Decolonising Literature
Exclusionary Practices & Writing to Resist/Re-Exist

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines elements of the conceptualization of literature within literary studies and literary production in a UK context, considering the concept of exclusionary practices based on the negligence of intersectional categories of identity such as race, gender, class, sexuality, etc., in the practice of understanding and interpreting literature. The methodologies I employ are close reading of various narratives, such as literary texts, as well as a narrative analysis aimed at a holistic understanding of my material. The second part of this thesis envisions a decolonised approach to literature in which we situate our positionalities when we read and interpret literary works. I demonstrate this through the analysis of several poems, informed by decolonial concepts and sensibilities. The results show that the maintenance of these exclusionary practices advances a grand-narrative of Western civilisation, ignoring the multiple sites people inhabit both from within, and outside, the West and that these practices are effectively harmful. I argue that through the project of decolonising literature there is a possibility of disrupting the perpetual macro-narrative of Western domination and universality.

Keywords: decolonising, literary studies, English literature, American literature, canons, macro-narrative, grand narratives, close reading, narrative analysis, postcolonial theory, decolonial theory, canonisation, Romanticism, othering, nation-state, national identity, publishing industry
para mi mamá y papá,
whom I’ve always wanted to make proud
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Introduction: “liberating literature”

“To often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent” – Edward Said (1979, 27).

In 2017, following the creation of an open letter to the English faculty at Cambridge University, then student Lola Olufemi explained the need to decolonise the former, writing: “We need a faculty that recognizes that ‘objective analysis’ and the act of reading is shaped by the material consequences of our lives: gender, race, class, ability. […] Acknowledgements of the politics that surround literature, especially pertaining to race and colonial history, do not burden texts, but liberate them” (2017). Upon reading this, two aspects of this quote stood out significantly: first, Olufemi asserts, while not in those words, the need to consider an intersectional approach to reading literature, that is, aware of how “sociocultural power differentials” (Lykke 2010, 67) are interwoven and how these shape our material realities. She also evokes Donna Haraway (1988) when critiquing the notion of “objective analysis”; who, in her seminal article, argues to move away from what she calls the “god trick” (581), which promotes a disembodied subject that removes itself from its research/writing, that works “to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power” (ibid., 581). Haraway attempts to establish objectivity based on a feminist premise, one that does not reproduce the “god trick”, but is instead conscious of one’s limited locations, of our “situated knowledges” (ibid., 583). As Ramón Grosfoguel (2009) asserts: “No one escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’ (13), and that we ”always speak from a particular location in the power structures” (ibid.). Secondly, Olufemi evokes Edward Said (1979) and the notion that literature,

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1 Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).
2 Grosfoguel (2009) adds ‘capitalist/patriarchal’ to ‘modern/colonial world-system’ – I will not write this out throughout this thesis, but see these structures as part of the matrix ‘modern/colonial’ (13). Moreover, Walter Mignolo (2002a) refers to the modern/colonial world system as an “articulation of power” and defines it in contrast to modernity (and postmodernity): “Modernity (and obviously postmodernity) maintained the imaginary of Western civilization as a pristine development from ancient Greece to eighteenth-century Europe, where the bases of modernity were laid out. In contrast, the conceptualization of the modern world-system does not locate its beginning in Greece. It underlines a spatial articulation of power rather than a linear succession of events. Thus, the modern world-system locates its beginning in the fifteenth century and links it to capitalism” (60). He goes on to write that “Modernity places the accent on Europe. Modern world-system analysis brings colonialism into the picture, although as a derivative rather than a constitutive component of modernity, since it does not yet make visible coloniality, the other (darker?) side of modernity” (ibid.).
as well as culture, is considered and approached as apolitical, as “historically innocent” (27). To liberate literature then, is to be critically aware of our positionings in relation to each other and the material we read and analyse, as well as understand literature as operating, not in a vacuum, but within powerful institutions; it means to ground literature as political and influential in the ways we relate to our surrounding world(s). It is from here that I begin grounding my research, the outset I want to move from. Having my academic background in literary studies at a UK university, Olufemi’s call to decolonise resonated with me deeply. But it has been more than the fact of my BA in Comparative Literature and English and American Literature; it is my own positioning in a Western context as a second-generation Chilean Swede that made me start questioning, as well as realising, the need to bring forth more of what made me, me in this particular context. That has had me looking beyond the Euro-centricity I have been shaped within. The instincts to decolonise, those that have enabled this thesis, stems from that very site: a site of “inbetweenness”\(^3\) of multiplicities.

i. Aims and research questions

The two overarching aims of this thesis is to map (and to expose) what I’ve here chosen to call “exclusionary practices” and to explore the possibilities of decolonising literature. By exclusionary practices I mean different modes in which literature, by being canonised, for example, or produced in an industry that maintains a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy\(^4\) (bell hooks 1994), has historically perpetuated a single story of the world, what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2016) refers to “the danger of a single story”. It is one that is informed by colonialist discourses that completely disregard or have systematically erased non-Western peoples’ (as well as the children of first-, second-, third-generation immigrant parents or grandparents growing up in Western contexts, like myself) local and embodied knowledges, as well as arts, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) stresses. By imagining a project of decolonising literature, I’ve wanted to consider what that could potentially entail and how (as well as where) we can come to ground it. This to consider possible ways we can disrupt exclusionary practices within literary studies and literary production within a UK context. My main research questions are:

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\(^3\) Mellanförskap in Swedish.

\(^4\) Here, I would add: hetero- and cisnormative and ableist patriarchy, for a fuller scope of the kind of power differentials at play.
• What are the possible functions of the national literary canon as a reservoir and transmitter of a specific kind of knowledge, such as establishing national identities and memories and in what ways can these maintain colonialist discourses?

• What kinds of exclusionary practices (that disregard intersections of race, gender, class, etc.) can be identified in examples of the English literary canon, in my choice of a non-canonical literary work, and in current literary production, and how do these naturalise harmful systems of representations within a modern/colonial world system?

• How can decolonising a Western understanding of literature and the current modes of doing literary studies potentially resist these tendencies?

ii. Thesis outline

The manner I’ve chosen to outline my thesis was not always clear-cut – initially, I thought of presenting my textual analyses first within the two-part structure. My choice to structure the thesis as I decided on stems from my wish to ground my analysis in a larger kind of critique. This will (hopefully) become evident as you, my reader, has finished reading the first part of this thesis, in which the second chapter – a postcolonial reading – is a continuation of some of the issues I bring up in the first chapter, particularly in connection to questions on re-publishing out-of-print literary works. My reading of Emma Smith’s The Far Cry (originally published in 1949; re-published in 2002 by publishing house Persephone Books; the latest edition is from 2016) is to demonstrate how the narrative contributes to a kind of reigning master (and thus exclusive) narrative of white, male, middle/upper, rational, imperial dominance, that I shall explore more in detail in the first chapter, and how, in turn, the publishing industry is complicit in these mechanisms when re-publishing such works without engaging critically with these texts through, for example, a fore/afterword (as I’m proposing is necessary). As such, I wanted to frame this entire thesis with the chapter of exclusionary practices as a point to move away from, in which my analysis of Smith’s novel is another example of such systems of exclusion.

As for the second part of my thesis, it came to mirror part I: in that I start with establishing elements of decolonial theory crucial for a project of decolonising literature, followed by a chapter where I look at how we can practically analyse literary works informed by such theory,
here limited to the concepts of resistance and re-existence, which I will there unpack. I use these concepts as decolonial methods to analyse assorted poems by Nayyirah Waheed (2013), Danez Smith (2014, 2015) and Warsan Shire (2016), as a way to illustrate the necessity to analyse literature within a politicised spectrum, as well as consider how these writers look to the importance of locality in their writing, moving away from the Eurocentric universal that has, at least in literary studies, often come to represent the white, middle/upper class, straight and cis man (and woman). The ways I’ve wanted to answer my research questions has been to problematize and critically approach the systems of exclusion I’ve chosen to present in this thesis, which in no way are conclusive. To further contest these, I’ve wanted to explore the possibility of decolonising literature as informed by my experience of literary studies, which of course is also incomplete, and by no means comprehensive – this is to hopefully sow a seed for future research in this particular interdisciplinary field of social sciences and humanities.

Lastly, I want to clarify that by exclusionary practices I refer to a Eurocentric universalist narrative that systematically ignores the theorisation of local knowledges, as well as devaluing these within a modern/colonial world system. I refer to narratives that perpetuate systems of representations that are harmful to peoples of colour and that continue in the project of dehumanisation, as I will show with my analysis of Smith’s The Far Cry. Decolonising literature, then, would not only focus on bringing to the fore ignored and devalued narratives of multiple human experiences, a decolonised canon, but it would also mean to acknowledge and explore the powerful mechanisms that enable a canon in the first place. It would also mean investigating the literature we occupy ourselves with in literary studies, to start; moreover, decolonising literature would emphasise that the literary works we read and analyse for our respective modules have not been created, nor selected, in a neutral and depoliticised vacuum. I also want to clarify that when I use “exclusionary” it is not to uphold an inclusion/exclusion

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5 Grosfoguel (2009) elucidates this further: “The main point here is the locus of enunciation, that is, the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks. In western philosophy and sciences the subject that speaks is always hidden, concealed, erased from the analysis. The ‘ego-politics of knowledge’ of western philosophy has always privileged the myth of a non-situated ego, ego meaning the conscious thinking subject” (14, emphasis in original).

6 Interestingly, Botkyrka Library (2017) in Stockholm have on their website such a list, based on the books that are available for lending there. I have not previously seen such a decolonised reading list in a Swedish context, so when I found this I was so pleased (and hopeful!). They write: “When we consider literary works that count as classics throughout history, the ones highlighted are often books by white European men. But what would a literary canon in the West look like, if we would count literary works by minorities from Asia and Africa?” (my translation).
binary, as this dichotomous thinking is grounded in the very foundations that I’m here seeking to disrupt. My use of “exclusionary” is to both map and expose these tendencies in order to move away from the very workings that enable an inclusion/exclusion binary, or binaries such as self/other, civilised/primitive, etc. as sustained by oppressive systems, through the project of decolonising. Furthermore, I want to clarify how I’ve used literature and literary studies, which at times might appear as interchangeable – this has not been my intention; rather, I understand literature as what constitutes literary studies. More generally, literature can be described as referring to that which is written, which is, of course, exhaustive in its scope; therefore, when I write “literature and literary studies”, I refer to works of literature that are included in literary studies (which is also exhaustive, but refers to specifically canonised literary works, or canonised “great world literature”). So, when I write “decolonising literature”, the title of this thesis, I do not refer to literature as all that which is written, but to our perception of literature and how we conceptualise literature within literary studies.

iii. Epistemologies and theoretical framework(s)

As I mentioned in my opening introductory statement, I want to ground the possibility of decolonising literature (and with it, literary studies) in an intersectional framework, where we consider our material realities as informing our reading and analysis, as well as considering Haraway’s situated knowledges, which stresses how our material realities limits us, the knowing subject. This to be conscious of the limits to our respective sites when producing certain knowledge, rather than imagining the latter as absolute truth, like the god-figure, thus reproducing the “god trick” (Haraway 1988, 581). My thesis has also been informed partly by a feminist poststructuralist framework that emphasises specifically “language, textual analysis [and] theory-making” (Holvino 2010, 258) – these three aspects of a poststructuralist framework are crucial to my analysis. Furthermore, a feminist poststructuralist framework accentuates the necessity for “intersectional analyses that can grasp the construction of subjectivities in discourses that weave together narratives of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age and so on” as these “are seen as mutually pervading and interpenetrating each other without any possibility of separating them out analytically” (Lykke 2010, 73). But because Holvino (2010) makes the distinction that feminist poststructuralism also looks as the “discourses that constitute men and women as different – the ‘other’ of a discursive, binary pair” (258), I feel the need to clarify that this, as a feminist framing my research partly in this particular framework, is not my outset. My focus on the “’other’ of a discursive, binary pair”
lies not exclusively on gender, but on binary pairs that centre whiteness and Anglo-Europe/Anglo-America as default, though still mutually pervaded by other categories of identity. Therefore, I’ve had to complement this framework by engaging with feminist postcolonial theory, when looking, for example, at how white middle-class British women function, specifically in Smith’s narrative, to erase brown working-class Indian women and how this works into my concept of standing exclusionary practices.

Crucial to my research is also the concept of discourse and the power of language, and the idea that discourse is enabled and maintained through the narratives that I employ in part I. As Michel Foucault (1972) writes: “I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers” (216). In regard to literary studies and the literature that constitutes it, there has been an institutionalisation of an exclusionary discourse, as informed by a master-narrative, that posits itself as default, one which is based on narratives of unification and progress and which is anchored in a modern/colonial world system. These kinds of discourses are also reproduced through language, and what Stuart Hall (1997) refers to systems of representation. He writes:

The meaning is not the object or person or thing, nor is it in the word. It is we who fix meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural or inevitable. The meaning is constructed by the system of representation. It is constructed and fixed by the code, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system (21).

Meaning, therefore, can “never finally be fixed” but is instead arbitrary (ibid., 23). These systems of representations become significant when considering exclusionary practices, as they correlate and are embedded in the very language we use to construct our respective world-views. I believe this a crucial aspect in literary studies and in our analyses of any literary works, but maybe particularly canonised ones as they are firmly rooted in Western collective imaginations, constantly reproduced as examples of worthy contenders for analysis as well as contenders for what constitutes “great” literature. If knowledge is power, and knowledge is always informed by current discourses, there needs to be constant exposition and re-evaluation of these. For instance, Foucault (1972) writes about the “internal rules” of discourse, asserting that this is “where discourse exercises its own control: rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution” (220). One such rule is what he calls “commentary”, and writes that “there is barely a society without its major narratives told, retold and varied”
In this internal rule, the point of departure of commentary is where meaning must constantly be rediscovered (ibid., 223). If we consider “commentary” as part of literary criticism – and thus part of literary studies – there is the matter of accountability in the knowledge we produce, as this is never constructed in a neutral and depoliticised vacuum. Also, if the reader is the person who gives a text meaning, or rediscovers meaning, this person’s arsenal of thoughts, based on values, principles, politics and ideologies as well as material realities, will always inform that reading. Thus, there is always the possibility of maintaining a status quo, particularly if this person is comfortably positioned within an existing norm, rarely having to consider processes of privilege and oppression. So, because readers engaging in literary criticism, specifically, are informed by discourse – don’t exist outside of discourse – and consequently uphold current discourses that are grounded in systems of oppression, there is a desperate need to disrupt this – I argue in this thesis that such a disruption can be made possible through a decolonial intervention in literary studies.

