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# Terrestrial Humanism and the Weight of World Literature: Reading Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*

## Abstract (151 words)

Through an extended reading of Canadian author Esi Edugyan's novel, *Washington Black* (2018), this article aims to revise and reinsert both the practice of close reading and a radically revised humanism back into recent World(-)Literature debates. I begin by demonstrating the importance of metaphors of weight to several theories of World(-)Literature, before tracking how, with the same metaphors, Edugyan challenges Enlightenment models of earth, worlds, and humanism. The article draws on the work of several theorists, including Emily Apter, Katherine McKittrick, Steven Blevins, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon, to argue that 'terrestrial humanism' might provide a framework from which to develop a grounded, politicised, earthly practice of close reading world literary texts. The aim is not to arrive at a prescriptive or 'heavy' methodology, but to push instead for a reading practice that remains open to the contrapuntal geographies, affective materialisms, and radically humanist politics of literary texts themselves.

**Keywords:** Esi Edugyan, *Washington Black*, world(-)literature, slavery, terrestrial humanism, Frantz Fanon

## Author Bio (46 words)

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## Introduction

Through an extended reading of Canadian author Esi Edugyan's Man Booker-shortlisted third novel, *Washington Black* (2018), this article aims to revise and reinsert both the practice of close reading and a radically revised humanism back into recent World(-)Literature debates.<sup>1</sup> As I will show, Edugyan's novel speaks back to – and partly historicises – the twenty-first-century preoccupation with the idea of 'world' in World Literature. The novel qualifies as World Literature (or world-literature) according to several definitions: it has moved across national borders to find readers beyond its point of origin; it has been recognised and rewarded by the centripetal literary marketplace; and it certainly 'registers' the combined and uneven development of the capitalist world-system.<sup>2</sup> However, wedging *Washington Black* into these criterium would miss the novel's generative engagement with World(-)Literature, which it develops through an extended metaphoric reflection on the comparative *weight* of methodologies and human bodies.

In this essay, I therefore *listen* to Edugyan's novel and follow its lead, tracing its inter-textual cues and building from those a response to the 'trouble' with World Literature, which I will briefly outline in a moment. Reading *Washington Black* with interlocutors signaled by the novel itself (including Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, among others), my argument develops what Emily Apter has called a 'terrestrial humanism': a humanism 'remade in the guise of [an] ethical militance' to disrobe 'the congeniality of a liberal tradition that loves the world but ignores the earthly violence of

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<sup>1</sup> In at least half of its efforts, this essay therefore follows a general trend in the past decade to insist on the importance of postcolonial critique to the discourse of World Literature. To name only a few significant contributions: Aamir Mufti, 'Orientalism and the Institution of World Literature', *Critical Inquiry* 36.3 (2010): 458-93; Robert Young, 'World Literature and Postcolonialism', *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, Djelal Kadir (London: Routledge, 2014), 213-22; Lorna Burns, *Postcolonialism After World Literature: Relation, Equality, Dissent* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). Nevertheless, I would not claim my approach as a strictly postcolonial analysis, even though I draw on two of the field's foundational figures (Frantz Fanon and Edward Said). By pushing for a form of *humanism*, even one radically revised from its original Enlightenment associations, my approach might sit uncomfortably with some postcolonial work.

<sup>2</sup> I'm referring in turn to the well-known definitions of David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, and the Warwick Research Collective, respectively. Below, I take Damrosch and WReC with Franco Moretti as broadly representative of the the field, although I recognise that there are many other equally influential and diverse modes of reading and/or writing World Literature, advanced by Wai Chee Dimock, Giuseppe Coco, Djelal Kadir, Tiphaine Samoyault, Rebecca Walkowitz, Alexander Beecroft, and Pheng Cheah, to name only a few. (I return to Cheah's work later in the essay). I do not mean to do a disservice to an exciting and sometimes explosive field, but rather to sketch a broad characterisation against which I can position the rest of the article's argument.

distributive injustice'.<sup>3</sup> I will build towards this concept throughout my reading before invoking it most explicitly in the essay's conclusion. My aim is to do this tentatively and attentively, reaching for the concept that best fits the novel and working towards theory through praxis, rather than the other way around.

## **The Weight of World Literature**

The 'trouble' with World Literature, wrote Graham Huggan in 2013, is that it advances the assimilationist agenda of a liberal or 'transnational humanism' without accounting for the long histories of imperialism and continuing global inequalities that, ironically enough, made World Literature's cosmopolitan aspirations possible in the first place.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, Huggan argues, we have David Damrosch's quasi-Saidian 'worldliness', which advances a model of World Literature predicated precisely on the *weightlessness* of literary texts. Writing from a formalist tradition, Damrosch argues that the literary text must 'lift off' from its 'culture of origin' and travel across regions and borders to be read elsewhere: only once it arrives does it become 'World Literature'.<sup>5</sup> Postcolonialists balk at this notion of 'world', which smooths over the fragmentation of the earth's surface into political territories and politicised immobilities, both historically and today, while simultaneously making a duplicitous claim for some kind of de-historicised, 'universal' humanism.

On the other hand, Huggan continues, we have Franco Moretti's more 'progressive' model, which begins by at least acknowledging 'world literature' as a 'problem', before 'scientifically' modelling a 'single and unequal' literary world system along a sociological and geographical axes of

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<sup>3</sup> Emily Apter, 'Terrestrial Humanism: Edward W. Said and the Politics of World Literature', *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, eds. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 439-453 (450). Apter includes the same essay in Part III, Chapter II, of *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London & New York: Verso, 2013). Due to the Covid-19 crisis I am only able to access an unpaginated ebook of *Against World Literature*, and so I reference the *Companion* in order to provide readers with exact page numbers.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Huggan, 'The Trouble with World Literature', *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, eds. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 490-506 (490-1).

<sup>5</sup> David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

periphery, semi-periphery, and core.<sup>6</sup> With the resolution of Damrosch's 'problem', however, the act of close reading a single literary text is itself erased. It seems that the best way to avoid the contradictions of liberal humanism is to remove the 'human' entirely, and even then remaining 'ideologically wedded to the anti-nationalistic imperatives of a dominant (Euro-American) model of Comparative Literature.'<sup>7</sup> As Moretti writes, it is only by adopting a more-than-human perspective that something like a world literary system comes into view: 'you *reduce* the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, *artificial* object [with] "emerging" qualities, which were not visible at the *lower level*.'<sup>8</sup> For Moretti, it is not the literary texts that are weightless, but the methodology instead. 'Distant reading' lifts us away from the heavy proximity of the page by swapping out, in Moretti's words, the 'infinitely rich' and dense 'reality' of the text for the 'abstract poverty' of concepts: from the metaphoric 'height' afforded by distant reading we see 'less', which Moretti takes to be 'more', and which others have taken to be something else entirely.<sup>9</sup> For my part, I worry that such an extra-terrestrial methodology loses sight of the human who must, in the end, be applying it: as Hannah Arendt might remark, 'the human brain which supposedly does our thinking is as terrestrial, earthbound, as any other part of the human body'.<sup>10</sup>

The most sustained effort to reintegrate readings of single literary texts back into materialist models of World Literature has been undertaken by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), whose model of 'world-literature' as a 'combined and uneven' system is formulated explicitly against Damrosch's metaphoric weightlessness, which they read as 'self-consciously indifferent to historicity'.<sup>11</sup> While their effort is welcome, the result is an extremely heavy methodology that

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<sup>6</sup> Huggan, 'The Trouble with World Literature', 494. See also Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review* 1 (Jan/Feb 2000), 54-68.

<sup>7</sup> Huggan, 'The Trouble With World Literature', 494.

<sup>8</sup> Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007), 53. The emphasis on the words 'lower level' is mine.

<sup>9</sup> Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', 57-58. For a succinct overview of the many objections to distant reading, along with a sustained critique of it, see Maurizio Ascari, 'The Dangers of Distant Reading: Reassessing Moretti's Approach to Literary Genres', *Genre* 47.1 (2014), 1-19.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), Chapter 8. See also Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 26-31, for her commentary on Arendt's terrestrial interests.

