfortable illusion they accept as a cultural and social norm. She is thus propagating a new sensibility, whereby Western metropolises face their history, challenge structural violence and develop a far more profound awareness of being intertwined with global peripheries, not only on an economic, but also emotional level.

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