Another significant grounding of this thesis lies in both postcolonial and decolonial strands of theorizing. As I mentioned above, I’m concerned primarily with the discursive binary pairings that posit whiteness and Anglo-Europe/Anglo-America as default, and this because of my previous studies in English and American Literature, grounded in institutionalised discourses that reproduces the notion of “the West and the Rest” (Hall 1992). As Ania Loomba (2005) contends, “If colonised people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual and lazy, Europe is civilisation itself […] the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine” – what she calls a “dialectic of self and other” (45). The question of the binary pair of self/other is also what has enabled “social, linguistic and psychological mechanism[s]” where the division of an us/them becomes realised; thus, “othering creates an exclusion” in which one is always positioned as inferior, writes Matava Vichiensing (2018, 52). The processes of othering, asserts Vichiensing, are related to notions of “ethnocentricity

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7 I want to briefly address this difference. Breny Mendoza (2016) writes that while postcolonial theorists changed the “terms with which to think about colonialism, capitalism and nationalism” (107), decolonial theorists “insist that capitalism is concomitant to colonialism”, and argue that “colonialism is what made capitalism possible” (ibid., 112). Moreover, Gurminder K. Bhambra (2014) writes that “both postcolonialism and decoloniality are developments within the broader politics of knowledge production and both emerge out of political developments contesting the colonial world order established by European empires, albeit in relation to different time periods and different geographical orientations” (119, my emphasis). So, while postcolonialism focuses on British or French colonialism, decolonial theorists “ground their analyses in the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of the Americas” between the 16th and 19th century (Mendoza 2016, 111).
and stereotyping”, in which a majority, for example, “declares itself superior […] and denies the other subjectivity and uniqueness” (ibid.). These “social, linguistic and psychological” mechanisms have been facilitated by the construct of the West which Hall (1992) defines as a “historical, not geographical, construct”, one that perceives itself as “developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (read: superior) – in complete contrast to “the Rest” because of its constructed function as a concept that has provided “a standard model of comparison” (276-7, emphasis in original). This has also been made possible through the systems of representation as constitutive of discourse (ibid., 279).

However, I would like to potentially shift from postcoloniality to decoloniality, firstly because postcolonial (literary) criticism is today institutionally established in literary studies, but more as an optic to analyse and understand literary works, rather than to actively engage with the processes that enable Western literary works as standard, while “the Rest” are perceived as alternatives. Furthermore, Anne McClintock (1995) suggests that postcolonialism is rooted in the “idea of linear, historical progress” (10). She argues that the prefix ‘post-’, as well as the prefix ‘pre-’, cements colonialism as “the determining marker of history”, thus “the world’s multitudinous cultures are marked, not positively by what distinguishes them but by a subordinate, retrospective relation to linear, European time” (ibid., 11). The prefix ‘post-’ also suggests that the structures enabled by colonialism are no longer in circulation; McClintock writes that the “postcolonial scene occurs in an entranced suspension of history, as if the definitive historical events have preceded our time and are not now in the making” (ibid.). This is where I believe a certain shift is necessary, particularly in relation to understand how these structures that have historically assured colonialism have not just disintegrated, but are instead continuously maintained. These processes are what decolonial scholars refer to as coloniality, defined here by Breny Mendoza (2016): “Coloniality refers to the long-standing patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism, which redefine culture, labor, intersubjective relations, aspirations of the self, common sense and knowledge production in ways that accredit the superiority of the colonizer” (114). Moreover, this is enabled through discursive systems that have fixed non-Europeans, or non-Westerners, “in a temporal frame that always [position] the European as more advanced” (ibid.). Decoloniality, then, or decolonial options, are “grounded in geo- and body-politics of knowledge”, and seek to delink “from the web of imperial/modern knowledge and from the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2009, 178). I will engage further with decolonial theory in the third chapter of this thesis, but wanted here to at least introduce this theory as it is relevant to my research.
iv. Method(s) and methodologies

The method of selecting material for my thesis was based largely on timing. I wanted to initially use Gabriela Mistral’s poetry in my resistance/re-existence chapter, but decided against it in the end, choosing three poets of colour, all of whom write from either a British or North-American context, and all of whom write primarily in English. Additionally, I intended to use both Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1848) and E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) when looking at canonised literary works, but because of the space limitations I had to refrain. My choice to use Smith’s novel was due to the possibility of considering it from a dual lens – one that dealt specifically with the text, and the other that could consider the implications of (re)publishing literary works that are potentially exclusionary.

The methodologies I’ve employed in this thesis are both close reading and narrative analysis. The former is primarily informed by Jasmina Lukić and Adelina Sánchez Espinosa’s (2011) chapter “Feminist Perspectives on Close Reading”, where they argue that “close reading as a method of interpretation remains a useful tool for feminist analysis”, but as it’s been perceived as “neutral” or “alien to feminism because of its connection with so-called formalist approaches” it has been overlooked (105). This connection with “formalist approaches” is further elaborated by Ato Quayson (2005), who writes that the method of close reading was initially used in New Criticism during the 1960’s to “identify ambiguity, irony, and paradox as different levels at which the text signaled tensions within its structure” – and favoured this approach rather than consider the “external world of politics and society” that were instead “efficiently bracketed out of consideration” (122). The issue with this method, writes Lukić and Sánchez Espinosa (2011), is that it centres on an “ahistorical approach to the literary text”, instead “understood as a totalised self-contained entity that transcends its immediate social and historical context” (105-6). More recently, however, scholars have re-discovered and re-evaluated the importance of this methodology as a crucial tool in feminist literary studies and cultural studies as well as “beyond” (ibid., 107), as it focuses on contextuality and historicity of literary texts (ibid., 106). This is essential to my own research, where I’m arguing for a more contextual and politically informed approach to literary works in which we focus on localities rather than a single universal. I’m complementing this approach with a narrative analysis to holistically interpret my material, paying close attention to what the narratives “includes, excludes and emphasizes” (Feldman et al. 2004, 148), set particularly against the frames of
chapters “I. Exclusionary Practices” and “III. Decolonising Literature”. Furthermore, narrative analysis as significant to feminist methodologies is here argued by Venla Oikkonen (2013), who writes that the “key contribution of narrative analysis to feminist methodologies is the ability to trace, dissect and reimagine the contested yet productive tensions from which scapes, sites and narratives emerge” and that narrative analysis is “suited to tackle […] multi-layeredness, because it moves between the abstract and the concrete, the variable and the invariable, the structural and the discursive. What narrative analysis provides is a way – albeit only one way – of examining the constitutive conditions of cultural phenomena (306). This is how I aim to use this methodology here, paying attention to how these narratives, as embedded in the cultural sphere of literature and literary studies, are constituted by additional social factors (such as a white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, as per hooks) and to investigate if (and how) these reproduce elements of exclusion.

v. Previous research

The topic of my thesis has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves and I have therefore had trouble finding literature that deals specifically with conceptualising a decolonised literary study, or our perception of literature in a Western context, the way I’m aiming to address it here. A prominent examination of the need to decolonise in a Kenyan and African context is seen in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986), where he deals specifically with the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the geo-political location from which he writes and how the conceptualisation of African literatures has been defined by processes of (neo)colonialism and imperialism. He asserts that the “biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance [‘liberty from theft’] is the cultural bomb” (3). He writes that “the cultural bomb” effectively “[annihilated] a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (ibid.). The cultural bomb did not only destroy the mechanisms described above, but were replaced by the imposition of the English language at an institutional level, the colonizer’s language; English became the carrier of culture and history within that specific location, and nothing could measure against it (ibid., 13-6). By “decolonising the mind”, Thiong’o refers to and calls for the “rediscovery and reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation” (ibid., 108), further implying that these processes need to start with what Walter Mignolo
(2011) calls “colonial subjects”, who dwell “in the local histories and experiences of colonial histories (274). As you will come to see, my positioning differs slightly, as I’m elaborating on Olufemi’s (2015) call for British institutions to start employing decolonial measures to address the overarching white male-oriented literature that these constitute, specifically politicising the literature we read to enable a “critical framework” where students can “question why that is”, and particularly looking at the “maintenance of power and structural disadvantage[s]” that these ensure.

In the introductory chapter of Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth Century “British” Literary Canons, editor Karen R. Lawrence (1992) writes that “the essays [of this book] explore the way literary canons disguise their own histories of violence, for the ‘cover story’ of canons, […], is that they transcend ideology” (2). This resonates with my outset for this research, particularly my attempt to address the implications of transcending “hegemonic ideologies” such as “imperialism and patriarchy” (ibid.) within literary studies and the imminent violence this creates through social, and reproduced by textual, mechanisms of erasure/neutralisation. Moreover, the essays, writes Lawrence, address specifically “the postcolonial condition”, analysing and complicating “the geometry of cultural inclusion and exclusion in twentieth-century British writing”, focusing on writings by both non-Western and Western authors within a kind of postcolonial context (ibid., 2-3). As such, the essays are practical examples of ways to conduct research and literary criticism that acknowledges these social implications and their subsequent importance to the study of literature.

Other examples of previous research are assorted articles that explore, for instance, the dismantling of settler narratives in a Canadian context (Hardwick 2015), decolonising the canon (Gugelberger 1991) and a dissertation on decolonising Shakespeare, titled “Decolonizing Shakespeare: Race, Gender, and Colonialism in Three Adaptations of Three Plays by William Shakespeare” (Eward-Mangione 2014). Hardwick (2015) aims with her paper to “better understand the relationship between settler ignorance and denial, […] [and] the ways that knowledge conditioned by colonial frameworks can prevent settler Canadians from engaging in acts of decolonization” (99), which is quite interesting in relation to my own research, especially if we consider the embeddedness of literature and its studies in a modern/colonial world system – and that this embeddedness will effectively prevent people who experience privilege by the systems in place to destabilise these, for instance. This is why
I believe this intervention necessary, a call for institutions to start the work people at the bottom of the hierarchy have been doing for decades. Compellingly, Gugelberger (1991) makes a similar declaration when he states that the “issue […] is not to integrate Third World literary works into the canon but to identify with ‘the wretched of the earth’ and to learn from them […] and thus to learn about our own limitations” (506). Or as Priyamvada Gopal (2017) puts it: “To decolonise and not just diversify curriculums is to recognise that knowledge is inevitably marked by power relations”. This is also a crucial aspect when conceptualising decolonising literature, as it is not a matter of simply “including” literary works by non-Western authors, or “diversifying” the curriculum, but understanding the mechanisms that enable an inclusion/exclusion binary. It means to address why there exists such a binary in the first place and why, historically as well as contemporarily, whiteness is a default in the concept of “great literature”, save a few, token examples. Moreover, Gugelberger (1991) raises in his paper the “inherent fundamental theoretical and definitional problems”, such as the matter of the term “Third World Literature”, to start, which reduces the differences “between a variety of literatures associated with the Third World” (506-7). Gugelberger’s exploration into this particular topic echoes my own research, but they’re not exactly attuned – the difference in scope is one thing, but Gugelberger takes his cue from the matter of definitional issues. My own point of departure is more concerned with the kind of conversations that are needed in literary studies when we talk about canons and the implications of current power relations on the production of knowledge, for instance, as well as why. It is also to look for a possibility to intervene the status quo of studying literature, and particularly be aware of the ways Western institutions elicit grand narratives of universality and homogeneity. Eward-Magione’s (2014) dissertation considers three adaptations of three plays by Shakespeare, looking closely at race, gender and colonialism, which, like the essays in Lawrence’s Decolonizing Tradition, becomes a practical example of implementing a decolonial framework in one’s analysis. The textual analyses of this thesis offer, similarly, approaches that considers an intersectional reading, informed particularly by the nexus of race/gender/class. I’m considering Eward-Magione’s dissertation in this review particularly because of its topic of decolonising Shakespeare, the latter of whom is of course firmly rooted in a Western literary canon, as well as the English language and a collective imagination.

The potential knowledge gaps I’ve identified lie particularly in the distinct framings of these examples – unlike Thiong’o, who looks at the need to decolonise one’s own colonised mind in
the context of a previously colonised location, or Hardwick who looks at settler ignorance and perpetual denial in a Canadian context, or Gugelberger who focuses on the issue of homogenizing the concept of “Third World” literatures, I’ve wanted to position my critique in a Western context of literary studies at a British university and move from that specific location.
PART I

I. Exclusionary practices

In late September 2012, I attended my first lecture of the mandatory module “Romanticism and Critical Theory” as a first-year student of English and American Literature at the University of Kent, Canterbury campus. This module came to combine several aspects I love about literature – particularly contextualising the literature we read, the literature that is recognised as “classics”, the literature of the canon (in this case, the British Romantic canon). Yet, there was a tangible depoliticised atmosphere in how we read and analysed these texts; it was reminiscent of Kevin Kumashiro’s “‘Education About the Other’” (2000, 31), in which he writes that oppressive mechanisms that affect a possible Other are merely suggested (I remember my seminar leader using the movie Sex and the City 2 [2010] as an example to introduce Said’s [1979] seminal work Orientalism, illustrating how the movie is orientalist and perpetuates harmful stereotypes of people living in Middle Eastern countries). We were encouraged to consider ways we could potentially use Said when interpreting texts in a critical analysis, but were seldom encouraged to consider the very structures that maintained orientalist texts and imagery as norm in our curriculum and in our Western societies. Thus, as Kumashiro (2000) writes, “the ‘knowledge’ many students have about the Other is either incomplete because of exclusion, invisibility, and silence, or distorted because of disparagement, denigration, and marginalization” (32). Furthermore, in that very first lecture, we were introduced to “the big six” of the Romantic period: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. We would, during that first semester, read Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (1816) informed by Said’s Orientalism. We would consider William Wordsworth’s not-as-known sister Dorothy Wordsworth (1800, 2012), who worked as housekeeper for her brother all her life (Alexandra 1989, 9), and her private journals as a literary testimony informed by feminist critical theory – I myself wrote a short essay on Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976, 2010) in relation to her journals, arguing that she writes woman (as Other) into Self through her personal writings. In fact, as Harriet Kramer Linkin (1991) confers, a feminist intervention of the canonised “big six” would instead be authors such as Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Emily Brontë (549). Such an intervention was not, as far as I remember, suggested by our seminar leader, and while we would touch upon subjects that bordered on the political in distinct contexts (for example, reading British literary
works against the backdrop of the French Revolution), it was still in a very depoliticised manner, because the analysis was rarely anchored in our own socio-political contexts. The very structures that maintain a canon, for example, were omitted from our curriculum. We were offered tools, but no handbook, no means to use them. This thesis is an attempt at possibly outlining such a handbook.