<sup>11</sup> Warwick Research Collective, *Combined & Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University, 2015), 50.

restrains and restricts those literary texts taken into its orbit. Profoundly suspicious of close reading – even Apter’s ‘close reading with a worldview’ – for its tendency to abstract literature from its ‘social determinants’, the WReC insist that individual texts might only ‘mediate’ or ‘register’ the modern world-system, a process that then becomes somewhat tautologically central to world-literature’s definition.<sup>12</sup> In more recent applications, this riskily prescriptive methodology has been re-articulated in positively confrontational terms:

In the terrain of this discipline, we can see a war of position being conducted between those desirous of a more totalising, politicised understanding of capitalism’s systemic crises and interested in the capacity of world-cultural forms to critique or inflect capitalism’s development, while critical of the increasing commodification and alienation of all forms of knowledge and cultural production, and those for whom world literature is more purely a matter of formalist analysis, humanist appreciation or taste, or datafied analysis, and whose criticism presents no threat to neoliberal consensus as such.<sup>13</sup>

It is my argument in this article that a close reading of *Washington Black* might break open the claustrophobic triad assumed in this statement: are ‘politicised’ literary critics really cornered by a universalising liberal humanism, distant ‘datafied analysis’, or the reduction of texts to little more than ‘critiques’ or ‘inflections’?<sup>14</sup> To answer this question in purely theoretical terms would be to efface this article’s argument: my aim is instead to show the critical potential of attentive reading as a practice that unsettles the weight of World(-)Literature and its attendant sociopolitical discourses.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> WReC, *Combined & Uneven Development*, 9. See also Apter, *Against World Literature*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro, ‘World-Culture and the Neoliberal World-System: An Introduction’, in *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent*, ed. by Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 1-48 (21). This later description makes it even more difficult to characterise ‘world-literature’ as a way of writing, not reading, as the WReC had initially insisted.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Brennan has described this as a choice between ‘either an ensemble of books confected of an aesthetic dream of universal uplift, or a faceless network of systemic determinants whose “materialism” makes literary trends appear as unconscious as volcanic eruptions or the migration of birds’. He prefers instead a more sustained engagement with ‘the real world of peoples and texts’, a perspective that I think terrestrial humanism gets us towards, though perhaps with a more explicitly political agenda. See Brennan, ‘Cosmopolitanism and World Literature’, *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimbler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23-36 (34).

<sup>15</sup> In centring the individual literary text, and the hermeneutic and creative work of the individual literary critic, my aim is not to do away with structural or systemic analysis, which is clearly imperative for building networks of solidarity and opposing neoliberalism’s fragmentation and marketisation of everything – higher education included. But it *is* to ask what is being lost with such a dogmatic dismissal of close reading as some kind of ineffective liberal wash that is structurally complicit with neoliberalism: it can and should be so much more than that. An imperative and recently published guide here is Juan Meneses, who in his book, *Resisting Dialogues: Modern Fiction and the Future of Dissent* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), explores the many ways in which close reading promotes political literacy and fashions civic and community commitments, specifically in and against the post-political crisis of the neoliberal era.

By listening to the text, and following up on its inter-texts, I will show how *Washington Black* suggests a radically *terrestrial* humanism that explicitly opposes the overbearing methodologies of world literary studies. As I see it, terrestrial humanism is not a self-contradictory liberal dead end, but a potentially generative point of departure.

I want to conclude this section by noting that it is not my intention to instrumentalise *Washington Black* for larger theoretical gains, nor to foreclose other readings of the novel. Even a brief note on Edugyan's now long held interests – which include themes of displacement and belonging – indicates why her work might have something to say to World(-)Literature's long-running concerns. Born in Canada to Ghanaian parents, Edugyan's writing builds on what David Chariandy describes as second-generation Black Canadian literature's dual interest in, on the one hand, 'fictions of belonging', and on the other, 'the fiction of belonging'.<sup>16</sup> Edugyan frequently uses revealing spatial metaphors to describe her own work, nowhere more so than in her Henry Kreisel Lecture, *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home* (2014), delivered after the international success of her second novel, *Half Blood Blues* (2011). There, she speaks of 'the special territory of fiction', conceiving of home 'both as a place and an idea', and asserting her belief 'in the power of stories to affect and alter the realities of our world'.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on the redemptive practices of storytelling has led some to read an implicit cosmopolitanism in her work, though as Isabel Carrera-Suárez responds, when Edugyan's 'recognised historical awareness' is accounted for, accusations of a de-historicised or overly liberal cosmopolitanism carry very little weight.<sup>18</sup> As I will now show,

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<sup>16</sup> See David Chariandy, "'The Fiction of Belonging": On Second-Generation Black Writing in Canada', *Callaloo* 30.3 Prose Fiction and Non-Fiction Prose: A Thirtieth Anniversary Issue (Summer, 2007): 818-829. For longer overviews of Black or African Canadian literature see Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2003), or George Elliott Clarke's *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). Clarke's study has clear influences on Edugyan's novel, as does his poetry more generally – Part Three of *Washington Black* is set in Nova Scotia, the 'home' of Clarke's 'Africadian' literature. Dionne Brand's work is of course also at the centre of this recent history. Leslie Sanders offers a more recent survey in her article, "'Maybe this wide country": African Canadian Writing and the Poetics of Space', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 48.6 (2019): 610-625; and Isabel Carrera-Suárez also offers a comprehensive overview Black Canadian writing's interest in themes of belonging and displacement from the perspective of diaspora and Afropolitan studies in 'Negotiating Singularity and Alikeness: Esi Edugyan, Lawrence Hill and Canadian Afrodiasporic writing', *European Journal of English Studies* 21.2 (2017): 159-173.

<sup>17</sup> Esi Edugyan, *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home* (Edmonton, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 2014), 6-7, 31-2. Edugyan's title, 'elsewhere', flags the influence of Édouard Glissant and other Caribbean poets and theorists on her work.

<sup>18</sup> Carrera-Suárez, 'Negotiating Singularity and Alikeness', 171.

physical territories and human bodies are central to her most recent novel, *Washington Black*, and it is the *weight* of these themes – along with the images she uses to bring them to life – that runs a cosmopolitan politics aground and makes space for a terrestrial humanism instead.

### ***Washington Black's* Contrapuntal Geographies**

Set mostly between 1830 and 1836, *Washington Black* tells the life story of its eponymous hero, Washington Black, a young black boy who has escaped his enslavement on a Barbadian plantation with the help of a white abolitionist, Christopher Wilde, also known as ‘Titch’.<sup>19</sup> Titch is an Enlightenment man, committed to scientific rationalism, and obsessed with ‘measurements, equations, [and] outcomes’ (103); his father is ‘James Wilde, Royal Fellow of the Royal Society’, a figure variously celebrated and criticised for his unforgivingly ‘mechanical view of the world’ (72). Titch befriends Washington after taking him on as an apprentice from his violent brother, Erasmus Wilde, who is also the ‘master’ of Faith Plantation, the source of the Wilde family’s fortune. In the two Wilde brothers – the one a scientist and, it transpires later, Abolitionist (Titch), the other a ruthless plantation owner and slave driver (Erasmus) – Edugyan sets up slavery as pivotal to, rather than an anomalous break with, her narrative of global modernity.<sup>20</sup>

In his remarkable study, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011), Simon Gikandi shows how slavery was not anachronistic to a culture of European modernity ‘premised on the supremacy of [an individual] self functioning within a social sphere defined by human values’, but fundamentally constitutive of it.<sup>21</sup> Gikandi exposes the cultural contortions required to explain a transoceanic system of dehumanisation at a time when the merits of the ‘human’ were being newly proclaimed, reaching the conclusion that slavery, which constructed Europe materially, was *folded* into its social, cultural,

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<sup>19</sup> Esi Edugyan, *Washington Black* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2019). For the remainder of the essay I will reference page numbers from this edition of the novel in brackets after the quotation.

<sup>20</sup> As Titch remarks in a revealing and reluctant attempt to conceal his Abolitionist politics while still on the plantation in the novel’s early pages: ‘no progress without blood, I suppose’ (80).

<sup>21</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

and symbolic economies as well. Following Gikandi, *Washington Black* not only explores slavery ‘in its powerful and painful materiality’, but in a ‘figural or semiotic sense, as the sign of the social and moral boundaries that made modern culture possible’, as well.<sup>22</sup>

Written in the first person, the novel covers the first eighteen years of Washington’s life, focusing especially on his adolescence and describing the fraught process of his socialisation as a young black man in a globalising world built *upon* rather than *around* him. With the exception of two important short chapters detailing the violence of plantation life, the novel begins with the beginning of Washington’s life – ‘I was born in the year 1818 on that sun-scorched estate in Barbados. So I was told’ (13) – and concludes with his coterminous arrival into adulthood and a state of (relatively) secure freedom. Edugyan thus repeats the shape of many ‘I was born a slave’ narratives that circulated during the historical moment in which her novel is set.<sup>23</sup> Throughout, the text presents itself *as* such a document, reproducing the genre so convincingly that it almost reads as a ‘found’ and ‘autobiographical’, rather than contemporary and fictional, narrative.