In the first segment, I will attempt to limit the British canon for the purpose of this chapter and thesis, as well as outline the possible functions of the canon(s) I’m looking at, against the backdrop of the following questions: what does a canon do and how does it erase certain narratives? In the second segment, I want to consider specific examples of canonised authors and the exclusionary practices these perpetuate through the exploration of postcolonial criticism of these texts. I’m focusing specifically on Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818, 2012) and one twentieth century author, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). I will not engage with these examples at length, but rather illustrate how we can take them out of their depoliticised space to highlight the practices that erase certain narratives. In the third and final segment, I will start by considering inequities in the publishing industry in a UK context and then look more closely at how (re)publishing can work toward maintaining exclusionary practices. I will focus on the publishing house Persephone Books which re-published Smith’s novel *The Far Cry* after years of being out-of-print, today marketed as a best-seller in their London shop. Here, I also want to consider accountability, especially in editions where established authors are asked to write a fore or afterword, by looking specifically at Susan Hill’s afterword to Smith’s novel. Each segment’s specific goal is to illustrate how these practices of exclusion all contribute to a political and ideological commitment of European cultural hegemony, continuously reproducing itself as the centre, and thus the world’s default; and as such, all other narratives remain othered.

### i. The canon: a “metaphorical notion”

One of the definitions of a canon is “a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works”, i.e., “the *canon* of great literature” (Merriam-Webster 2018, emphasis in original). We can speak of a canon of world literature (Rosendahl Thomsen 2008; Smith 2011), or a canon of a particular nation at a specific time, such as a canon of British Romanticism. For example, in the overview for the module “Romanticism and Critical Theory” at the University of Kent
webpage\(^8\), it says: “This year-long course examines some of the most significant writing of the Romantic period (1780-1830)” – here I want to emphasise “some of the most significant writing” (2018). Because, indeed, who decides what constitutes “the most significant writing”? Who limits a specific times’ body of work to “some”? Who accepts, or even sanctions, this “group or body of related works?” Nancy Miller (1988) suggests that processes of canon-formation include “the politics of publishing – what is re-published, by what house, edited by whom, for whom”, and that studies of canon-formation “also involve an analysis of anthologies, literary manuals, literary histories, monographs, syllabi and pedagogies; the funding of research; the organization of colloquia, and so on” (406). I’m using Miller’s quote to illustrate that the answer to my questions above is not clear-cut, as there is not one answer, nor easy ones at that. However, Miller is able to highlight few of the mechanisms that enable a canon, which are extensive and intricately linked. Furthermore, my analysis is not so much on canon-formation itself, but the possible exclusionary practices present in canonised literary works. But what has been argued, and there is a consensus among scholars, is that canons, and canon-formation, are related to mechanisms of institutionalised power (Lawrence 1992; Said 1994; van Dijk 1999; Hutcheon 2002; Valdés 2002; Mignolo 1991, 2002b).

To return to Merriam-Webster’s definition of a canon as a “group or body of related works”, it begs the question: related how? In rethinking literary history, Linda Hutcheon (2002) writes that “the modern nation-state and the discipline literary history were born together” and have thus been “mutually implicated from the start” (4), suggesting that literary history was a tool to establish a national identity based on nationalist narratives and thus ensure the nation-state, indeed, a case of strengthening its borders and legitimizing it. She goes on to write that this model persists today, seen in a “teleological narrative of continuous evolution” and that it was

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\text{originally structured on the romantics’ idealist philosophy of history – with its emphasis on the importance of origins and the assumption of continuous, organic development – this model was intended to establish an implicit parallel between the inevitable progress of the nation and that of its literature (ibid., 5).}
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I want to establish two ideas here. The first is what Hutcheon calls the “teleological narrative of continuous evolution” that implies that the canon, as a body of related works, is, in fact, that narrative. If great literature is born out of past great literature, the canon will consist of literary works that not only interrelate, but that also maintain the idea of a collective “origin” which

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\(^8\) Viewed 16 March 2018. As of April 2018, there is no longer any information on the course, just the following: “Sorry, the module isn’t running currently”.
can be traced linearly. Moreover, the canon narrates a continuous form of progress and development, as characteristic of European modernism. Thus, the literary canon is part in establishing a narrative that not only legitimizes a nation-state but that also narrates that nation’s “continuous evolution”. The second idea I want to establish is that of Hutcheon’s reference to the romantics’ “idealist philosophy of history”, which instead brings to mind the time period which I am here focusing on. In one of my seminars, we once analysed Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811, 2006) as a political commentary of the French Revolution (and the “sensibilities” of the French) which was contrasted to English sense, represented through Austen’s two female protagonists. This was argued by Clara Tuite (2002), who writes that “[i]dentifying sensibility as a specifically French threat was one way in which conventional literary history began to breed a distinctly English pedigree for the novel” (83), and later continues that this sensibility is “particularly important for questions of English self-definition from the 1790’s. Sensibility functions as the kind of repressed other against which this self-definition occurs in terms of English common sense, and empiricism, conservative Romanticism, contemporaneously with the consolidation with a national canon” (ibid., 84-5), implying that Austen’s novel is not only part of a process that consolidates a national canon, but one that attempts to identify its very essence, that of Englishness. While this example is not representative, it does indicate the sentiment of the time and the importance of creating a self-identity on a national scale. In the same vein, David McCrone (1998) elucidates:

> The narrative of a nation is told and retold through national histories, literature, the media and popular culture which together provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, events, symbols and rituals. Through these stories national identity is presented as primordial, essential, unified and continuous (52).

Hence, in this respect, we can establish that one of the functions of a canon is to historically narrate the nation that is “premised on ethnic and often linguistic singularity” (Hutcheon 2002, 3), that which consolidates a nation-state and that enables an “us” and “them”, as seen by Austen’s attempt at distinguishing the English from the French. As Said (1994) writes: “Nations themselves *are* narrations” (xiii, emphasis in original). It is important to bear in mind that the canon is a social construct (or a “metaphorical notion” as phrased by van Dijk 1999, 122) and as such, “a rational attempt to identify what is central to the given literary culture”, according to Mario Valdés (2002), and that the “purported identity of the literary culture is always whatever the dominant group in power wanted it to be” (93). Therefore, Merriam-Webster’s definition as “a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works” refers to dynamics that are not always easy to pinpoint, but that have here been limited to notions of
identity, national identity, progress, evolution and continuity, as well as unification, all of which were amalgamated within the time period of nineteenth and twentieth century British empire and European modernity.

So why have I chosen to focus on exclusionary practices in examples of British nineteenth and twentieth century canon(s)? This thesis is both informed by, and a small contribution to, decolonial theory. This time period is essential to one of my central arguments: the sustaining of the modern/colony world system (Mignolo 2002b) through the depoliticised manner in which we today read literary works and engage with canonical works in the context of literary studies at a British university. In this segment’s final paragraph, I want to engage further with decolonial thinking and the modern/colonial world system, and tie it in with my discussion of the canon(s). In “Rethinking the Colonial Model”, Mignolo (2002b) defines the modern world system as follows: “a sociohistorical frame that describes the world we are still living in (the world of capitalism, modernity/coloniality, and the growing Atlantic circuit, from the sixteenth century to its hegemonic position in the nineteenth century)” (168). This system ensured, among many things, what Mignolo calls the “macronarrative of Western civilization”, defined by “its relentless narrative of progress, civilization and development” (ibid.). This recalls what Hutcheon (2002) called the “teleological narrative of continuous evolution” as constitutive of the “national model of literary history” which is premised on ethnic and linguistic singularity (3) and that is a narration of progress. What this suggests, then, is: that the growing awareness of a self-identity on a national level as constituted in, but not limited to, literary works of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries coincides with the creation of a macro-narrative of Western (initially European) civilisation as established through “modernity” – the modern/colony world system has therefore persisted as it has gone unchallenged. Thus, as Grosfoguel (2002) writes, “We live in a world where the dominant imaginary is still colonial” (210). Moreover, this also established the distinction between “Self” and “Other”, as illustrated here by Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo (2009):

In the modern/colony world, Western philosophy from the Renaissance on, distinguished, in different guises and masks, humanitas from anthropos. This distinction was not made by those classified under the domain of anthropos; neither were they consulted. The distinction was a pure, sole, and unilateral decision made by those who considered themselves, and their friends, to be the humanitas (12, emphasis in original).

What Mignolo and Tlostanova allude to here is that the codes of classification were at the disposal of the West (of Europe), and were grounded in light of national narratives that
identified themselves against non-Westerners or non-Europeans. The macro-narrative of Western “progress, civilization and development” was then imposed on non-European societies and civilisations through colonialism and imperialism, constructing the West/Europe as the very centre of the world. Understood against this backdrop, then, my choice to use examples in the British nineteenth and twentieth canon(s) has to do with the fact that this narrative is indeed present in literary works of the times in question, as well as maintained in contemporary contexts where we do not contest it. The canon, as constituted by institutions of power, illustrates the “dominant imaginary that is still colonial” because it is part of “the global hegemonic colonial culture [that] involves an intricate and uneven set of narratives with long histories that are re-enacted in the present through complex mediations” (Grosfoguel 2002, 210). In this light, then, the canon upholds a “global hegemonic culture” as constituted by the West, first imposed through colonialism and imperialism, later maintained by coloniality⁹, thus continuously erasing narratives that do not have that “global hegemonic” cultural power.

ii. “I will not trust the evidence even of a man’s very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad’s”¹⁰: exclusionary practices in examples of English nineteenth and twentieth century literary works

In this segment, I will focus specifically on both examples of postcolonial critiques and original narratives of the following novels: Mansfield Park by Jane Austen (1814), Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (1818) and Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad (1902). What I will present is by no means extensive because of the limited scope of this thesis, but it is open-ended; meaning that this critique is not conclusive, though crucial to shaping my own argument of the need to decolonise literary studies/(histories/canons).

Said (1994) argues that it is key to understand Austen’s Mansfield Park, not only as structured by temporality, but in relation to the “function of space, geography and location” because of the place’s location “at the center of an arc of interests and concerns spanning the hemisphere, two major seas and four continents” (84). The material life-style the Bertrams of Mansfield Park are used to is, in fact, sustained by Antigua, which Said understands to be sugar plantations maintained by slavery which was not abolished until the 1830’s (ibid., 89). The role of Antigua

⁹ See the definition of coloniality in the introduction.
¹⁰ Chinua Achebe (1977, 23).
in *Mansfield Park* is therefore essential to understand the novel against its political and social-cultural background. Said writes that “Austen reveals herself to be assuming [...] the importance of an empire to the situation at home” (ibid.). He goes on to write that there needs to be a “commensurate effort on the part of her readers to understand concretely the historical valences in the reference; [...] to understand [...] why she gave it the importance she did, and why indeed she made the choice, for she might have done something different to establish Sir Thomas’s wealth” (ibid.); this because of the fact that the novel “connects actualities of British power overseas to the domestic imbroglio within the Bertram estate” (ibid., 95). Seen against this light, the material reality of the characters in Mansfield Park are dependent on Sir Bertram’s colonial estate and sugar plantations in Antigua, illustrating the systems that enabled the idea of Englishness and English propriety as forming a national consciousness. As Said puts it: “There is the hierarchy of spaces by which the metropolitan center, and gradually, the metropolitan economy, are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control, economic exploitation and a socio-cultural vision: without these stability and prosperity at home – ‘home’ being a word with extremely potent resonances – would not be possible” (ibid., 58-9). Said’s analysis has proved one “of the most influential and durable analyses of Jane Austen in the 1990s”, writes Hidetada Mukai (2006, 63), but he has not been uncontested. I want to briefly engage with Susan Fraiman’s (1995) critique of Said’s analysis of *Mansfield Park*. Citing John Leonard’s review of Said’s work, who has in a somewhat condescending (sexist) fashion referred to Austen as “not much bothering her pretty head about the fact that this harmonious ‘social space’, Sir Thomas Bertram’s country estate, is sustained by slave labor on his sugar plantations in Antigua” (Leonard as cited in Fraiman, ibid., 805), Fraiman challenges: “If, as Leonard implies by omission, Jane Austen is not only ‘pretty’ but ‘little’, why the apparently big role in Said’s exposé of the canon’s partnership with imperialism?” (ibid., 806). One of Fraiman’s concerns is Said’s “highly selective materialization of her”, which she thinks is “almost completely isolated” from the rest of her work (ibid., 808), and claims that “*Mansfield Park’s* particular complexity – including what I see as its moral complexity – has been sacrificed here, so ready is Said to offer Austen as exhibit A in the case for culture’s endorsement of empire” (ibid.). Furthermore, she contends Said’s analysis because he fails to include Austen’s status as “an unmarried, middle-class, scribbling woman” and as such “enjoyed few property rights, living as a dependent at the edge of her brother’s estate, and publishing her work anonymously”, concluding that “Austen was arguably a kind of exile in her own country” (ibid., 809). I take great issue with this kind of reasoning, as it becomes a game of asking “Who is more oppressed?”, completely disregarding how British
colonialism and imperialism dehumanised people through slave labour, and how it was maintained by white, English men but also enjoyed by white, English women. Not to mention the complete erasure of the hundreds of people who were shipped across the Atlantic – truly exiled and completely cut off from their homes – so that Europeans could continue to enjoy sugar. Mukai (2006) mentions that in Austen’s *Emma* (1815, 2003), there is Jane Fairfax, a character that compares the governess-trade to the slave-trade – the former being the sale of human intellect rather than human flesh and hinting that “the sale of ‘human intellect’ is no more than the sale of ‘human flesh’” (80). As such, Mukai argues that Austen “discovers and exploits a potential analogy between the oppressive, patriarchal order in Sir Thomas’s household and slavery” (ibid.). I want to further challenge Austen’s analogy by quoting Maria Lugones (2010), who writes:

> Under the imposed gender framework, the bourgeois white Europeans were civilized; they were fully human. The hierarchal dichotomy as a mark of the human also became a normative tool to damn the colonized. The behaviours of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful. [...] The civilizing mission, including conversion to Christianity, was present in the ideological conception of conquest and colonization. Judging the colonized for their deficiencies from the point of view of the civilizing mission justified enormous cruelty (743-4).

Lugones’s reference to the civilising mission as being present in the “ideological conception of conquest and colonization” is what enabled the slave-trade, and thus the eventual “territorial control and economic exploitation” overseas that maintained empire. Thus, the comparison of the governess-trade to the slave-trade completely erases the implications of the latter at the hands of a society that enabled both, but the latter being distinctly rooted in white supremacist patriarchal ideologies that considered the colonized as “bestial and thus non-gendered”.

Gurminder K. Bhambra (2014) comments on Lugones’s positioning, writing: “Lugones argues that not only did colonization invent the colonized, it also disrupted the social patterns, gender relations and cosmological understanding of the communities and societies it invaded” (118).

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11 Anne McClintock (1995) writes that while white women and men “did not experience imperialism in the same way”, that is, white women would not reap the vast profits of the empire to the same extent as white men, they were not “hapless onlookers” but “ambiguously complicit” (6).

12 This kind of narrative is not uncommon in activists’ spaces today, where women of colour will be called divisive for including race in their analysis to which (white), western feminist cannot relate to because of white supremacy. This functions as a form of silencing, which is why an intersectional perspective is crucial to highlight the ways systems of oppression intra-act (are mutually pervasive) (Barad as cited in Lykke 2010, 51; Lykke 2010, 51).
This elucidates the need for a critical (and decolonised, as per Lugones) perspective on gender in feminist literary theory and criticism, as Fraiman (1995), from a feminist perspective, fails to mention the horrors endured by women of colour in the colonies, showing that exclusionary practices are present well beyond canonical works, and that it is here crucial to include the intersection of race to the nexus of gender and class, for example. Moreover, regardless of whether or not Said “fails” to mention Austen’s social status, it does not devalue his critique of her novel as part of a project of nation-building set against the imperial projects overseas – and this in spite of Austen’s authorial intentions. As I argued in the previous segment, the authors I’m considering here wrote against growing national awareness and sense of self-identity, as going hand in hand with the empire (imperialism being “the expansion of nationality” and thus power [Said 1994, 83]), which is why Said’s analysis is crucial.

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I shall now move on to Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818, 2012), which can be read as encompassing the anxiety in Shelley’s temporal and spatial context toward the expanding world and an allegory for “Europe’s West Indian imperial adventure” (Clement Ball 2001, 35). Here, however, I want to focus on Shelley’s construction of her character Safie as initial Other to be assimilated through education (she renounces her father’s Muslim origins to be more like her Christian mother). Safie, referred to as “the Arabian”, arrives in the story on horseback, clad in a “dark suit and covered with a thick, black veil” (2012, 80). In the subsequent pages, she will be taught an “enlightened”, “universal”, and “secular” education, while, unbeknownst to her, Frankenstein’s Creature/Monster will in the background be taught the same (Spivak 1985, 257). Born to a Muslim father and Christian mother, Safie is described with a “countenance of angelic beauty and expression”, raven black hair, “curiously braided”, and dark eyes – however, her complexion is described as “wondrously fair” (2012, 81). The Creature notices that she has a “language of her own” through “articulate sounds”, and the fact that she is neither understood by, or seems to understand, the cottagers. I find her character curious; for example, she is referred to as the “Arabian”, yet I wonder if her fair complexion which the Creature describes as wondrous is a matter of white-washing the character – Anne K. Mellor (2001) writes that Shelley’s personal physician was a “racial scientist” who had attributed specific “moral characteristics to each [‘racial’] type” (8). This is highly speculative, but it makes me wonder if Shelley unconsciously chooses to white-wash Safie so as to

13 Said (1994) writes that his intention is not to discount Austen or her work with a reading such as his, but rather illustrate its capacity to “completing and complementing” (95).
differentiate her from her “race” and its negative qualities outlined by Lawrence, Shelley’s physician (ibid.). Her otherness, therefore, is not marked by her complexion (as she is fair), but in her inability to speak the English language. Language (or lack of language) as a mark of Otherness is also applicable to the Creature; he soon notices that the cottagers are attempting to teach her the language, and realises that he “should make use of the same instructions to the same end” (2012, 81). Safie is no mere plot device, present in the narrative for the Creature to learn the language, get an education and thus rid himself of his Otherness, to rid themselves of their Otherness and to then assimilate. She is present, as Spivak (1985) suggests, to express “eighteenth-century liberalism that are shared by many today”, which is noticeable in Safie’s rejection of her Muslim father and reverence of her Christian mother; Spivak writes, “Having tasted the emancipation of woman, Safie could not go home” (257). Indeed, it was his religion that caused her father’s “condemnation”; he had been the “cause of their ruin”, described as a “treacherous Turk” (2012, 85-7). Whereas Safie’s mother, a “Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks” had taught her “to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet” (ibid., 86). Shelley continues:

This lady died; but her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of returning to Asia, and being immured within the walls of a haram [...]. The prospect of marrying a Christian, and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take rank in society, was enchanting to her (ibid.).

Not only does this kind of liberal feminist expression further emphasise Safie’s white-washing, (had her mark of Otherness been her complexion, she would not as easily have been able to fit in, to assimilate, but since it’s her language, this can be rectified), it also suggests that feminist thought, or women’s emancipation, is not possible in Islam, this being a crude generalisation of racist sentiment. This kind of thinking is, as we know, not uncommon in Western/European thought today, which, as Sa’diyya Shaikh (2003) claims, is due to “Euro-American cultural hegemony” that remains coupled with a xenophobia directed at Islam and Muslims [which is] reflected in the enduring legacy of problematic types of orientalist scholarship on Islam and, on the popular level, the continuing stereotyping of Islam as violent, medieval, and, especially, misogynist religion (149).

Thus, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, because of its position as a canonical work of English Romanticism, and within a context of Euro-American cultural hegemony, continues to work toward a kind of macro-narrative, a grand narrative, which perpetuates the type of problematic
scholarship and stereotyping in popular culture of Islam and Muslim people. Safie, like the Creature, needs to – in order to be accepted – be indoctrinated into an “education in (universal secular) humanity” (Spivak 1985, 257) which Safie would not have received, according to Shelley’s narrative, if “returning to Asia” – after all, it was her Christian mother that taught her to aspire to “higher powers of intellect” so as to not be “immured within the walls of a haram”, which would be secured through her education and the subsequent marriage to a Christian man (Shelley 2012, 86)14. Thus, non-western knowledges, here represented by Islamic thought and reduced to misogyny and treachery, are devalued in contrast to western/European knowledge15. Since the Creature’s Otherness is marked by his exterior, he is not accepted into society; whereas Safie, fair Safie, gets to rid herself of hers, gets to replace any previous (local) knowledge with “universal” knowledge, gets to be independent, and only then, accepted.

I will here briefly address author Chinua Achebe’s (1977) postcolonial critique of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness16, to illustrate how this narrative works to not only perpetuate negative stereotypes but also maintain them in both academic and mainstream cultures.

Achebe starts his critique by recounting an occurrence in 1974, writing that he was walking to a parking lot from the English department at the University of Massachusetts, when a man – a Professor – made small-talk with Achebe, walking the same path (14). He had expressed

14 Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), argued in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman for (white, bourgeois) women’s right to education.

15 I make a conscious distinction here between non-western “knowledges” (plural) and western/European “knowledge” (singular) to emphasise the latter’s construction as universal.

16 It is here important to remember that Joseph Conrad, born Józef Konrad Korzeniowski, was the son of anticolonial fighters against the then Russian empire. He immigrated to the West to avoid being drafted into the Russian army and to avoid being othered as the son of Siberian exiled nationalists. He was a devoted Polish patriot and aristocrat, and while he is considered one of the greatest writers in the English language, a canonised English writer, he is still a racialized Polack. Achebe’s reading of Conrad disregards this, very likely to the fact that, for Achebe, there is no difference between racism as perpetuated by Western and Eastern Europeans. This illustrates that there is an additional perspective of which one can analyse Conrad; not having been able to write about Poland and Russia, he instead wrote about Congo-Kinshasa and the Belgians’ brutal colonial imposition there. But while Conrad might have been opposed to the treatment of the native population in then Congo-Kinshasa, I also want to mention Said (1994) who asserts that “Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independance, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end” (25). Said suggests that Conrad, while aware of the brutality of colonialism, supported an imperialist project, not being able to imagine an alternative.
surprise when Achebe told him that he was a teacher of African literature: “Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, […]]. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had a thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time, I was walking much faster” (ibid., emphasis in original). Achebe’s critique is grounded in this very telling incidence, because it suggests a notion that is pervasive in western/European discourses, the idea that Africa does not have its own narrative, constantly reduced to a homogenous space by Euro-American media, a place of poverty and depravity. Achebe suggests that a narrative such as Conrad’s with his novel fuels a discourse that people from the African continent cannot tell their own stories and therefore do not have their own version of histories. It also assumes that there wasn’t anything there until it was “discovered” by the white man. Achebe goes on to say that the reason Conrad is part of what he calls “permanent literature”, what I have distinguished above as canon, or a canonised literary work, is because he’s “undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller”, thus “read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics” (ibid., 15). This is one of my more crucial points that I actually mean to raise with my thesis – the accountability of knowledge production within literary studies, this “constant evaluation” of the classics that at one point might need to be re-evaluated, which does not mean discrediting or devaluing, but remembering not only the context in which it was written but how it maintains a discourse of exclusion in being part of what Achebe calls “permanent literature”. What Achebe criticises is that Heart of Darkness “projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (ibid.). As Said (1979) suggests, the Orient (in his case) was not only Europe’s cultural contestant, but also helped “define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2). In a perfect simile, Achebe (1977) writes: “Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray – a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate” (25). Africa, then, becomes “devoid of all recognizable humanity”, a mere “setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor”, becoming a “metaphysical battlefield […] into which the wandering European enters at his peril” (ibid., 21). Thus, this is what enables the “real dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster the world” (ibid.). Finally, however, I do want to stress a very important point Achebe makes here, in which he clarifies that “Conrad did not originate the image of Africa”, and that he only brought “the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear” on the “dominant image of Africa
in the Western imagination” (ibid., 25). This is a crucial clarification, as it makes clear that it is not only a matter of critiquing the fact that he was a racist, as Achebe states; as I briefly illustrated in the previous segment, the contexts of these centuries in Europe were pervaded with ideas of “racial” distinctions and superiority of the “Caucasian race” (Mellor 2001, 9). More significantly, it is a question of how this overt racism is (re)produced and upheld in our Euro-American societies through the reluctance to see the very structures that ensure it.

iii. Inequities in the UK publishing industry: whose voices do readers preoccupy themselves with?

Before concluding this chapter, I want to consider the contemporary British publishing industry and identify how it perpetuates exclusions. In 2015, Nikesh Shukla, Kamila Shamsie, Sarfraz Manzoor and Bernadine Evaristo, among several contributors, gave their insights to the following question: “How do we stop UK publishing being so posh and white?” The article’s ingress informs that following the “absence of any black, Asian or minority ethnic writers” (or BAME), on 2016’s World Book Night List caused an uproar and a Twitterstorm. The Guardian then set out to ask “leading figures within the industry” what they believed could be “done to encourage greater diversity in British publishing” (2015). Shukla suggests an anthology collecting essays by BAME writers, focusing on “emerging voices rather than established ones”. Shamsie attests that there needs to be a reconditioning, but not of readers but of the “machinery”, as she calls it, where “publishers and booksellers are central to that machinery”. She also believes that the people in the business need to be representative of Britain in terms of ethnicity and class, she writes. Manzoor believes that inclusion doesn’t just mean publishing “extreme tales” that become “fetishes”, such as “the Asian woman fleeing honour killing” or “the Muslim man who flirted with extremism”, but writers from minority backgrounds that are given “space to write beyond those confines and to show that one can be brown without being sad, mad or dangerous” (Shukla et al. 2015). After an Arts Council report in 2005 that “revealed that less than 1% of poetry books in the UK were written by black or Asian poets”, author Bernadine Evaristo initiated in 2007 a mentoring scheme in which emerging poets were able to be mentored by Britain’s leading poets. She writes that more than 20 poets “have gone on to win or be nominated for more than 40 awards” and that they “have enriched and changed the face of British poetry” (Shukla et al. 2015). These are some concrete examples for change, as well as a kind of call-to-arms – but what do surveys from the past three years actually tell us about the publishing industry’s “diversity”? In 2016, The Bookseller partly compiled statistics
that showed that “of the thousands of titled published in 2016 in the UK […] – fewer than 100 – were by British authors of a non-white background” (Shaffi 2016). While in 2017, a survey by bookcareers.com showed that “of more than 1,000 people working in the UK publishing […] more than 90% currently in the industry classify themselves as white British” (Flood 2018). In the article, Flood interviews Suzanne Collier (founder of bookcareers.com), who declares that publishers “have got to do more than tokenism”, as it is not enough recruiting “one or two people from a diverse background” (ibid.). Moreover, in 2017, two years after The Guardian had asked the question on how to stop UK publishing being so posh and white, Arifa Akbar (2017) set out to find out if that was still the case. She writes that there “is overwhelming agreement among excluded communities that systemic change can only happen when inclusivity is filtered upwards”. This attests Collier’s comment that publishing houses have got to do better than tokenism when addressing “diversity” or “inclusivity”, and specifically when it is filtered upwards, but it also highlights the kind of power the industry possesses, in terms of who gets to be seen – and read – and whose voices get to be heard. The kind of work that Shukla and Evaristo are doing, while incredible and a start to create platforms to young aspiring authors of colour, is regrettfully not enough. For example, one way publishing houses have attempted to “fix” the problem is by creating imprints. However, the issue with imprints that then deal “exclusively” with “diverse” voices is here problematized by Akbar: “Why does inclusivity have to have its own ring-fenced imprint? Shouldn’t it be part of every imprint rather than becoming its own distinctive brand?” Akbar highlights that it might not actually change anything by creating brands that focus solely on “diversifying” the industry as it does not actually address the systematic injustices that continuously marginalises or erase certain people’s voices; it becomes a “quick fix”, rather than obtaining insight to how their industry is exclusive in the first place, as well as upholding a kind of dichotomous standard/alternative opposition (Akbar 2017).