However, with its multiple books and the epic scope of its plot, not to mention its sustained thematic interest in artistic realism and human freedom, Edugyan’s novel also comes close to the related genres of the eighteenth-century sentimental novel and its close cousin, the *bildungsroman*. It begins, after the former, with the ‘primal scene’ of the plantation, a ‘spectacle of suffering that solicits the spectator’s sympathy’; and it imitates the latter by tracking ‘the emergence of the sovereign self from given relations based on status, custom, or tradition and its right to make its own destiny, albeit within a framework of incorporation into an emerging capitalist world order.’<sup>24</sup> The novel’s opening account of the plantation’s visceral violence recalls the affective opening of the sentimental novel, while our narrator’s *bildungsroman* – which is also the story of his search for freedom from slavery and prejudice – is always already displaced by the initial account of dehumanising violence. The

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<sup>22</sup> Gikandi, *Slavery*, xvi.

<sup>23</sup> For a thorough compendium of such narratives, see Yuval Taylor ed., *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume One, 1770-1849* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 1999); see also Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 28.

effect is to unsettle the *bildungsroman*'s prescriptive humanism by pointing to what Debjani Ganguly calls 'the *surplus* of humanness' contained *within* novelistic worlds.<sup>25</sup> Against the '*interiorisation of contradiction*' that, as Moretti reminds us, is both revealed and foreclosed by the *bildungsroman*, Washington's visibility as a black man and an escaped slave repeatedly forces the genre's contradictions to the surface.<sup>26</sup> His 'socialisation' as a 'free man' is only ever partial and precarious, contingent on the boundaries that still vigorously marshal racial difference, regardless of Abolition. However, the novel does not concede these racialised limits of the 'human', reaching instead for the *humanness* that spills over from the straitjacket of 'human rights inc.' in order to recuperate a different kind of humanism instead.<sup>27</sup>

*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 reevaluation of Enlightenment modernity.<sup>28</sup> The novel's plot follows Washington's 'voyage in', so to speak, as he skirts geographically around the edges of the 'Black Atlantic'.<sup>29</sup> His journey begins in Barbados before moving to Virginia in the United States, then on to Nova Scotia in Eastern Canada, and finally (with the exception of a last trip to the Moroccan desert), to England and the heart of the Empire. It is in Nova Scotia, midway through the plot, that Titch, having enabled Washington's escape from the plantation, suddenly disappears into the 'obliterating whiteness' of an Arctic storm – a moment written by Edugyan as a conspicuous 'white void' at the centre of the novel (216-217).<sup>30</sup> Titch's disappearance leaves Washington feeling 'as though the world had vanished' (216), and for

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Though posing as the 'tendentally reformist' and 'normative genre' that is the subject of Joe Slaughter's critique, I will argue here that Edugyan's novel has more earthly designs in mind. See Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), especially 27-28 and 38-39.

<sup>28</sup> Gikandi, *Slavery*, xiii. Gikandi acknowledges the obvious influence of Edward Said's work on 'contrapuntal reading' in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> In this pivotal moment for the novel's plot, Edugyan is making a surreptitious and anachronistic reference to Captain Lawrence 'Titus' Oates, who disappeared into a snow storm during the 1910 to 1913 British 'Terra Nova' expedition to the Antarctic (Titch's name may even be a reworking of Titus, though Nova Scotia is of course in the Arctic, not the Antarctic). Oates's famous words – 'I am just going outside and may be some time' – are today regarded as a quintessential expression of male British imperialism's culture of 'heroic failure'. See Stephanie Barczewski, *Heroic Failure and the British* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 197-8.

the remainder of the novel Washington becomes obsessed with knowing what became of him. The novel is therefore structured as a “double-flight” narrative’, a geographic motion of escape and return that is typical of nineteenth-century colonial and adventure writing.<sup>31</sup> The first half of the plot is propelled forward (or upward) by Washington’s escape, or ‘flight’, from a condition of chattel slavery; the second half documents his search for Titch, which results in his eventual return to a grounded location on the African continent that is geographically proximate to his ancestral home.

This narrative and geographic motion is epitomised in the two locations that (almost) bookend the novel: we begin in the plantation, owned and run by Erasmus Wilde, while near to the novel’s end, Washington – now desperately in search of the lost Titch – visits the Wilde’s childhood home, or that other ‘great estate’: the English country house. Within the novel, these two spaces are *geographically* as far apart as it is possible to be: 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. Despite this, Edugyan plays with gothic tropes – which Gikandi argues were an expression of the cultural traffic between plantation and estate<sup>32</sup> – to reveal how the two locations are contrapuntally folded together:

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. [...] Against a rain-soaked carriage house someone had lined up broken axles, black as burnt bones.

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. [...] The grounds had a feeling of plenitude, of growth and richness, but there was also a sense of vacancy, as though the place had been abandoned not only by its people but by progress itself. One felt great age, and a silence like a held pause; it was as though everything that could happen here had already occurred, as though you were wading into an aftermath. (327-328)

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<sup>31</sup> Dominic Davies, *Imperial Infrastructure and Spatial Resistance in Colonial Literature, 1880-1930* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), 187. Titch’s balloon plays on the image of hot air balloon travel that has come to be associated with Jules Verne’s proto-globalisation 1872 novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Trans. by William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). However, no balloon actually features in Verne’s original story – that is director Michael Anderson’s addition, who included the now iconic balloon flight in his 1956 film adaptation of the book.

<sup>32</sup> Gikandi, *Slavery*, xvi, 259-262.

The estate is written here as an ‘aftermath’ of the novel’s opening scenes, which detail the horrific punishments metered out by Erasmus Wilde, the ‘master’ of Faith Plantation. In those early pages – the novel’s ‘primal scene’ – Erasmus gruesomely decapitates the bodies of enslaved people who have taken their own lives, with the aim of discouraging further suicides: ‘No man can be reborn without his own head’, he threatens, displaying the dismembered body parts around the plantation on spikes (12). Beginning with this attempt to extend white ownership of black bodies into the afterlife, the novel centres the plantation as a necropolitical heart of darkness engaged in the production of ‘absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death’: it is both a *dehumanised* and *dehumanising* space.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, at the end of the novel, with the debris of ‘broken axles’ (signifying lost motion and movement) resembling human remains (‘burnt bones’), Edugyan writes the estate into a narrative continuum that begins with the plantation.<sup>34</sup> It is as though the two spaces are one and the same, separated not geographically, but temporally: we know that Washington has travelled thousands of miles from the Barbadian plantation, but Edugyan describes the scene not as one of arrival, but *return*.

The effect is to reveal the visceral human consequences that are folded into imperialism’s contrapuntal territories. The English estate is re-constructed by Edugyan in the terms of Katherine McKittrick’s ‘demonic grounds’: ‘places and spaces of blackness and black femininity’ that ‘uncover otherwise concealed or expendable human geographies.’<sup>35</sup> Drawing on influences shared with Edugyan (Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Dionne Brand, among others), McKittrick intends her concept not simply to identify spatial categories of difference or absence, but ‘to outline the ways in which *this place*’ – and she repeats an earthly insistence on physical *ground* throughout her study – ‘is an unfinished and therefore transformative human geography story’.<sup>36</sup> Although Washington is a young

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<sup>33</sup> Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40 (21).

<sup>34</sup> There is a nod to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* here, an obvious inter-text for a novel so self-consciously interested in both the act of narration and the earthly dynamics of slavery and colonisation. While stranded upon the island, Crusoe literally tries to reinvent the wheel, significantly for the purpose of a wheelbarrow that he might then use to build his new home. He is thwarted, however, because he finds ‘no possible way to make the iron gudgeons for the spindle or axis of the wheel to run in’. See Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 54-55.