So, what about Persephone Books? A small publishing house in London with its own bookshop, it is grounded in the aim of finding neglected fiction by (mostly) women writers of the nineteenth century. This is, of course, a significant venture as it breathes new life into forgotten stories. When I first heard of Persephone Books, I was enchanted by their concept – here was a publishing house that would make it their mission to revive stories that had in some way or another vanished, a kind of “herstory” of nineteenth century (British) literature. And while I did love my visit to their bookshop where stacks upon stacks of books filled their rather small space, some in their shelves for sale while others in disarray, I noticed, as I went through
titles upon titles, that many were by white, British authors. This was, regrettably, confirmed as I went through their website (Persephone Books, c. 2018) – and this made me think about accountability in the publishing industry; it made me wonder of the kind of voices people (and by people here I refer to a readership that is constituted by a majority) preoccupy themselves with, the voices they think they’re interested to hear, because they’ve never had to consider an alternative, always being represented in the books the industry chooses to publish as well as in the literature of their collective imaginations… The matter on accountability will become clearer as I delve into Smith’s novel, marketed as one of their best-sellers, but I will raise the following question here: how can publishing houses be accountable for the literature they publish and distribute, especially when a novel perpetuates racist(/sexist/classist) language and symbolism, without it becoming a matter of censoring? One answer to that question could be that the fore and/or afterword to a later edition actually politicises and contextualises the novel at hand, and critically addresses the ways the novel can perpetuate exclusionary language, for example. In the afterword to *The Far Cry*, author Susan Hill (1978, 2016) focuses initially on the novel’s longstanding status as out-of-print, as Smith’s authorship, for various reasons, fell out of memory. Hill recounts that upon publishing her own first novel, “at a tender age”, had been told of “a similar young woman” who had written an acclaimed novel, sold well, but that had then “dropped out of sight” (321). This afterword is dated to 1978, interestingly, and there is no note by the publishers that clarifies how they acquired this afterword for their re-published edition, and whether it was intended as an afterword. Hill writes that prior to writing this short text, she had finally acquired the novel, “tracked it down”, and claims that she has a “missionary zeal for resurrecting novels which deserve a new readership”. And rather than finding a novel that “might betray its author’s youthfulness and seem dated”, she found “a small masterpiece” (ibid.). To her, this novel is “rich in human understanding”, and an “intricate study of human nature” (ibid., 322-3), of “penetrating observation”. She praises Smith for having written a novel that is hopeful, “positive and liberating”, a novel “on the side of life and goodness, permeated with all the humane values” (ibid., 323, my emphasis). Hill, here, maintains a kind of universalist rhetoric, at which *humanitas* (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009) is represented by the novel’s central characters: white, cis, straight, middle-class, non-disabled, British. There is here no room for Smith’s characterization of India’s local population, if not stereotyped then shoved to the outskirts of the narrative. Significantly, Smith’s insight to

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17 Among their list of authors, none are women or men of colour; some are of Jewish heritage, but the majority are white British authors, born in Britain, the U.S., as well as India and South Africa.
the complexities of human nature is reserved for her English characters who have journeyed to India, or who live there under imperial conditions. To Hill (2016), it is not merely Smith’s characters and the impact of the journey to India upon them that is noteworthy, but equally vivid is not just “sights, but sounds, smells, whole atmospheres, [that] rise off the page” (322). How do we then reconcile this kind of narrative when considering accountability in the publishing industry? For Hill, people ought to be reading this novel – in the temporal and spatial context from which she wrote, however, few could (ibid., 324). This is juxtaposed to the material reality of my own, as well as the publishing house’s, temporal and spatial context, which I think Persephone Books are very much aware of: not only are they here resuscitating Smith’s forgotten “masterpiece”, they are also fulfilling Hill’s wish that this book be read. To answer my own question, I do not think it is possible here, now. But it can be through activists’ interventions and additional research, a call to address how a fore and/or afterword can and are needed in order to politicise novels that potentially maintain exclusionary practices in contemporary contexts. It is certainly necessary if we are to enable change on at least one front.
II.  *The Far Cry* by Emma Smith – a postcolonial reading.

“Here she was, on the verge of this flat and burning land whose terrible cries already reached her ears, whose people she already saw swarming about beneath. Every dozing nerve in her body sprang awake. Reason had gone. Sense had gone”.


In this chapter, I am conducting a textual analysis of the novel *The Far Cry* by Emma Smith, originally published in 1949. It was later out of print – as to the reasons, you will read below – but was in 2002 removed from oblivion to the general public by publishers Persephone Books, whose concept is reprinting “neglected fiction and non-fiction by mid-twentieth century (mostly) women writers” (c. 2018). I want to take the opportunity to briefly clarify that I do not intend to use this novel as representative of an entire discourse of exclusionary practices. My aim in using this novel is to consider how it perpetuates an orientalist language that enables an exclusivist discourse, one that is left unproblematized by Smith, Hill and the publishers as I showed in the previous chapter. While this novel is not classified as canonical literature, and might even have a somewhat obscure status, I chose to use it because of the possibility to consider the text from both a postcolonial and intersectional lens as well as its position in a contemporary context, as I illustrated above. Furthermore, it is worth noting that its obscurity, rather than the “timelessness” of canonical works, might instead forthrightly convey the dominant cultural and political discourses of the time, breathing the zeitgeist, thus making it a more straightforward venture to conduct a critical analysis. Its obscure status has predictably prevented me from finding any literary theory that deals exclusively with the analysis of this novel; I will therefore use postcolonial theory applied to a literary novel, as well as engage considerably with Said’s *Orientalism* (1979). In this chapter, I will first contextualize the novel; then, in the second segment, I will explore the construction of India by considering how the imagery and language perpetuates orientalism, what Said calls “not an airy fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment”, and that which has enabled orientalism as a “system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” (ibid., 6). I will also look at the erasure of Indian women at the hands of the novel’s white British women in relation to belonging as a central theme in the novel. Indian
women are often only mentioned in passing, for example in this way: “Never had she seen so many people. Never had she dreamed so many people existed. […] [W]omen, their cheekbones standing out from their faces like the hips of cows, silver bracelets winking in the shadows of their rags, squatted over piles of green unripened oranges” (Smith 2016, 118). I want to consider this erasure as tied to 1) Smith’s depiction of India as an extension of British society, as seen through imperialism and 2) the implications of the construction of the novel’s protagonist as othered in order to justify her choice of home (India), in contrast to her older half-sister, who instead is constructed as rightfully belonging in England.

i. Reception/reviews and context

*The Far Cry* was Smith’s second novel and was published to critical acclaim in 1949; it was later out-of-print until re-published by Persephone Books in 2002. Smith describes the reason for its being out-of-print in the foreword to the Persephone edition, dated 2001, writing that she was “squarely launched on [her] chosen career”, which ought to have been followed up by a third best-seller, but she got married instead, the result being that her “typewriter mouldered quietly away on a shelf” (2016, xiii). After seven years her husband unexpectedly died, and widowed, she was left to raise their two small children. She explains that “slowly, slowly, at a snail’s pace – because there was so little time or energy to spare for it – I began to write again” (xiii). The novel received in 1949 the James Tait Black Memorial Prize “for the best novel of the year in English” (Persephone Books: *Emma Smith*, c. 2018), and was in 2004 the “Book at Bedtime” on BBC radio 4 (Persephone Books: *The Far Cry*, c. 2018). In 1949, Elisabeth Bowen for *The Tatler* called the novel a “savage comedy with a vicious streak” (ibid.), while Charles Allen (2002) writes in his review for *The Spectator*:

I can think of no writer, British or Indian, who has captured so vividly, with such intensity the many intangibles of the Indian kaleidoscope. Emma Smith harnessed those intense impressions of her youth to give her story a quite extraordinary driving force. So yes, a small masterpiece, mature beyond its author’s years.

In the same spirit, one North-American blogger wrote in 2010:

My goodness, what a gorgeous book! I’ve never been to India, but this novel certainly makes me want to go. The people and places of India are described in painstaking detail, as only a first-time visitor to India could describe it. They’re probably some of the best descriptions of India written by a Westerner that I’ve ever read […]. In a sense, though, *The Far Cry* is a novel not so much about India as it is about India as it’s experienced by the British.
Indeed, this blogger’s review echoes Allen’s in the sense that both consider Smith’s depiction of India as having been “captured vividly” and with “painstaking detail”. However, interestingly, the blogger makes a very important distinction in writing that the novel is “not so much about India as it is about India as it’s experienced by the British”.

I want to briefly address the geo-historical context that Smith (2001, 2016) ignores, both in the novel and in her foreword. Smith travelled to India with a “documentary film unit” in September 1946, and three weeks later they docked (viii). Following this, she makes what will be the only mention of the political atmosphere in India, writing that they “learnt immediately on arriving that owing to the rumoured imminent withdrawal of the British Raj from its Indian Empire the sub-continent was in a highly volatile condition, and it was considered neither safe nor suitable for a very green young woman to be at large, unaccompanied, in Bombay’s excitedly seething dockland” (ibid., ix). Nine months later, on June 3rd 1947, the year Smith spent writing her first novel *Maiden’s Trip*, the partitioning of British India into India and Pakistan took place. This is not mentioned in her foreword, and was barely alluded to in the narrative. Instead, what she chooses to remember retrospectively is WWII, writing:

> [I]t seems very strange indeed that although the Second World War had so recently terminated and its hellish campaign against the Japanese been fought in the jungle of a Burma practically on the doorstep of where we were blithely shooting peace-time films, no mention was ever made in my hearing of that horrific – heroic – struggle, of who was involved, to what extent, or who spared. It might never had happened. […] Perhaps a sufficient number of years had to elapse before the nightmare was made safe enough to approach and investigate as history (xii).

What strikes me with this quote is of course her mention of history, echoing the notion in Clare Hemmings “Telling Feminist Stories” (2005) that “all history takes place in the present” (118), hence begging the question of whose history deserves to be told, as well as demonstrating the implications of history-making and the processes that are not in any way neutral. Hemmings writes that history-making is not a matter of getting the story straight or finding absolute truth as the stories that “predominate or are precluded or marginalized is always a question of power and authority” (ibid.). In 2017, *The Guardian* published an article called “Partition: 70 years on, Salman Rushdie, Kamila Shamsie and other writers reflect”, where in the preamble we can read: “More than a million were killed and many millions more displaced by Indian partition”. Siddartha Deb (2017) writes:
Partition [...] was a different process depending on which part of it you were caught up in. The British and Indian elites making their new nations [...] were all in a hurry to force the process through. [...] By [August 1947], the ethnic cleansing was well under way. Over a million were killed, thousands raped and abducted, and between 12 and 20 million displaced in the process. [...] None of this violence and pain has really worked its way into the official histories of Britain, India, Pakistan or Bangladesh.

These images are neglected from the narratives circulating the novel as much as in the novel itself. Published two years after the Indian partition, the India we see in Smith’s narrative is one made for amusement, writing that “Everyone wanted to dance for Teresa, everyone wanted to amuse her. This was India, made for her amusement. Even the sun invited her to pour out her gladness [...]. Even the beggars pranced with hope” (2016, 127), standing by the Gateway of India in Mumbai. Author Tahmima Anam (2017) remembers an India that was torn apart, writing: “Hence, one family, from one city, became citizens of three separate nations, all in the span of a few decades. With such fracturing, history is obliterated; no one can know what happened in the past when everyone has fled the very land on which it occurred”. This displacement and intra-generational sorrow is among a few histories that are omitted in Smith’s narrative which instead is a depoliticized narrative that avoids the geo-historical and -political context the story is set in. If the novel eventually went out-of-print because Smith failed to write her third bestseller due to her marrying and her husband later dying, or if it’s a matter of the novel becoming outdated because of the political and cultural conversations of the time, we cannot know. What we do know is that when it was re-published in 2002, people seem to have forgotten what Shamsie (2017) calls “the violence of partition”, for which there was “no reckoning”.

ii. India in The Far Cry: An Orientalist narrative?

The novel begins somewhat in medias res, with Teresa Digby waking up late the morning her father is arriving to visit her and his sister, Aunt May, which is suggested to be an infrequent occurrence. Upon his rather dramatic arrival, he frees Aunt May’s of her duties as Teresa’s guardian (after ten years) because he intends to take Teresa to India (where his other daughter, Ruth, lives, married to a tea-planter). This because Teresa’s mother is returning to England after having once relinquished her duties as mother, and in his paranoia, he believes it is to reclaim their child, which he cannot let happen (2016, 13 – I will henceforth cite this edition). He says: “Let [Lillian] come to England. No one shall stop her. And when she arrives, what
will he find? Nothing. [...] No one. The birds will have flown. To India, May, to India” (14). His sister trembles and is shocked into silence, later claiming that Mr. Digby has “lost his head” (ibid.). Teresa, on the other hand, is glad – not so much about travelling to India – but of not having to return to school. India is so far left quite ambiguous, until:

‘Oh, come, Teresa,’ said Miss Digby with irritation, ‘it may have been foolish of me but I really thought on your last night you’d make some attempt to show good manners. After tomorrow, of course, you’ll have no need of them, for your father never notices good manners and Ruth has lost her own, I should think, after living so long in a jungle (20).

This is the first value-laden depiction of India, not only equalled to the generalisation of “a jungle”, but also the implication that good manners in a “jungle” such as India are not required, or are a place where they’re “lost”, in contrast to its binary of civilised England in which they’re instead maintained. The colonial trope of the jungle as wild and untameable in contrast to British civilisation and order is thus established here (Valverde 1996; Furniss Weisberg 2015; Asghar and Iqbal Butt 2017). Also, this evokes what Said (1979) writes of the orientalist’s previous knowledge of the Orient, where “every writer of the Orient […] assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies” (20). Whether the knowledge is inscribed in a travel diary, as was the case for Smith, or inscribed in a larger cultural discourse, is here difficult to define, but for the purpose of this segment, I want to first look at the kind of narrative about India and the non-West that is conveyed prior to Teresa’s arrival in India, and during her stay there.

Miss Digby’s mention of “a jungle” indeed sets the tone specifically for Mr Digby’s negative contention of India, as a place full of “mosquitoes, dangerous dreadful things, foreign pests” (28), which as the novel goes on, will only intensify. Teresa, however, instead paints London as the dirty place, where “London smuts blew in her eye; London noise bellowed in her ear”, constructed here as a juxtaposition to her take of India:

Buried somewhere deep in the boat she felt a throb that answered her, impulse for impulse, that drew her away from the grey land, across the grey water to bluer seas smoothed over by hot winds, and on and on, farther, even farther, to where strange golden India lay waiting (35).

Where Mr Digby’s attitude toward India is indicated through his unflinching conviction of British superiority, Teresa is described as much more curious, and thus innocent. But the description of her leaving the “grey land” behind, into a “strange golden India”, conjures exotified imagery of a place that has no distinct autonomy outside of its relation to Britain as a
colonial/imperialist power. “Strange golden India” lies waiting, farther and farther on, and is, as we shall see, configured as a place of “exotic beings, haunting […] landscapes, remarkable experiences” – what Said (1979) calls “almost a European invention” (1). This is further suggested in an instance on the boat where Teresa is wandering alone and stumbles upon singing “Indians”, and the writing itself evokes a kind of ethereal Otherness:

Wraith-like she wandered up and down the long length of the boat, touching steel and rope for comfort. […] There, crouched in a circle in the lee of a life-boat, were Indians going home, singing of loneliness. Their bundled figures swayed from side to side. They sang, she knew, or thought she knew, of sorrow and parting, of death and after-death. She hovered outside the dim ring of their fellowship, listening […]. Their soft nasal song spiced the Channel winds with ghosts of heat (39).