<sup>35</sup> Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxxi.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, xxvi, my emphasis.

man, not himself subject to the doubled violence wielded against women of colour, *Washington Black*'s narrative pushes for the territorial possibilities of 'demonic grounds' as simultaneously contrapuntal *and* reparative geographic spaces.<sup>37</sup> It is this combined movement that suggests a *terrestrial* humanism: a humanism *rooted* in and against, rather than *built upon*, the historical violence of slavery's contrapuntal geographies.<sup>38</sup>

Edugyan's novel therefore pursues Aimé Césaire's well-known critique of Europe's 'pseudo-humanism' and its dependency on the production of spaces of death.<sup>39</sup> In the fraught central relationship between Washington and Titch in particular, Edugyan allegorises the reliance of Enlightenment-era organisations such as the Royal Society – responsible for many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century imperialist manoeuvres made in the name of scientific expeditions<sup>40</sup> – on the transatlantic connections and stockpiles of wealth accumulated from the Caribbean plantation economy, with the aim of *embodying* their human cost. Indeed, Edugyan breathes frightening biopolitical volume into this allegory through metaphors of (im)mobility, burden, and weight: it is, after all, and as we shall now see, Washington's *weight*, his physical body mass, that makes Titch's scientific innovations possible – Washington is, quite literally, 'human cargo'.<sup>41</sup> As Césaire comments, extending this evocative metaphor: with every brutal act of colonial violence, so-called 'civilisation acquires another dead *weight*'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For the philosopher Sylvia Wynter, McKittrick's interlocutor, 'demonic grounds' signify also 'the absented presence of black womanhood', which McKittrick then develops. Despite the novel's absence of leading black female characters, I think it is possible to read Esi Edugyan herself as an authorial 'absent presence', with the effect of constructing the world of the novel as an epistemological space that bears some resemblance to Wynter's and McKittrick's demonic grounds. See Sanders' commentary on Wynter and McKittrick in "'Maybe this wide country": African Canadian Writing and the Poetics of Space', 610-625 (especially 623), and also Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick is rightly cautious both of a 'geographic humanism' and 'humanism' in general, which after all finds its most brutal spatial expression in the spaces of the plantation and the stately home. Nevertheless, McKittrick does rehabilitate a Fanonian humanism in relation to Wynter's extensive work on 'being human' to explore how 'the body is necessarily part of a human struggle [...] and therefore signals that black geographies are human geographies, not simply skin.' McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 24. This interest in the human is central to *Washington Black*, as I explore in more detail below.

<sup>39</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36-7.

<sup>40</sup> Jodi Byrd's *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) offers a series of compelling detailed accounts of the imperial land grabs launched under the auspices of scientific discovery.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Blevins, *Living Cargo: How Black Britain Performs Its Past* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 18-19.

<sup>42</sup> Césaire, *Discourse*, 35.

## The Weight of the World

Metaphoric couplets of heaviness and lightness, flight and flightlessness, and mobility and immobility, dance together throughout *Washington Black*, clustering especially around the novel's centrally conjoined question of Washington's humanity and freedom. They are expressed most explicitly in Titch's hot air balloon, 'the Cloud-cutter', 'a fantastical boat, with two fronts, and oars hanging out', suspended beneath 'an enormous smooth ball [caught] in a kind of webbing' (45). Illustrated on the book's cover, this is the bizarre contraption that Titch and Washington use to escape from the plantation at the end of the novel's first book (there are four parts in total). 'Your real task', says Titch to Washington, 'will be to assist in my scientific endeavours', which include in particular his experiments with 'lighter-than-air craft', and he chooses Washington as his assistant because he is 'precisely the size that I need [...] The weight, you see, that is the key to the Cloud-cutter' (36).

In his book, *Living Cargo* (2016), Steven Blevins explores a recent historiographic turn to the slave trade and slavery in contemporary Black British literature, art, and performance. Blevins notes the emphasis placed by this work on black life as 'human bio-cargo', a concept-metaphor that Blevins appropriates from the dehumanising eighteenth- and nineteenth-century expression, 'human cargo'.<sup>43</sup> The concept's historicised origins are designed to work against the theoretical tendency to abstract away from the real human bodies and lives eradicated by material and structural processes. Although acknowledging his indebtedness to postcolonial studies and recommitting himself to materialist critique, the concept of 'human bio-cargo' allows Blevins to reconsider and thus to *remember* what the *materials* of materialism have been. The result is an emphasis on an *affective* materialism that captures 'the embodied experience of "feeling historical" through aesthetic and synaesthetic sensation' (a technique clearly used by Edugyan herself to construe *Washington Black* as an historical document).<sup>44</sup> Blevins' point is not to dematerialise the violence of global capitalism or plantation

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<sup>43</sup> Blevins, *Living Cargo*, 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 4.

slavery, but rather to help ‘us think about matters of ethical responsibility often abandoned in older Marxist analysis’ and to confront ‘the challenges of comprehending the violent consequences of global capital dispersed across transnational space’.<sup>45</sup>

This endeavour steps cautiously towards a critically humanist project that interrogates the ways in which ‘a society comes to regard a life as human’, as well as ‘the consequences [...] for both those forms of life brought within this conceptual enclosure and those forms of life relegated to some conceptual outside’.<sup>46</sup> What Blevins identifies as the coterminous turn to histories of slavery and an affective materialism in Black British literature is, I think, expressive of the same ‘uncanny homologies’ that Ganguly identifies ‘between the conditions that gave rise to the novel in eighteenth-century England and those that have produced the contemporary world novel’.<sup>47</sup> Although Goethe is now almost ubiquitously credited with the coinage of ‘world literature’ (with Marx and Engels coming in a close second), Ganguly helpfully points to a third early use of the term: it was at the inaugural World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 that Henry B. Stanton, then president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, called for the assistance of ‘the enlightened sentiments of the civilised world’, naming specifically one ‘*influence which we desire to bring to bear for this purpose [as] the literature of the world.*’<sup>48</sup> There are therefore homological similarities, quite intentionally summoned by Edugyan, between *Washington Black* as a historiographic project and the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Abolitionist narratives that were similarly designed to make readers ‘*see and hence feel the horrific violence of the transatlantic slave trade.*’<sup>49</sup> As Blevins might argue, they both share the aim of reinserting the embodied and affective experience of the ‘human’ into the otherwise abstracted processes of capital accumulation and biopolitical control.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 19. Blevins’ acknowledges that there are of course ‘all kinds of life forms that circulate as bio-cargo’ that are not categorised as ‘human’, suggesting the relevance of the posthumanities to these concerns, though conceding these are beyond the scope of his study. See Blevins, *Living Cargo*, 303 fn.37. Similarly, though the posthumanities are clearly on the edge of my argument here, in the interests of space they must in this article remain beyond it.

<sup>47</sup> Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 18, emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 18, emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Blevins, *Living Cargo*, 18-19.

Importantly, these themes of embodiment and their affective weight not only frame the generic contours of *Washington Black*, but are also woven into its diegetic world: after all, Titch *literally* uses Washington's physical weight for his scientific ends. Edugyan thus presents a kind of contrapuntal allegory in which the embodied relationships between individual human characters echo the novel's larger contrapuntal geo-temporalities. With Ganguly's emphasis on 'the contemporary *world* novel' in mind, I will now track this interest in physical and metaphoric weight as it evolves through *Washington Black*'s first book, for so doing reveals that it is clustered with two other related keywords: 'world', yes, but also 'earth'. The relationship between these words is important for the rest of the novel and, as I will show, can help us to understand the full weight of Edugyan's grounded, humanist work.

In the novel's second chapter, Big Kit, Washington's enslaved mother, is described in her heavy labour as 'tearing up the wretched earth' (7), while two pages later she explains freedom from slavery to her son as 'nothing in this world' (9). Reflecting on the successful trips he has already made in 'the Cloud-cutter', Titch describes being 'ten, twenty thousand feet' up in the air as 'truly spectacular. The world from up there is, well – it is God's earth, man' (20). Titch initially explains his 'aeronautical' experiments to Washington, who 'must be wondering what on earth' he has been called into help Titch with, by showing him the moon through a telescope, 'another world' hanging weightless in the sky (33-34). Climbing to the top of Corvus Peak, the fictional mountain overlooking the plantation, Washington remarks on 'how different the world did look from that height', before noting the boundaries of the plantation marked into the 'earth' below (59).<sup>51</sup> When Titch reveals to Washington his real identity as an undercover Abolitionist gathering evidence from Faith, he describes slavery as 'a moral stain', a heavy weight 'that will keep white men from their heaven' (105). And finally, when Titch and Washington escape from the plantation at the end of this first book by flying away in the Cloud-cutter, they stare from their airborne perspective 'out onto the boundlessness of the world' (131).

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<sup>51</sup> There is no Corvus Peak in Barbados. However, there *is* a Corvus Peak in Mt Edziza Provincial Park on the Western edge of Edugyan's British Columbia, Canada – another curious twist in novel's geography.

In Edugyan's symbolic economy, earth and world are set up as oppositional – though not entirely separate – terrains. That first coupling of 'earth' with 'wretched' should alert us to the influence of Frantz Fanon on the novel, a closer analysis of which I will turn to in the next section of this essay. Edugyan connects earth to material labour, and to the violence of the plantation economy; the earth is the ground, and the relationship of Edugyan's characters – both black and white – to that ground is mediated by both the literal weight of their bodies and the 'lightness' of their skin colour. Weight is therefore a racialised category in *Washington Black*, with lightness functioning doubly to signify a synonymy between skin pigmentation and the weightless mobility of freedom. Edugyan's 'worlds', meanwhile, are less material and more abstract, functioning a little like Moretti's 'abstract' concepts to allow Titch a 'God's eye' view of the earth. For those stuck on the ground, worlds are potentially freeing, though it is an idea of freedom that can be precisely historicised to the fictional world of the novel itself:

The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! [Dare to know!] Have courage to use your own understanding! For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is freedom. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all – freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters.<sup>52</sup>

For Immanuel Kant, writing in the first paragraph of his much-discussed 1784 essay, 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"', Enlightenment freedom is not so much the freedom to move physically *through the world*, which would be better described as the freedom to move over or across the surface of the earth: as Kelly Oliver comments, in her study *Earth and World* (2015), for Kant, 'earth' refers precisely to the 'limited surface of the earth', and is thus implicated in property rights, territorial wars, and at best, the notion of 'earth as a common possession'.<sup>53</sup> Against earthliness, Kantian freedom is the freedom to *make worlds*; unlike earth, the 'world' is an essentially

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Gikandi, *Slavery*, 4. The full essay is available here: Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in *Political Writings*, ed. by Hans Reiss, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Second Edition, 1991), 54-60 (54).

<sup>53</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World*, 5.

temporal rather than spatial concept.<sup>54</sup> Crucially, it is the ability to engage freely in such processes of world-making that constituted, in Enlightenment terms, ‘the production of a unique and self-reflective human subject’: ‘humanity’ and ‘freedom’ here become tautological concepts, the one implying and necessitating the other.<sup>55</sup>

This is the epistemological crucible in which an enduring model of European humanism was forged, and which, from the outset, did not simply *ignore* its contradictory dependence on transatlantic slavery, but wove that contradiction into its DNA: black exclusion marked the limit of the Kantian human, and therefore *made humanism possible*. As Gikandi argues, ‘alterity [...] assumed a structural function: the designator of what enabled Europe, or whatever geographical area took that name, to assume a position of cultural superiority and supremacy.’<sup>56</sup> To make his point, Gikandi cites an especially unpleasant excerpt from Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that arises above the trifling. [...] among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through special gifts earn respect in the world.<sup>57</sup>

Kant’s racism is riddled with contradiction: even within the already self-contradictory terms of his own discourse, Kant’s initial assertion – ‘not a single one’ – quickly runs up against his own qualification – ‘some continually rise aloft’ and ‘earn respect in the world’. Especially relevant to *Washington Black* are Kant’s vertical metaphors: in order to be ‘in the world’ one must ‘arise above the trifling’, or ‘rise aloft from the lowest rabble’ – lift away, that is, from the earth’s solid, material

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<sup>54</sup> This distinction allows Oliver to develop an ‘earth ethics’: ‘an ethics of sharing the earth even when we do not share a world. This earth ethics is based on our shared cohabitation of our earthly home’. Oliver, *Earth and World*, 5. There are strong overlaps here with Pheng Cheah’s normative theory of world literature, which re-conceptualises ‘world’ as a temporal rather than spatial category. By tracing a similar philosophical genealogy as Oliver (Kant, Heidegger, Arendt, and Derrida), Cheah reconceives ‘world literature as literature that is an active power in the making of worlds’. See Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2. I will return briefly to Cheah’s work later in this essay.

<sup>55</sup> Gikandi, *Slavery*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Gikandi, *Slavery*, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Gikandi, *Slavery*, 4. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. by John T. Goldthwaite (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 110-111.

ground. Kant's philosophy operates on a racialised metaphor of weight and burden as a mediating category between the terrestrial surface of the earth and a higher, celestial world. Moreover, implicit within this metaphor is a veiled promise that this weight can be 'lightened' by the production of something 'great in art or science' – a portrait, perhaps, or indeed, a prize-winning historical novel.

In *Washington Black*, Edugyan uses the central trope of air flight to concretise these metaphysical concepts into the material *physics* of her novel's diegetic world. In the architecture of Kant's thought, worlds are made only when the earth as a grounded space of physical labour is sufficiently distant; hence Titch's obsession with *elevation*. Titch is, after all, the son of a Royal Society fellow, engaged in scientific 'experiments' that might enable airborne flight (140), and recognition from his father and from the Society – that is, his recognition as a 'Man' – is contingent on the success of these experiments. Yet as an Abolitionist, he is convinced that by attaining height – that is, by becoming *lighter* – he can enable Washington's freedom too, an act that will in turn confirm his own 'humanity'. Titch's words again: 'Negroes are God's creatures also, with all due rights and freedoms. Slavery is a moral stain against us. If anything will keep white men from their heaven, it is this' (105). Finally, these metaphysics solidify into the 'double-flight' structure of the novel itself: with Titch's obsessive pursuit of human flight (which structures the first half of the novel) and Washington's subsequent and similarly obsessive pursuit of Titch (which structures its second half), the novel's narrative follows a philosophically significant trajectory of escape and return – or perhaps more accurately, ascent and descent – with a 'white void' at its central peak.

Despite (or because of) his Abolitionist commitments, both Titch's humanism and – until the novel's final pages – Washington's humanity remain conditioned by the ontological Kantian splitting of world from earth. Even after they have escaped the plantation, Titch justifies Washington's presence to other white characters by referencing his skill as an artist:

He has shown himself an excellent scientific illustrator, and so, rather than wasting his talents in physical labour, I've made better use of him as a personal assistant. He has quite a gift for expressing aeronautical methodologies in ink. You [...] would be wise to treat him with the respect he is due. There are powerful men in England studying our latest report with interest. (140)

Washington buys into this idea that his humanity – tautologically synonymous with freedom – might be attained through artistic and scientific achievement, and the plot goes some way to confirming his assumption.<sup>58</sup> When he first sees Titch drawing the Cloud-cutter, Washington stares ‘at the paper in amazement’, convinced ‘that I wanted – desperately wanted – to do it too: I wanted to create a world with my hands’ (45); later, he reflects that, at ‘the easel, I was a man in full, his hours his own, his preoccupations his own’ (240). It is because of his sketching that he meets Tanna Goff, the woman who will eventually become his lover (244-5), and his trip to England (and thus his eventual freedom) is secured because Mr Goff, Tanna’s father, employs Washington to provide sketches for his new book (280).<sup>59</sup>

In *Washington Black*, the act of drawing therefore becomes more than a way to make mere representations; it is also a way to *make worlds*. Throughout the novel, Washington’s drawings seem ‘to lift from the page’ (45), to become ‘less a drawing than a haunting, a vision of the specimen’s afterlife, set down in a ghostly lustre of ink’ (209). Thus equating artistic production with freedom from slavery, the novel also insists on these world-making endeavours as fundamentally human and humanist projects. For although Washington draws numerous ‘scientific specimens’, he harbours a secretive preference for drawing people’s portraits, particularly – and significantly – from memory. He draws portraits of several other characters throughout the novel (81, 148), and in his climactic encounter with Titch at the end of the book, he entreaties Titch to focus on making representations of ‘human faces’ rather ‘than astral features’ (401) – a scene to which I will return below.

In this thematic preoccupation of drawing-humans-as-world-making, Edugyan appropriates Kantian metaphysics to align the surface of the earth with the material surface of her page. Her

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<sup>58</sup> Washington’s acceptance of this Enlightenment ideal is not entirely uncritical, however, and he frequently considers the grim terrestrial realities of his own historical moment. As he reflects about one-third of the way through the novel: ‘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 wrong-headed 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’ (165).