The imagery conjures a kind of haunting landscape where “Indians” are described as singing of universal themes of parting, sorrow, death and after-death – all of which are Teresa’s own projections, having of course no idea of what they’re actually singing of. Questionably, they do not reappear in the story and are instead completely erased from the narrative – they’re not allowed a story of their own (not even through the protagonist’s eyes), but serve as an “exotic” backdrop to Teresa’s own, “remarkable”, journey.

I want to momentarily digress for this paragraph and consider the brief narrative on “Africa”, which is at one point used as a setting as they travel further East. Smith writes,

In the meantime Africa was the backcloth for a dozen buds of friendship, and the swimming-pool had been opened. […] Arms and legs were bared. Shirts fluttered. Naked flesh burned coppery under the scorching wind; […]. Dance-music bounced out of the loudspeaker and hurtled away across the silver-and-sapphire twinkling sea to confute the sombre frown of Africa (54-55).

Intriguingly, Smith opens her chapter on a rather light-hearted note, using “Africa” as a backdrop for “dozen buds of friendship”; but two paragraphs in, these encounters of friendships by the swimming-pool, where the (white) passengers gather, and the happy occasions of “dance-music” bouncing off the speakers, are instances that come to invalidate “the sombre frown of Africa”, creating a clear juxtaposition in which the people’s high spirits on the boat cannot be bothered by Africa’s “sombre frown”. What Smith goes on to do is also perpetuate the imagery of Africa as the “dark continent”, seen here:

And Africa was like a beast. It was brown and heavy and huge. Its hills rose one behind the other. Its shore was as low as the lip of a village-pond, and intimately dangerous. It looked like land that had lain maturing for years without number,
and had now reached its strength and was terrible, guarding a power no man was meant to calculate (55).

Not only reducing an entire continent and its diverse peoples with distinct geopolitical contexts to an empty space that is “brown, heavy and huge”, it maintains a narrative that is grounded in racist discourses dating back to the Victorian era (Brantingler 1985; Jarosz 1992). The narrative also reproduces the idea that Africa poses a kind of threat because of its immensity, because of its power which “no man was meant to calculate”. Furthermore, the description of Africa as this “brown and heavy and huge” beast also echoes the dehumanization of its peoples for hundreds of years, as the “inherent” bestiality, and thus, inferiority, of its populations justified the violence perpetrated against them (Brantingler 1985, 184; Jarosz 1992, 106).

After departing Port Said (Egypt), Teresa is met by the “amazing sight” of “square dung-coloured and yellow houses […] with painted signs in an unknown language” where “[p]eople not English strolled about”, while Mr Digby simultaneously fashions himself an “adventurer” as he hears “a voice cry out a string of words in a high-pitched foreign tongue”, surrounded by “exotic dust” and off into “the wilds” (80-81). Firstly, this language grounds this narrative in a Western/Anglo-centric framework, which also maintains the dichotomous “Occident/Orient”. The fact that a sign in an “unknown language” should meet Teresa outside of England ought not to be unusual, but its mention here, alongside the comment that non-English people stroll alongside the Suez Canal anchors this narrative in a framework of British hegemony. Moreover, words such as “exotic” and unknown “wilds”, even “adventurer”, function toward establishing the “Orient” (here, Egypt as well as India) as a fantastical place where anything can happen and where you shall find yourself on an adventure, all the while looming in complete contrast to the reality of the “Occident”, or in this case, Britain (Said 1979, 2). Compared to the “grey land” they have left behind, “a world of colour” is now slowly opening up before Teresa, “exquisitely pleasurable, promising revelation after revelation” (90). But as they arrive in India, Teresa is described as frightened. What was promised to be a colourful land of pleasure and revelations instead becomes her own personal hell. Upon arriving, standing by herself as her father has run off to look for his mosquito nets, she meets a “creature with brown naked legs and huge flat feet” standing “menacingly close” to her (105). And she thinks: “He wore only a navy-blue smock. How hideous the navy-blue seemed to her against

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18 It is suggested by the JBHE Foundation (1995) that the imagery of the “dark continent” originated in the failure to map the continent in 16th century Europe.
that dark brown skin” (ibid.). While Teresa is frightened (the coolies “hemmed her in”, shouted “wickedly”, looked like a band of “marauders” with their “turbans” and beards”, amidst a situation “worse than a nightmare”), Mr. Digby is convinced he knows who stole the nets: “Some damn Indian I suppose” (106). Smith writes:

India had caught her unprepared, and India was a force whose antagonism was immeasurable. India was very old, very hot, festering with life; not tame, not lenient, but the natural land of the tiger. Of what good were her little arts of defence against an enmity so mystical and so immense? (109).

What provokes me here as a reader is Smith’s vocabulary, which again is value-laden, reaffirming Aunt May’s casual remark of “a jungle”, and is reminiscent of the exotified imagery that is being continuously produced. India, like Africa, is an antagonistic force beyond measure; it is ancient, having “matured for years without number” and underneath the scorching, unyielding sun life is festering, which of course conjures an image of death, of rotting and decay. The land, unlike civilisation, unlike order, is that of the beast (the tiger), natural and indomitable. As a side note, let’s recall Katherine the blogger’s (2010) remark that this novel is “not so much about India as it is about India as it’s experienced by the British”, which indeed solidifies the idea that this narrative relies on structures outside the novel itself, preconceived notions based on an existing discourse, as Said phrased it. In a Western/British imagination, the dichotomy of East/West is not only tangible, but is also left unbridled. As Said (1979) writes:

[T]hat Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, ‘there’ in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient (22).

Nothing exists in a vacuum, even less so literary works. This kind of narrative, or “dichotomous categorization” as phrased by Shaikh (2003), “results in the monolithic constructions that efface the complex nature of realities and multiple ethical discourses” in Western societies as much as Eastern societies (149). Hence, India is, in this narrative, continuously constructed on premises that do not reflect its multiple realities or as a distinct geopolitical location, but instead made real through a westernized gaze, feeding into existing discourses that has already established it as monolithic and “natural”, as Britain’s direct opposite.
This is also seen in Smith’s depiction of India as an extension of Britain and British society, as seen through white British men running their tea gardens and their cultivation of the land. The novel was written briefly after India’s independence in 1947, but there is only one brief mention of the current political atmosphere, acknowledged by Mr Digby’s acquaintance Mr Littleton (who is a tea-planter):

’You ought to take care where you go on your own,’ said Mr Littleton warningly.
‘I never let my wife walk about by herself, it isn’t safe. The country’s in a very peculiar state at the moment. Riots going on all the time in one place or another. They were throwing acid about in the markets yesterday. Nasty stuff, acid.’
‘They weren’t throwing it about in my market,’ said Teresa. ‘Everyone was awfully nice’ (136).

At this point, Teresa is no longer frightened of her immediate surroundings and is described as welcoming the strangeness (118), but can however be understood as an unreliable source of information because of her age and thus her innocence (as I mentioned earlier in this segment). One could therefore argue that it is her romanticising that ought to be up for critique, but Smith fails to pursue that angle. To be sure, India through the eyes of Teresa is romanticised, but it is never addressed as an issue in the narrative by countering with a “realistic” perspective of India; it instead perpetuates the distinction made by orientalist discourses and relies on those very discourses. It is never a place with autonomy, but stuck in the dichotomous categorization of “Occident/Orient”, a place with no beginning nor end, “a world flat and baked and dry on whose immense surface, far apart from one another, dwelt men and their beasts” (141). And speaking of the beast, it is, throughout the narrative, occasionally hinted of the appearance of the tiger, the ultimate symbol for India’s primitiveness (the wild jungle housing this dreaded beast) and here also used as a premonition of death. Toward the conclusion of the novel, Smith writes:

It was just before they reached the river that Teresa saw her first tiger. One moment an empty path of dust surrounded them […] [Next,] into the yellow glare of the headlights leapt the huge beast. […] Tiger, tiger, her heart banged, tiger, tiger, tiger. It burned like a powerful flame, like a furnace, in the dark night, able to consume (281-2).

The apparition of the tiger becomes “for ever welded” with the death of her father, who dies of a heart attack on the way to his acquaintance, Mr Littleton (285). To round this segment off, I want to look at how the tiger’s symbolic tie to fire and a furnace is echoed in the following paragraph, maybe even suggested here as a premonition:

She wished she could have been dead without having to die. She tried to read. She stirred the fire. […] It was impossible to leave the house: the night outside
was full of menace. Suddenly in the distance a pack of jackals burst into their wild chorus, laughter that ended in screams of torment. It sounded like the cries of children drowning, mingled with the cries of the wretches who drowned them: fear; remorse, hate and a hellish mockery jumbled together in one shrill discord, and swept towards the house. Teresa leapt to her feat, quivering with horror. The jackals – monsters, devils, whatever they were – seemed to be only a few yards away, on top of her, overrunning the garden, when, abruptly as it had begun, the babel ceased without a whimper. Not a yap […] followed, only a dead and eerie silence (267-8).

Amidst the cultivated lands of the (white, British) tea-planters and their tea-gardens, there is wilderness (229); there are monsters and devils, here in the forms of jackals, sometimes in the form of coolies who were likened to “creatures” standing “menacingly close” to her, and also in the form of the tiger, the rare-sighted devil of the land. What this narrative does is continuously remind its readers that the place Teresa finds herself in is in fact “hellish”, “savage”, “immense” and thus unknown, where anything “may happen, at any moment” (160). Maybe it’s even a suggestion that she is somehow already dead, being in India, that the “dead and eerie silence” confirms just that; or maybe it’s a question of Smith wanting to kill Teresa’s innocence, and that this is the place to do just that. Either way, as Smith moves to conclude her novel, this imagery stands out vividly, reminding readers that the place Teresa finds herself in is, on the one hand “worse than a nightmare”, but one in which she is doomed to stay as she doesn’t belong anywhere else.

### iii. Whose home?

When Teresa is described through the eyes of her father Mr Digby, it is often in contrast to his first daughter, Ruth – Teresa’s half-sister. While Mr Digby could be read as one of this story’s villains with his self-important demeanour and his sexist and racist opinions (e.g. 46-7, 106-7), he is framed by Smith as a buffoon, hence not always to be taken seriously. However, the narrative fixes Teresa as her sister’s opposite because we are continuously reminded that she is just that, not only from Mr Digby’s point of view. Teresa is first described as graver than her father, with her skin “marked by a certain bluish transparency”, giving the impression “of being as much a spiritual as a physical attribute” (5). She is throughout the narrative likened to an otherworldly being, “wraith-like”, a “spirit of no permanence” (39, 61) – she is conceptualised as a “new creature […] not a girl, not a woman, not human, not his”. It is also often indicated that Mr Digby struggles to control her, unlike Ruth, whose serene demeanour and beauty he values above all (26-7). To him, Teresa is “so different from Ruth. Ruth, at the same age, had
been graceful […] had been serene […] had kept out of his way, never exasperated him […].
This child stuck out like pins at every angle and the fault was her own, no one else’s” (26).
Teresa is neurotic and therefore “disgraceful, unhealthy”, she is not like other little girls who
are “good and quiet” but is instead “highlystrung” and “excitable” (111-12). Smith’s othering
of Teresa is also explicit here:

[The surrounding scenes] were vivid to her, as vivid as though she herself had
been there and heard and seen it all; as though, in fact, she had seen and heard it
time and time before, not only from the rail of B deck, but from the shores of Port
Said […] as though her blood was partly Eastern, not controlled by birth and
death, a very ancient understanding that pulsed inside her (86).

This paragraph not only appropriates the very distinct dynamics of embodied knowledge, or
what Mignolo (2011) calls a “body-politics of knowing/sensing/understanding” (274), but also
furthers an orientalist narrative through the mystification of the East by alluding to its
possession of “an ancient understanding”. More significantly, it diminishes the experiences of
non-white people at the hands of British colonial and imperialist forces, rendering invisible the
dynamics that colonialism, by imposing Euro/Anglo-centric systems of knowledge and
knowing, suppresses “sensing and the body […] of its geo-historical location” in order to
“claim universality”, one standard mode to exist by (ibid., 275). It thus becomes a question of
deriving the possibility of telling one’s own story, and white-washing the geo-political and
geo-historical contexts present in the narrative. Lastly, Teresa happens to frighten Ruth when
they finally meet after many years: “I am afraid, she thought, as Teresa took her hand, of any
child who stares so unwinkingly, who is so white and thin, who stands so still” (182). To Ruth,
Teresa “isn’t like a child” (197), and to their father, Teresa isn’t “quite normal” (224). Ruth,
on the other hand, is described as continuously constructing herself, performing constantly.
“[Teresa] saw what Ruth intended everyone to see: a very beautiful woman”. She had once
discovered her beauty and “marvelled at it” and made sure to create a person “that would
display this beauty best” (184). But she is also described as incredibly unhappy, having
imagined herself “in diamonds at the Opera”, to be “praised in London and envied in Paris” –
she was “gifted like a goddess and courted like a queen, when she met Edwin Tracey, a young
tea-planter home on leave” (185-6). Ruth is not, as we see here, Teresa’s opposite at all;
everything her father believes her to be is, in fact, false. She considers herself “a fraud”, while
knowing all the time that she, her beauty, is being wasted in India (186-7).
Consequently, both characters’ constructions in this narrative bring up the question of belonging: Teresa, as the boat takes off toward India, feels like “something was severed; she felt delivered”, and thinks she never wants to come back to “the grey land” that makes no effort to hold her (35). She is a traveller and “travelling was her chosen occupation […]. Detached and curious, she was indeed a natural traveller” (39). Once in India, she is asked if she lives in London, to which she replies, “‘No, I don’t. I don’t know where I live. I don’t think I live anywhere at the moment,’ said Teresa, wondering where in the world she did live” (117). Ruth, on the other hand, tries desperately to re-fashion the bungalow to a place where she “not so long ago, [would] receive her eminent visitors”, a place where she attempts to imitate the “London catalogues” she pours over and where “pieces of furniture, at enormous cost, were crated out from England and gradually, year by year, supplanted the serviceable local product” (189). At one point, Edwin tells her “‘You can’t make a drawing-room in the jungle’”, an argument that soon finished when Ruth cries: “‘Must we live like clumsy apes just because we’re miles from anywhere?’” Where Teresa’s curiosity is framed as endearing and innocent, carried by the insecurity of where she belongs and thus justifying her affinity to India, Ruth’s racism distinguishes her resentment of being where she is, solidifying her identity as English. She is not only unhappy, but believes herself superior to the place she inhabits and its peoples (224). Teresa, in the end, actually ends up taking Ruth’s place in India after Ruth is killed in a hit-and-run in Calcutta, a couple of days before she and Teresa were meant to return to England. Edwin travels to Calcutta to meet Teresa and says at one point: “‘Perhaps this is your country […]. Perhaps you’re too exotic for England. Ruth was English. I blamed her for it. Do you think you can manage to run a bungalow for me, Teresa?’” Thus, Edwin confirms what has been at play throughout the narrative: the othering of Teresa is used to make her unrecognisable to her father, to her sister, even to her aunt. She is nothing like Ruth, Ruth who belongs in England, to England. Teresa has never known where she belongs, until now, until her brother-in-law tells her. Perhaps this was always her country, despite her fear, despite the unknown, wild surroundings – wild and uncontrollable, like her. But this construction of Teresa is actually incredibly problematic. It becomes a question of erasing Indian women at the hands of white British women: Ruth represents England, while Teresa comes to represent India.