<sup>59</sup> I have here had to gloss over some of the intricacies of the plot in the interests of space, but the general point – that Washington’s sketching enables his freedom, and thus confers upon him an Enlightenment version of ‘humanity’ – still stands. Tanna herself is an aspiring artist, and though not so naturally gifted as Washington, she similarly equates the ‘progress’ of her ‘drawing’ with her ‘freedom of movement’ (244).

implied suggestion is that her own novel is itself a world-making project with both terrestrial and humanist ends. *Washington Black* is, after all, Edugyan's own historical 'portrait' of Washington, one that sets 'down in a ghostly lustre of ink' the human life worlds of the Black Atlantic. Against the weight of the methodologies devised to decide what counts as World(-)Literature, Washington's physical weight instead encodes a meta-textual dimension: the burden assumed by Edugyan herself, as she attempts to recreate the world of an escaped slave from collective memory and to rewrite it as history.<sup>60</sup> *Washington Black* carries the black artist's 'burden of representation', as Kobena Mercer has influentially described it: the weight of 'the role of making present what had been rendered absent in the official version of modern art history', and to which we might add literary and global histories as well.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Washington Black's* White Masks**

If *Washington Black's* humanism so far appears to conform uncritically to the architecture of Enlightenment thought, that is because we have not yet accounted for the other bodily price that, beyond the utility of his physical mass and his skills as an artist, Washington pays for aiding Titch in his 'aeronautical' experiments. The first time they attempt to launch the Cloud-cutter from the summit of Corvus Peak, Titch and Washington ascend the mountain accompanied by Titch's cousin, Philip. A member of the English aristocracy from Hampshire, Philip is a man with 'an unending hunger', his weighty 'bulk' and 'brooding presence' frequently remarked upon (82). Disengaged from their experiment, Philip demands Washington fetch him 'the sandwiches' at the very same moment that Titch turns on the canisters of 'hydrogen gas' to inflate the Cloud-cutter's balloon (85). Still a slave, Washington is forced to oblige, lunging forward within range of the Cloud-cutter to grab the satchel

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<sup>60</sup> The influence of Glissant is again palpable here, his reflections on 'the presence (and the weight) of an increasingly global historical consciousness', and the role that literature can play in allowing 'the weight of lived experience' to 'slip in' to history, clearly informing Edugyan's own work. See Édouard Glissant, 'The Quarrel with History' and 'History and Literature', *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 61-66, 69-86.

<sup>61</sup> Kobena Mercer, 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation', *Third Text* 4.10 (1990): 61-78 (62).

containing their picnic just as the canister explodes. He is blasted off his feet, ‘lifted and thrown back’ – momentarily weightless – ‘in the shuddering milk-white flash of light, my head striking the ground’ (85).

The nature of Washington’s wound alerts us to another of the novel’s sustained interests – not weight, but images of human faces (though the two are closely related).<sup>62</sup> Washington awakes to ‘a weight on my neck, a strange blunt numbness’, and when Titch eventually fetches him a mirror, he sees ‘a grotesque creature [peering] back at me’:

I raised a hand, and shuddered at the touch of my cheek. It felt like meat. The right side had been partly torn away. I could see into the flesh of my cheek, a strange white patch marbled with pink, like a fatty cut of mutton. Old black scabs edged the wounds, along with fresher ones, clots pale as boiled oatmeal. My right eye was full of blood. I could still see foggily by it, but the pupil looked lunar, bluish white. I saw it and thought of the raw, cursing eye of a duppy. (88)

There is so much to be said about this description that I can only draw out some general points here: the intimation of the Lacanian mirror-stage, conjoined to the reduction of Washington’s face to ‘meat’, makes this a moment of self-cancelling self-recognition, in which Washington sees himself as ‘human cargo’; the description of the ‘lunar’ pupil invokes a ‘world’ that has been erased, the vantage-point of a ‘heightened’ perspective, now lost; there is the comparison with the ‘duppy’, a spirit in Caribbean folklore with avowedly anti-colonial designs; and finally, there is the evocative similarity of the overall description with the ‘loathsome yet appalling hideousness’ of the face of Frankenstein’s monster (Washington will be described as a ‘monster’ on several occasions throughout the rest of the novel).<sup>63</sup> Suffice it to say that, taken together, these multiple references construct the

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<sup>62</sup> Knocked unconscious by the blast, when Washington first comes round he describes an initial fear that he has been caught ‘between worlds, that my death had not been complete and I’d been left suspended and weightless, lost’ (86); it only takes him a moment longer to remember that it was Philip’s ‘desire to eat’ that has caused ‘pain like a sunrise in my skull’ (87). As should by now be clear, I have not over emphasised the extent to which weight and weightlessness saturate the world of *Washington Black*. Although the metaphor is not used so abundantly that its meaning is lost, it is written – in yet another example of Edugyan’s extraordinary authorial control – so that the novel itself weighs heavy with images of weight.

<sup>63</sup> The dramatic revelation of the inhuman face of Frankenstein’s monster occurs in the final paragraphs of Shelley’s novel, in his climactic confrontation with Walton. See Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 152. The essays discussing themes of humanism, transhumanism, and posthumanism in *Frankenstein* are too numerous to mention here, but we might note Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the way in which Shelley’s novel destabilises ‘Kant’s three-part conception of the human subject’ in her influential essay, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a

deformed face as an *image* of a broken humanist project, a symbolically loaded ‘wrecked visage’ that Washington is ‘forced to carry like an unwanted warning’ (244) – a *burden* – for the rest of his life.

Importantly, it is not only Washington’s face that is deformed in this novel: Titch has ‘a fine white scar cutting up from either corner of his mouth and across his cheeks to his ears’ (40), ‘caused in boyhood’ by ‘a very thick wire, of tempered iron [...] pressed into [his] mouth and yanked back’ (172). In a pivotal moment for the novel’s plot, the overweight Philip commits suicide in front of Washington (thus implicating him in Philip’s death and forcing him to flee the plantation with Titch). Significantly, Philip begins by apologising for causing the wound to *Washington’s* face, before then shooting *himself* through the mouth. Edugyan’s description of this episode echoes Washington’s earlier trauma: Philip’s profile, ‘black and blunt against the failing sun’, is suddenly replaced with a ‘white [...] explosion’ and a ‘reek of fresh meat’; remnants of his ‘teeth, or pieces of bone, [and] other parts of his shattered face’ spray over Washington, leaving ‘the flesh of his face [...] folded viciously away from the skull, like leather freshly cut’ (118-121). Third and finally, in an eventual confrontation with a slave hunter, Willard, who tracks Washington for much of the novel, Edugyan’s protagonist defends himself by ‘driving the tip’ of an ‘ivory-handled kitchen knife’ deep into the slave hunter’s eye (299-300).<sup>64</sup>

In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler reads the Levinasian face as ‘not precisely or exclusively a human face’, but more specifically a face that communicates ‘what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable.’<sup>65</sup> Edugyan’s conspicuous preoccupation with injured faces is closely related to the novel’s larger thematic interest in the limitations of Enlightenment humanism, wherein black people are dehumanised and reduced to ‘cargo’ or ‘ballast’, measured only in their physical

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Critique of Imperialism’, *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn, 1985): 243-361. For a poetic reflection on the anti-colonial politics of the duppy, meanwhile, see Rebekah Lawrence, ‘The Third-World Duppy’, *The Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 5. 3 (Summer 2008): 98: ‘If I were a duppy / I would hunt down Columbus, Cortez and de res’ ah dem so-called discovers / ...And their descendants’.

<sup>64</sup> Willard actually survives Washington’s defensive attack, only to be later caught for the murder of another freed slave in England and hanged. Washington learns of the hanging and goes to see it in person, catching a ‘fleeting’ glance of ‘Willard’s face’ before his death, though oddly, there is no mention of a scar or wounded eye (363). However, in a reflective passage, Edugyan weaves the hanging into the larger symbolic economy of her novel, gently reminding readers that it is Willard’s *weight*, and the sudden dropping of his body from a scaffold, that is the eventual cause of his death (365).

<sup>65</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London & New York: Verso, 2004), xviii.

weight. However, these faces alert us more particularly to the redemptive thread of Edugyan's novel, signaling her effort to search out and re-conceive a new kind of humanism that circumvents the vertically constrained limitations of Kant's exclusionary model. As Butler continues in her later work on precarious life, 'the human' is constituted through conditions or 'frames' of 'recognisability'; the conditions, that is, that make a person's life grievable, and thus recognisable as human.<sup>66</sup> Written in the style of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century slave narratives, Edugyan's novel imitates a genre designed historically to create those conditions, and to make the humanity of enslaved people recognisable to white readers. But in addition to this historical imitation, the novel is also doing similar recuperative work in its own present, asking its contemporary readers to rethink the 'frames' of recognisability through which they view histories of slavery and the slave trade.

This is how *Washington Black*, even as it struggles with Enlightenment humanism, is – like key figures in mid-twentieth-century decolonising movements – reluctant to let go of the concept entirely, instead reworking it towards anti-colonial ends. The prevalence of cracked and scarred faces, especially among the *white* men of Edugyan's novel, suggests they are little more than *masks*, and as I have noted, this is not the only reference to Fanon: Washington's mother, Big Kit, works the 'wretched earth', and the 'hothouse' in which they both live before Washington escapes bears 'Latin script upon it: *Not Unmindful of the Sick and Wretched*' (323). The need for 'face to face' encounters of various kinds is scattered throughout Fanon's fiery prose, and in answer to the question, 'Why write this book?', Fanon writes the following in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Well, I reply quite calmly that there are too many idiots in this world. And having said it, I have the *burden* of proving it.

Toward a new *humanism*....

[...]

The black man wants to be white. The white man wants to reach a human level. [...]

There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men.

There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.

How do we extricate ourselves?<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London & New York: Verso, 2009), 5-6.

<sup>67</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 1, 3, my emphasis. The imagery of Rudyard Kipling's 'white man's burden' lingers in this metaphysical architecture.

With this analysis, Fanon reconstructs a Kantian model of Enlightenment humanism (which it his purpose to dismantle) around a vertical metaphor of height, wherein humanity, or the ‘human level’, is attained by moving upwards from a terrestrial to celestial plane.<sup>68</sup> Fanon recognises that this territorial distribution of ‘humanity’ descends vertically from the heavens, and that it is racialised according to the relative burden of earthly slave labour and the lightness of white supremacy.<sup>69</sup> Fanon’s question – ‘How do we extricate ourselves?’ – drives the plot of *Washington Black* forward. For Fanon, this is achieved by a reorientation ‘toward a new humanism’, one that is redefined not as some celestial or idealist plane reached through ‘aeronautical methodologies’, but as earthly and terrestrial, grounded to a specific historical and political geography. As he writes:

The architecture of this work is rooted in the temporal. Every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future.

And this future is not the future of the cosmos but rather the future of my century, my country, my existence. In no fashion should I undertake to prepare the world that will come later. I belong irreducibly to my time.<sup>70</sup>

In his argument for ‘postcolonial literature as world literature’, Pheng Cheah reads Fanon’s philosophy of ‘revolutionary decolonisation’ as a process of reworlding: ‘an opening of the existing world to colonised peoples by the inauguration of a new temporality’.<sup>71</sup> Cheah’s welcome deviation from existing models of World(-)Literature is predicated on precisely this understanding of ‘world’ as a temporal rather than spatial concept. However, in his emphasis on temporality, Cheah risks losing sight of the still very terrestrial reference points of Fanon’s model, which are crucially what

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<sup>68</sup> In his well-known introduction to the 1986 reissue of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Homi Bhabha acknowledges in a conspicuous footnote Fanon’s tendency to portray white women according to cultural stereotypes and his outright refusal to speak of women of colour (‘I know nothing about her’). Bhabha is satisfied that ‘Fanon’s use of the word “man” usually connotes a phenomenological quality of humanness, inclusive of man and woman’, and leaves the question of gender there. See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, xxxvi-xxxvii. Though a thorough response is beyond the scope of this article, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997) offers a more rigorous defence of Fanon’s rhetorical and political position on gender. She emphasises that *Black Skin, White Masks* is ‘at once a clinical study and an experiential narrative’, excluding not only women’s experiences but several other subjectivities too. As Fanon himself concedes: ‘Many Negroes will not find themselves in what follows. This is equally true of whites.’ See Sharpley-Whiting, *Conflicts and Feminisms*, 12; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Admittedly, Fanon is writing here about colonialism, rather than slavery *per se*, but he views the one as a continuation of the other, describing the colonised as ‘slaves of modern times’. See Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, Trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 34.

<sup>70</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 5-6.

<sup>71</sup> Cheah, *What is a World?*, 195.

differentiate it from Kant's. Kantian worlds, as we have seen, are situated on unearthly, idealist planes. By contrast, Fanon's world-making project is 'temporal', but it is also geographically 'rooted' in 'my country' and 'my existence', opposed explicitly *against* some abstract, more-than-earthly 'cosmos'; for Fanon, if decolonial world-making is to be more than a metaphoric project, it must be fundamentally *territorial* and *terrestrial* as well.<sup>72</sup>

In addition, and though engaging with philosophers from Heidegger to Arendt, humanism is rarely on Cheah's agenda. Fanon's temporality, by contrast, is explicitly couched in a human-centred scale and perspective, even if his 'humanism' is positioned radically against the exclusionary limits of its European namesake. For Kant, new temporal worlds are split away from the spatial surface of the earth; for Fanon, it is the earth that is worldly. For Kant, man must make worlds, and their humanity, by creating something 'great in art or science'; for Fanon, he is already

the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos [...] If I am black, it is not the result of a curse, but it is because, having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic *effluvia*. I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth....<sup>73</sup>

The worldly cosmos at the summit of Kantian metaphysics is, for Fanon, infused into the black body itself, 'world' and 'earth' coming together through the figure of the human to create an earthly world, or a terrestrial humanism.

Apter develops this phrase, 'terrestrial humanism', through a reading of the 'earthly and worldly valences' of Edward Said's later writings. In particular, she shows how Said's humanism was forged through the hotly contested territorial histories of Palestine/Israel: as Said reflects in an influential

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<sup>72</sup> I am implicitly referring here to Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang's influential article, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society*, Vol.1, No.1 (2012), 1-40, which reminds us of the importance of physical territory in processes of decolonial world-making. As they write: 'Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth (land, for shorthand, in this article.) Land is what is most valuable, contested, required' (5). This is something that Fanon stresses too, more explicitly in *Wretched of the Earth* than *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'What [the colonised] demand is not the status of the colonist, but his *place*. In their immense majority the colonised want the colonist's *farm*. There is no question for them of competing with the colonist. They want to take his *place*.' Fanon, *Wretched*, 23, my emphasis. Let me add here, then, that while the humanism I'm sketching out is influenced by theorists of decolonisation, I am not making the case for an exact synonymy between a 'decolonial' or 'decolonised' humanism and a 'terrestrial' one. This would be to 'metaphorise decolonisation' and thus to 'resettle theory' all over again, something Tuck and Wang warn sharply against. While for Said and Fanon a terrestrial humanism would eventually enable some forms of decolonisation, we should be cautious of assuming that the first somehow inherently forecloses or necessitates the latter.

<sup>73</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 31.

1979 essay, which Apter cites in support of her argument, he writes from the territorial ‘standpoint’ – Said uses Fanon’s word – of the victims of Zionism.<sup>74</sup> I take the territorial underpinnings of Said’s humanism to be productively comparable to Fanon’s: where Said’s humanism, for Apter, is rooted in his notion of a ‘worldly world’, Fanon’s is rooted in an earthly world.<sup>75</sup>

This is not the universalising liberal humanism that the WReC imply when they worry about Apter’s ‘close reading with a worldview’.<sup>76</sup> Rather, Said’s humanism, like Fanon’s, was ‘earthly’ and ‘world-making’, open ‘to “concrete ways of being human” that are not foretold in the conventional humanist programme’.<sup>77</sup> For Said, the critique of humanism enables humanism’s earthly *beginning*, rather than bringing it to a deadening end. Here, critique *itself* is a productive rather than a prescriptive project, a politicised mode of attentive close reading that tries to open up and *generate* contrapuntal worlds *within* and *from* texts, rather than measuring what they do or do not say against a pre-existing – and necessarily abstract – system or checklist.<sup>78</sup> *Washington Black* may indeed ‘critique or inflect capitalism’s development’, but as Blevins might observe, it also weighs the human cost of those processes and seeks to run their riskily abstract conceptualisations aground. In this way, the novel constructs a critique of ways of reading that are either limited in their analysis by their self-proclaimed anti-humanism, or overly abstracted into the masked ‘pseudo-humanism’ of the liberal Enlightenment tradition. With this work in place, it reaches in its final pages for a terrestrial humanism instead.

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<sup>74</sup> Apter, ‘Terrestrial Humanism’, 451, and Edward Said, ‘Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims’, *Social Text* 1 (1979), 7-58. Apter’s argument also builds on Aamir Mufti, ‘Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times’, *boundary 2* 31.2 (2004): 1-9, and reads Said’s *Freud and the Non-European* (London: Verso, 2003), *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), and *After the Last Sky* (London: Vintage, 1986), among others.

<sup>75</sup> Apter, ‘Terrestrial Humanism’, 440-4. For an extended comparative discussion of Said, Fanon, and humanism, see Anthony C. Alessandrini, ‘Humanism in Question: Fanon and Said’, in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 431-450.

<sup>76</sup> WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 26.