There are very few instances that Indian women are even mentioned, and none where they are engaged with in conversation; they’re often mentioned in passing and in relation to manual labour and/or poverty. Indeed, the interactions between the native population and the visiting party is minimal. There is one occasion when on the way to Assam that a little girl (“[she] was
like a flower or a moth, something so naturally beautiful that it seemed like an accident”) comes up to Mr Digby, described as helping her blind older brother, and asks for “baksheesh” (142). To Teresa’s surprise, her father gives the girl two rupees (“a small fortune”) and he goes off muttering “poor little devil” several times (ibid.). The one other time that Indian women and girls are described at length is when Edwin is doing the rounds of his “Garden”:

The girls, facing all in one direction, baskets posed on their upright heads, advanced toward him, pressing their way slowly through the stubborn ground, chins lifted not in pride, eyes lowered not in modesty, arms held stiffly forward with curving wrists to crop the bush ahead. Their bodies were hidden as high as the waist. Saris of limp and flimsy cotton hooded their brown cheeks, swathed their bosoms. Against the dark flesh their silver bracelets smoked with sunshine. High shade-trees speckled the brilliant green acres with sombre patches, speckled their yellow wicker-baskets, their white saris, made their faces black and featureless (254).

Here, the narrative works to conceal these women (or girls): either their bodies hidden as high as the waist, or their saris hooding their faces, or the shade of the trees making their faces “black” and “featureless”, further highlights their erasure; figures to only complete the background. It is a narrative driven by a character study rather than plot, framing the white British subject’s journey to self-discovery as complex and valuable, whereas the stories that were already existing there, and had existed before and long after, become unessential in contrast, objects in the background, props in Edwin’s “land of mystery” and a footnote in the narrative (208). Allen (2002) wrote in his review that “the most striking character of the book is India itself, a tangible presence that commands and drives the book along, just as it reorders the lives of Teresa and her father”, not only reducing India to a “character in a book”, but a place emptied of histories, local perspectives, embodied knowledges through the erasure of its people, hence emphasising Smith’s Western (and orientalist) perspective. Furthermore, the Indian people in the narrative are either reduced to harmful stereotypes (consider Mr Digby’s conviction of Indian men as thieves or as being distrustful; Edwin’s categorization of Indian peoples as “animals”; Ruth’s distinction of Indian peoples as “clumsy apes”; and even Teresa’s negligence of seeing the faces of the people serving her, instead reduced to a “brown hand”) or are completely derived of a voice (e.g. 106, 113, 137, 161, 189, 195, 201). This voicelessness is evoked in a different temporal context by Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” (1984), where she critiques Western feminist scholarship as reducing the “fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in [Third World] countries” to a monolith and homogenous “Third World Women” who instead are “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious,
domesticated, family-oriented, victimized” (335, 337) – “[i]n this way”, writes Nina Lykke (2010), “white, Western, middle-class feminists have unreflectingly reproduced colonialist tradition of cultural essentialism” (53). However, it is not here a question of Smith simply ignoring the “complexities and conflicts which characterize” Indian women in the story by speaking “for them” or reducing them to a monolith category, although those dynamics are also embedded in structures that imminently silence women of colour (Anzaldúa 1981, 1987; Lorde 1984; Lugones 2010; Matsuda 1991; Rich 1986); here, it is rather an instance of erasing their voices entirely through the portrayal of Ruth and Teresa as representatives of home/colonial-imperial extension of home.

Smith’s portrayal of Ruth and Teresa also becomes interesting when compared to Brontë’s characters of Jane and Bertha, evoking here Gayatri Spivak’s (1985) critique of the latter in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” where she looks particularly at the individualisation of Jane as a national feminist symbol of British fiction in both Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) and Jean Rhys’s re-writing of Brontë’s classic, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) (251). Spivak (1985) does this by looking at what she calls the family/counter-family dyad, and how Jane moves through the counter-family’s to in the end form her own nuclear family, and how this in turn is enabled by the “active ideology of imperialism” (247). Jane’s obstacle to become the “feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” is Bertha, but not in the purpose of “mere marriage or sexual reproduction”, but of the “‘greater’ project” of soul-making, that of Europe and “its not-yet-human Other” (ibid.). Spivak argues that for Jane to become the feminist heroine, Bertha/Antoinette “must play out her role, act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself”, writing that she “must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer” (ibid., 251). The comparison is not perfect, as neither Ruth nor Teresa are colonial subjects the way Bertha/Antoinette is (that is, neither were born in India), but the dynamics resonate. Firstly, one has to die to replace the other, in order to restore Britain’s colonial project in India, which is that much more noticeable in the narrative when nothing is described to oppose it, though we are aware of the kind of anti-colonial movements that were a material reality by the time of Smith’s visit to India, and was also realised by the time her novel was published. Secondly, Teresa’s othered Self needs to come out whole of this ordeal; the reference of fire and furnace in the encounter with the tiger alludes to Spivak’s reference of the self-immolation of Bertha/Antoinette that allows for the glorification of the colonizer’s mission, and could be read
as something dying in Teresa when her father and her sister dies – her otherness, which they confined her in. No longer defined by their alienation of her, she can now be herSelf, no longer Othered by others. Thus, Teresa’s no-longer-othered Self does not only make her more inclined to take Ruth’s place to continue an imperialist enterprise, it legitimizes it – she is constructed as not belonging in Britain the way her sister does, but she is still British. Ruth’s hatred taints the project, emphasises the politicised dynamics and tensions between British citizens and the native population, that Teresa, on the other hand, conveniently ignores; in her market, everyone was “awfully nice”, failing to mention (or maybe repressing) that she had felt both ripped off and confused (120-2). In this way, Teresa’s othering works to unify, to restore the imperialist British project, in a manner that inherently depoliticizes the times, ignores the geo-historical and -political contexts, continues to silence, well into our 21st century.
PART II

III. Decolonising literature

“Again and again, it was necessary to remind everyone that no education is politically neutral” – bell hooks (1994, 37).

“We need a faculty that recognizes that ‘objective analysis’ and the act of reading is shaped by the material consequences of our lives: gender, race, class, ability” – Lola Olufemi (2017).

As I wrote in my introduction, one of my aims with this thesis has been to explore the possibilities of decolonising literature, as it is constituted within literary studies particularly in a UK context. I did my joint honours degree in English and American Literature and Comparative Literature at a UK university; in my final year at university, I would often think how the “American” was, and is, misleading – North-American is more accurate. The “English” can also be problematized, as it refers to English as localised primarily to England, rather than consider it as an imposed colonial language. Indeed, it elucidates English and North-American cultural hegemony. Moreover, it was in my third year at university that I was (finally) able to choose modules that focused on, for example, postcolonial writing or writing by authors of colour. I chose a module titled “Native American Literature”, in which we focused exclusively on Ojibway/Anishinaabe literature. “Native American Literature” is, of course, also misleading, not only suggesting that there is a singular Native American literature/literary history, but that also homogenizes and lumps together assorted Native American literatures and literary traditions across the Americas. A Cambridge graduate, Olufemi (2017) declares why an optional module at the end of a three-year degree is both problematic and dangerous:

It is not enough to simply include one option at the end of a three year degree. Postcolonial writing is not an afterthought; it is British literature. It is a reminder of a colonial history that Britain and British institutions would like us to forget. It is therefore our intellectual responsibility to meet the claims of these authors with the respect and the dignity they deserve.

Vociferous, Olufemi’s claim reminds me of my own university years and of the depoliticisation of literary studies. Here, she also voices the hypocrisy of “English literature”: ought not all writings in the English language constitute “English literature”? Instead, literatures written in English as an imposed language in (post-)colonial contexts do not actually
count, even though they technically constitute “English literature” – as Olufemi claims, “Postcolonial writing is not an afterthought – it is British literature” (ibid., emphasis in original). Furthermore, the issue, of course, with an optional module after a three-year degree is that not enough students will experience the un-comfortability that comes with the processes of unlearning, of decentring, of re-evaluating, of critically questioning the systems of domination that enable the centre/periphery binary, what is defined or conceptualised as compulsory and optional. I want to clarify that I am not advocating for the decolonial options I’m engaging with here to be appropriated or white-washed, and removed out of their contexts of resistance (Mendoza 2016), but as an open-ended project informed by decolonial thought, to envision how a decolonised literature programme could potentially look and why we are in desperate need of it in a Western context. I will here explore aspects crucial to decolonial thought, but will not implement these in my reading/analysis, as I chose to use the concepts of resistance and re-existence\(^\text{19}\) instead, and look at a possible paradigmatic shift between the two – this to offer a broader view of how we can envision the project of decolonising literature. In this chapter, I am using the decolonial option as an open-ended strategy to re-envision literary studies, and to here explore what “decolonising literature”, the thesis’ main title, actually – or rather potentially – entails. I will also explore the reasons why I believe it is a significant endeavour and how we can implement decolonial thought within literary studies and literature, not only to criticise but to discover trajectories in which such a project can flourish and bring about change.

i. An ongoing project

Mendoza (2016) declares that decolonisation is not “a metaphor for antiracist, anticapitalist critiques, nor for critiques of Eurocentrism” (103). It is from here that I take my cue to consider what decolonisation might actually propose and what it means in connection to both literary studies and literature. Firstly, as Mendoza asserts, it is not a metaphor – meaning it is not a linguistic symbol or representation for the critique of the social construct of race nor of capitalism. Secondly, it is not merely a critique in and of itself: decolonisation does not end with antiracist and anti-capitalist critique, nor does it end with the critique of Eurocentrism. Decolonisation, Mendoza argues, “is always an unfinished project” (ibid., 113), remains ongoing, meaning it is something you constantly do, something you actively partake in. For

\(^{19}\) As theorised by Adolfo Albán-Achinte (2013).
example, Mignolo (2011) notes that while modernity and postmodernity are historically grounded in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, both in European contexts, decoloniality is historically grounded in the Third World, in the Badung Conference of 1955 in which “29 countries from Asia and Africa gathered” to find “a common ground and vision for the future that was neither capitalism nor communism. That way was ‘decolonization’. It was [...] a delinking from the two major Western macro-narratives” (273). Here, a significant aspect of Mignolo’s argument is the notion of delinking: the decolonial option “opens up a way of thinking that delinks from the chronologies of new epistemes and new paradigms (modern, postmodern, [...] quantum theory, theory of relativity, etc.)” (ibid., 274). As such, delinking in literary studies would mean to re-evaluate the current (and new) episteme(s) and paradigms and their respective chronologies: such as Romanticism, Realism and Modernism, for example, and the literature that becomes representative of these literary periods/movements, i.e. their canons. This because these chronologies are grounded in a specific geo-historical site of knowledge, that of Europe, and universalised because of European cultural hegemony through coloniality. Mignolo elaborates further on the concept of delinking, writing that it is a means for colonial subjects “dwelling in the local histories and experiences of colonial histories” to theorise their truths and histories transgressing the universal. And while colonial subjects may share the same grammar as the imposed colonial languages, “they inhabit different bodies, sensibilities, memories and overall world-sensing20” (ibid., 276). In my view, delinking in literary studies could indicate one way to map exclusionary practices as a mandatory aspect, and to consciously evaluate the very ways we map literary works within a Western understanding of time; to evaluate the ways literary canons have been constructed and how these tend to be exclusive as a rule. In a chapter titled “Canon Fathers and Myth Universe”, author Lillian S. Robinson (1992) clarifies the significance of her chosen title, which I think becomes relevant here: “It refers to the generally patriarchal literary canon, the literally patriarchal biblical one that is the source of the canon metaphor, the Fathers of the Church, whose patristic writing include the bases of canon law […]. And then there are the notions of a universal myth, the dominant myth of a human universal that turns out to be male” (24). The dominant myth of a human universal is not only male, however, but capitalist, white, non-

20 “I use the expression world-sensing instead of world vision because the latter, restricted and privileged by Western epistemology, blocked the affects and the realms of the senses beyond the eyes” (Mignolo 2011, 276). Mignolo’s definition of “world-sensing” is significant as it emphasises the body as a form of sensing the world beyond the rationale, as established within Western thought that has historically grounded the rational/emotional binary, valuing the first.
disabled, hetero and cis, to start. Therefore, there needs to be a consciousness, a critical awareness, in how we produce and reproduce canons that continuously perpetuate hegemony. Delinking, then, is one decolonial option that we can use to open up for additional and simultaneous kinds of thinking and sensing that are not defined by modernity, for example, or the European experience of history (Thiong’o 1986, 91). It is from here that we can also start re-imagining a literature programme that does not offer optional courses on literature by authors of colour in its final year, but one that considers decolonial options as crucial aspects of literary studies in their entirety as a way to constantly re-examine itself.