<sup>77</sup> Apter, ‘Terrestrial Humanism’, 451. See also Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 92.

<sup>78</sup> I’m clearly writing under the influence of the fairly recent turn against symptomatic reading and critique advocated by Bruno Latour and Rita Felski, among others. However, while I welcome Felski’s call for a more positive and productive approach to texts, I would not want to do away entirely with critique, as this article itself should evidence. With Said (and, for that matter, Raymond Williams), I believe the critic’s role as an active participant in the production of a text’s meaning in the world must be acknowledged. One way in which I am managing this nuance is by insisting, against figures such as Latour, on the place of the *human* in the act of reading and writing World Literature. See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam’, *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004): 225-48; see also Lorna Burns, *Postcolonialism After World Literature* (2019), 8-11, for a useful commentary on some of these tensions.

## Conclusion: Reading For A Terrestrial Humanism

I want to close this essay by turning to the final chapters of *Washington Black*, where these ideas take on their clearest expression. What I've called *Washington Black*'s second 'flight' narrative – Washington's restless pursuit of Titch – is predicated on the former's need for the latter's recognition of his humanity. Washington demands this recognition when he finally catches up with Titch, who has set up camp in the Moroccan desert. Why is he in the desert? For better visibility of celestial worlds: 'Above the low roof the heavens were vast, filled with bright stars' (400).<sup>79</sup> Edugyan lays the metaphoric weight on thick in these closing pages: 'Dozens of scientific instruments had been piled here [...]. It was as if a single obsessive thought had been made manifest in these tools; each steel piece seemed an idea cast aside, each glass scope a possible answer' (400-1). Somewhat manically, Titch has developed a process of image capture – something like the daguerreotype – to make exact replications of the moon on 'sheets of silver-plated copper': he is trying (and failing) to *make* worlds by reducing them to abstract representations. Tellingly, however, his method is not yet technologically capable of capturing the moon in sufficient detail. Instead, it is only his experiments with *human faces* that have so far yielded satisfactory results:

'The process works much better with human faces than astral features, as you see. But my goal is to have them be equally sharp. I think it is a question of distance. Of distance from one's subject.'

I searched his face, feeling there was something now more recognizable in it.

'But human faces are so interesting,' said I.

'Yes, to be sure. But when you are looking at one face, you are not looking at another. You are privileging that face. You are deciding who is worthy of observation and who is not. You are choosing who is worth preserving.' (401)

It is difficult not to read this exchange as a implicit commentary on the 'trouble' with World Literature. Titch's 'problem' is eerily reminiscent of Moretti's, which they both try to resolve with

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<sup>79</sup> Edugyan's desert might also be read in a philosophical tradition that runs from Kant through to Arendt and Heidegger, where the desert evolves as a metaphor for an 'inhospitable region' – Robinson Crusoe's *desert* island – to describe more generally a condition of 'worldlessness' and 'a lack of connection between people and peoples'. See Oliver, *Earth and World*, 29-38.

‘distant reading’ and comparably totalising methodologies. Yet in this quest for totality, these methodologies risk what Oliver calls ‘the dangerous attitude of supercilious mastery and control over both earth and world’, and which are characterised here by Edugyan as ‘aeronautical methodologies’ that efface the human content of her own literary text.<sup>80</sup>

With her words now carrying this metaphoric weight, we can intuit Edugyan’s ‘standpoint’ in this debate. Washington reminds Titch:

‘You told me once, when I was drawing, “Be faithful to what you see, and not what you are supposed to see.”’

‘Did I say that?’ Titch seemed genuinely surprised.

‘You did. And yet it always did seem to me that you never lived by it yourself.’

He paused. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You did not see me – you did not look at me, and see me. You wanted to, but you didn’t, you failed. You saw, in the end, what every other white man saw when he looked at me.’ (403-4)

Washington’s confrontational insistence on Titch’s failure to recognise his humanity pits a grounded, terrestrial humanism and earthly world against the abstracted concept worlds of World(-)Literature. At the same time, the novel pre-emptively and critiques a reading of itself *as* World(-)Literature by refuting its own subjection to ‘distant’, overly prescriptive, or decontextualised analysis. For although the text insists on a humanism, it is far from a ‘liberal’ or ‘transnational’ one in which material and social determinants are effaced. Rather, it is a humanism attuned to the terrestrial histories and evolving territorial politics of *this* earth.

Bringing this point to conclusion, in the following chapter – the book’s climactic scene – Titch reveals to Washington that he has rebuilt the Cloud-cutter and plans ‘to cross the Atlantic in it. I had been thinking, actually, of Barbados as a destination’ (407). The horror of this final and most ridiculous ‘scientific’ plan is that Titch has unthinkingly plotted to repeat the Middle Passage, the journey from Northwest Africa to the Caribbean, ‘conveniently forgetting’ – in Washington’s words – ‘all that had been bad and wrong about it’ (407-8). Suddenly, Edugyan’s depiction of the Cloud-

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<sup>80</sup> See Oliver, *Earth and World*, 43. Glissant is here again, too. As he writes: ‘Methodologies passively assimilated, far from reinforcing a global consciousness or permitting the historical process to be established beyond the ruptures experienced, will simply contribute to worsening the problem.’ See Glissant, ‘The Quarrel with History’, 61.

cutter as ‘a fantastical boat, with two fronts, and oars hanging out’ (45), takes on its heavy historical meaning, signifying here the slaving ships that carried enslaved people across the Atlantic.<sup>81</sup> What is more, this image takes on a meta-critical significance too: the balloon – ‘an enormous smooth ball [caught] in a kind of webbing’ – reads as the ‘world’, or the *object* of World Literature, caught in the netting of methodologies that, in seeking to harness its potential, inadvertently weigh it down. At its most critical, World(-)Literature’s totalising and overly abstracted gaze might be read here as a secondary dehumanisation of the human and historical portrait that it has been Edugyan’s burden to produce through her writing. This is why, in the novel’s conclusion, Titch and his ‘aeronautical methodologies’ are not absolved, but abandoned: as Fanon quips in the early pages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, there comes ‘a point at which methods devour themselves.’<sup>82</sup>

In the novel’s final scene, Washington leaves Titch’s house and walks out into the desert, where he fixes his gaze on ‘the orange blur of the horizon’ (417). Washington looks upon a world – the rising sun and the beginning of a new day – not through the perspective-altering tools of a telescope or daguerreotype, but with his naked human eye; from an earthly ‘standpoint’, to use Fanon’s and Said’s terrestrial word.<sup>83</sup> ‘We must shake off the great mantle of night which has enveloped us, and reach for the light’, writes Fanon in the conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*: ‘The new day which is dawning must find us determined, enlightened and resolute.’<sup>84</sup> Conjuring with this image Fanon’s call for a world ‘whose communications must be humanised’, *Washington Black* characterises the erasure of an open and attentive close reading by world literary studies as a risky repetition of the Enlightenment’s exclusionary, dehumanising, and unearthly worlds.<sup>85</sup> In its place, Edugyan suggests

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<sup>81</sup> This metaphor is further extended when we account for the fact that the first Cloud-cutter, on which Titch and Washington escaped the plantation, is now a ‘wreckage’ at the ‘bottom of the ocean’ (137, 166).

<sup>82</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> There is perhaps a case to be made – which I allude to above, but do not have room to pursue here – that in this final scene Washington is looking towards the ‘territory’ once occupied by his African ancestors. Here, at the end of the novel, he has stepped foot on the African continent for the first time in his life. In the novel’s opening scenes on the plantation, Big Kit plans her’s and Washington’s suicide with the aim of attaining their return spiritual return to West Africa: ‘She was of an ancient African faith rooted in the high river lands of Africa, and in that faith the dead were reborn, whole, back in their homelands to walk again free’ (8). Washington’s new life, intimated here by the rising sun, might thus be read as the full recovery of black life from the violent social death metered out by the slave trade, and that is epitomised in the necropolitical space of the plantation in the novel’s first two chapters.

<sup>84</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 235.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, 237-8.

a terrestrial humanism built on demonic grounds: as McKittrick might observe, by insisting on ‘blackness and black humanity in the world’, both Washington and Fanon insinuate ‘a different geographic language into the landscape, a language not always predicated on ownership and conquest.’<sup>86</sup> Herein, perhaps, lies a model for *reading* world literary texts, not as data points or prescribed critiques, or as harbingers of liberal humanist values, but as terrestrial standpoints that alert us to the historical worldliness of the earth and the possibilities of the human, radically redefined.

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<sup>86</sup> McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 28.