Another important aspect to the processes of decolonisation is the concept of border thinking. Mignolo (2011) stresses the importance of thinking in the borders that colonial subjects inhabit, but not “borders of nation-states but borders of the modern/colonial world, epistemic and ontological borders” (276-7). Because of the conceptualisation of the modern/colonial world and the processes of coloniality as a result of colonisation, “European knowledge production was accredited as the only valid knowledge” and as such, “indigenous epistemologies were relegated to the status of primitive superstitions or [were] destroyed. Eurocentrism locked intersubjective relations between the European and the non-European in a temporal frame that always positioned the European as more advanced” (Mendoza 2016, 114). I understand border thinking, then, as a way to change the current epistemological and ontological hierarchies in Western contexts: it can potentially aim to shed light on Eurocentrism on the one hand, and actively challenge Eurocentrism by changing compulsory curricula on the other. Border thinking is also significant when considering the various socio-political circumstances from which students of literary programmes actually read and write. As Olufemi (2017) stresses: “There is an unspoken assumption that that [sic] the history of literature is a history that belongs exclusively to white men and the elevation of a Eurocentric canon, which purposefully excludes writers and readers like me”. The disruption of the history of literature as exclusive to primarily white men and the “elevation of a Eurocentric canon” is necessary in order for literary studies, as well as our conception of literature, to remain interesting as well as relevant. Furthermore, border thinking as a means to imagine a decolonised definition of literature in literary studies becomes crucial to de-westernise these, which is needed because the title “English and American literature” eventually reveals its British and North/Anglo-American cultural hegemony; it works to reproduce a hegemonic discourse that attempts to “homogenize all differences” (JanMohamed 1987, 10) under the guise of the de-politicised idea of a shared humanity. Border thinking as a concept can also be applied as a reminder of the multitudes of...
sites we inhabit even as we sit next to each other in a classroom. It means to look at how border
thinking/sensing “links border epistemology with immigrant consciousness and consequently,
delink from territorial and imperial epistemology grounded on theological (Renaissance) and
egalorographical (Enlightenment) politics of knowledge” (Mignolo 2011, 274-5). It means to
consider the English language, or literature in English, not only as localised to England, but to
also consider it as an imposed and colonial language. This goes for any language that has been
imposed in a colonial context. For example, the authors of Rewriting English: Cultural Politics
of Gender and Class argue that English literature “was born, as a school and college subject,
not in England but in the mission schools and training colleges in Africa and India” (Batsleer et
al. 1985, 23). They write that the very premise of canon formation was grounded in the then
emergent curriculums for imperial sites of domination (ibid.; Wilentz 1992, 262), thus
strengthening the nation-state, the “Self” positioned against the colonial/colonised “Other”,
who instead was stripped of history and culture.

The notion of border thinking as conceptualised by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), on the other hand,
brings to the fore the kind of sites we readers and thinkers inhabit and the pre-possessed
knowledges we bring into our undertakings. For example, Anzaldúa’s “mestiza
consciousness”, a consciousness of the borderlands, seeks to emphasise the multiplicities of
self: “la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to
another” (78, emphasis in original). This makes me think of my personal fronteras, the
“inbetweenness” of my existence, inhabiting not only several sites in one material space, but
also languages and the cultures that come with them and that it is from here that I think, and
sense. I used to believe that I was stuck in the slash – / –, in a kind of limbo, always in between
places, always too much of one aspect of myself or too little. “The work of the mestiza
consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show
in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (ibid., 80, emphasis
in original). By decolonising literature, we ask not only what literature is, but whose literature
is what (not to essentialise, not to universalise, but to sense); what are the literary traditions
available to us and how do they differ (because they will differ); how are literatures organised,
and to what end; which are the aesthetics present in the literatures we’re currently exploring
(rather than ask which literary aesthetics are present in non-Western literatures because that
means starting from a value-laden and occupied site, using the Westernized and universalised
standards as the outset for the analysis)? We will also ask: What aesthetics of literature are
elevated? Why are they elevated? Whose literature do we conceive as significant/valuable and
why? This to politicise the premises of literary studies, to politicise the surrounding systems that organise literature itself, and to remember how it has fuelled a macro-narrative through the exclusionary practices present in literary studies, as well as be aware of the continuous (re)inscription of the “superiority of Western knowledge” (Mendoza 2016, 109) in literary studies. This is how we start to move away from the current Eurocentrism of literature to Anzaldúa’s (1987) borderlands, in which we can conceive literature grounded in peoples and locality, in embodiment. Where high/low literature doesn’t exist, or where we ask, “why the distinction and who remains in the margins?”, in which macro/micro narratives are disrupted, the slash reconfigured. I’m imagining that the project of decolonising literature means therefore to reinterpret the history of literature but also reinterpret how we have defined literature, to anchor it in material realities; it is where we start listening to the mestiza, or the peoples in the borders, who are “using new symbols, […] [to shape] new myths”. It is where we learn “to transform the small “I” into the total Self” (ibid., 82-3). This is the kind of reading we need to do, the writing we need to read; not the myriad suggestions of a universal and common experience of being human, the perpetuation of a “shared humanity” (Olufemi 2017), but delve into the different myths, the histories that have been forced outside a white-washed History/HIStory, the other stories told – and the multiplicities of Self, re-existing in a no-longer fragmented state, but whole, finally whole again.

ii. Moving onwards

So, why do we need a decolonial intervention in literary studies, in how it grounds and defines literature? Firstly, a decolonial intervention means to explicitly consider the very premise of English (and eventually North-American) literature as a subject and its relation to colonial contexts (Batsleer et al. 1985, 23; Viswanathan 1990; Johnson 1996), and that this would be a mandatory aspect of literary studies. Furthermore, decolonising literary studies, in how it premises and defines literature, is needed to on the one hand disrupt how we map, and have mapped, literary history, and on the other, be critically aware of how canons reproduce exclusivity since they become representative of a nation-state and of a national identity against “Others”. For example, Olufemi (2015) asserts: “There is the maintenance of power and structural disadvantage in being made to constantly study the work of white men without any critical framework that allows us to question why that is”. Olufemi makes a crucial point here that resonates with my experience as a student of literature: the fact that there is no critical framework to understand why we study what we study and how it is premised on exclusion as
an outset. It is a matter of having white-washed literature and literary history within literary
studies, and where its students are meant to accept this as norm. Moreover, on the matter of
language and culture, Thiong’o (1986) writes:

To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in
relationships to others.

For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction
or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions,
history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation
of the language of the coloniser (16).

This becomes significant on two fronts: decolonising would mean to critically investigate the
implications of colonialism in the first place and how it disenfranchises peoples of colour or
other peoples in the margins to this day through, for example, the elevation of a Eurocentric
canon and a white-washed and cis male-oriented literary history, as well as consider how the
imposition of the English language was used to subjugate a people and remove their local geo-
and corpo-politics only to then consider their cultural production in the English language as
substandard. Thiong’o asserts that his choice to write in Kikuyu/Gĩkũyũ was a means to
forward cultural production of African literatures written in its various languages as opposed
to contribute to English literature from a colonised position (ibid., 27). This is not only a matter
of resisting the status quo, but actually works into re-existence, as Albán-Achinte (2013)
conceptualises it; in which a “people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography,
education, orature and literature” (Thiong’o 1986, 16) are no longer undervalued, but re-
worked/re-written to matter, where art is created as a means to re-exist on one’s own terms,
emphasising one’s own embodied knowledges within a specific geo-political and geo-historical
context. Decolonising means to disrupt the systems of representations that actively
disenfranchises peoples in marginalised positions and that have instead remained intact because
they are present in “high literature” and in art (as though art exists in a vacuum), while also
creating room – both in a metaphysical and physical sense – for simultaneous stories (rather
than alternative ones). It also challenges how harmful portrayals are reproduced through the
act of re-publishing, as was apparent in Smith’s novel for example, hailed as a “small
masterpiece” but where critics or its publishers conveniently avoided addressing how it either
reduces its Indian characters to stereotypes or how they’re removed almost entirely from the
narrative despite the novel being set in India. Lastly, the need to decolonise literary studies and
literature arises from the disparity of being, as a student, introduced to, for example,
postcolonial theory as an alternative lens to understand and analyse literature, but not being
given the tools to consider the acute necessity of that lens. It means re-considering postcolonial theory, or feminist theory, or queer theory, as alternative lenses in which to analyse and interpret literary works, but instead as integral parts of literary studies; it means that a critical approach to literature is crucial, considering it within interdisciplinary frameworks, in which we regard it as part of a larger discourse which actively affects and impacts as opposed to understand it as passively created in a vacuum.

The next question is: how can we actively go about this intervention? Slightly reminiscent of Anzaldúa’s border thinking (1987), in which we ground the sites we inhabit, Elisabeth Hjorth suggests in her dissertation from 2015, *Förtvivlade läsningar: Litteratur som motstånd och läsning* (translated in its description page to “Desperate Readings: Literature as Resistance and Reading as Ethics”) to read ethically as a practical method of interpreting literature. In it, she aims to consider the ethical dimensions of reading, and how it can be directed toward change21 (8, my translation). To her, the site of the despaired, as she conceptualises the space from which she writes and reads, is wrought with questions about what literature as resistance might offer, about what reading as an ethical practice can entail, all from which originate in a “political desperation over the state” of these questions, and a “necessary wish to change their current state”22 (ibid., 8, 251, my translation). Significantly, literature, she asserts, can make visible the modes in which systems of domination intricately inform society, but claims that they are also fluid and are, as such, occasionally concealed “behind phenomena that at first do not indicate power relations”23 (ibid., 9, my translation). She writes: “What is being sought is a self-critical relationship to the power of the reader. Reading as an ethical practice is a critical endeavour with the relationship to the Other as an [sic] self of her/his/[their] own and a distancing of one’s own self” (ibid., 251). This self-critical relationship means to be aware of the power a reader exercises; meaning that a reader can choose to ignore the power structures visible in a literary text, and how this literary text potentially reproduces exclusionary practices.

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21 "Jag närmar mig litteraturen, otillfredsställd liksom den, och läsningen blir därmed också ett sätt att rubba en ordning. Så går det att förstå läsningens etiska dimension: som en riktning eller en rörelse för förändring” (2015, 8).

22 "Min läsning har kommit att innebära att jag startar från en särskild position: den förtvivlades. Frågorna om det motstånd litteraturen kan bjuda, och om den läsning som kan kallas etisk praktik, är ställda utifrån en politisk förtvivlan över sakernas tillstånd och en lika nödvändig önskan att förändra dessa tillstånd” (2015, 8).

23 "Litteraturen kan synliggöra de dominansförhållandena som på ett inriktat sätt präglar samhället. Dessa är rörliga och döljer sig stundtals bakom fenomen som i förstone inte tycks handla om makt” (2015, 9).
that goes beyond the work itself, thus maintaining them, leaving them unsaid, continuously sustaining the status quo. Or a reader, instead, can consider the implications of a literary text as exclusionary through language and/or content. For example, Laura Sackton (2017) for BookRiot wrote a list of ten ways white readers can actively do anti-racist reading\textsuperscript{24}, such as: “read diversely”, “buy books by currently working authors of colour”, “support PoC-owned bookstores and businesses”, “don’t be an apologist for racist classics; don’t be afraid to openly discuss the problematic parts of books you love” and “use books to educate yourself about racism – don’t ask people of colour to explain it to you”, which put emphasis on active reading, and informed reading, focusing on the marginalisation of people of colour in the publishing industry, as much as emphasising how a white person who reads and consumes can bridge that gap of disparity. It is a matter of being reminded to be active, rather than passive, readers, because we exercise power when we read and interpret, becoming, again, a matter of accountability in producing knowledge; therefore, we need to be aware of the different power structures and how they intersect, or intra-act (“processes of mutual construction and transformation”), in order to, hopefully, disrupt and reconfigure these (Barad as cited in Lykke 2010, 51; Lykke 2010, 51). As Bhambra (2014) reminds us: Mignolo is not “arguing simply for a geo-politics of location as central to any academic endeavour, but rather a consideration of what that geo-politics enables to be known and how it is to be known (118, my emphasis). I understand this as being aware of how you, the reader or the writer, because of your geo-political site, are premised on a certain geo-political and geo-historical site of knowledge and that this is reproduced in your endeavours. Therefore, reading as an ethical practice and incorporating reflexivity in the act of reading is an essential aspect within literary studies if we are to move toward a decolonised literary programme and eventually enact such a project. In line with this, I would also claim that there needs to be a commitment to anti-oppressive pedagogy (Kumashiro 2000), within literary studies specifically. Kumashiro asserts that to change, not only your students, but subsequently society, we need to “conceptualise oppression as discursively produced”, and as such, we can understand “how oppression can play out differently in different contexts” (ibid., 41), meaning that we can more easily detect systems of oppression – as Hjorth (2015) claimed, they’re fluid, always transforming, easily concealed

\textsuperscript{24}The article’s title suggests that we can \textit{be} anti-racist readers, but I want to contest this: racism, as well as other –\textit{isms} (such as sexism, ableism, classism for example), refer to the systems of oppression that are maintained when we expressively “\textit{do}” them. This to remove an essentialist “\textit{be}”; we need to move away from the idea of being, or not being, racist, for example, and look at how we instead “\textit{do}”, and as such, perpetuate and maintain, racism. This to challenge when people say, “I’m not a racist, but….”, and so on.
(9). From this particular framework, understanding oppressive structures, or in this particular case, exclusionary practices, as being discursively reproduced through texts, or as Kumashiro (2000) suggests, through “citing of harmful discourses and the repetition of harmful histories” (40), we can start to recognise the implications of oppressions and the acute measures to dismantle these discourses (i.e. canons and canonised texts, re-publishing novels containing harmful discourses without addressing these, etc.). These are discourses, Kumashiro states, that “frame how people think, feel, act, and interact” (ibid.), and they are embedded in collective imaginations, define how we think about ourselves and everyone else. As such, anti-oppressive pedagogy, the means to change students and society, is through “a particular kind of labor”, Kumashiro suggests, writing:

The prohibition and/or critical awareness of the repetition of harmful associations/histories do not actually change them. What does is a particular kind of labor. When activist labor to supplement harmful associations they are participating in altering them (i.e., are constituting a reworked history, are performatively reworking history) (ibid., 42, emphasis in original).

What Kumashiro emphasises here is the same kind of doing that Hjorth suggests: an active participation in the kind of knowledge we’re producing or sharing. One way to actively participate to alter harmful associations, or performatively reworking history, or literature, is through the “politics of citation”, which Gloria Wekker (2009) defines as “the politics of who is cited and canonized and of the power relations which ensure these mechanisms” (56). It is from here that we can start processes of decolonising literature and literary studies, to forward a programme that is conscious and critical of the practices of exclusion they maintain, while we as readers and students are also given the opportunity to be critically aware of the framework of which we are learning, to understand how we too are complicit in reproducing harmful discourses and oppressive dynamics when we read literature that either erases people from all around the world, or considers authors of colour, for example, as always an alternative to the norm. This to bring about change.
IV. Breaking the Master-Narrative

“I am driven by the knowledge that my slave ancestors kept themselves alive through storytelling, and no matter how much we are kept down, our stories will rise” – Sharmaine Lovegrove (2018).

“When I walk all the things / of the earth awaken, / and they rise up and whisper / and it’s their stories that they tell” – Gabriela Mistral, “The Storyteller” (2008, 102).

Storytelling is essential for survival. In storytelling, those whose voices are today lost can be found again, and as such, they resurrect like phoenixes from the ashes. With storytelling, there is the possibility of immortality. It is the recreation of strife and struggle in the midst of life; it is the promise of death in the midst of life; not as a final stop, but rather a temporary obstacle from which we can rise again. Storytelling reminds us that we are here on borrowed time, and in that time, we share the world. This is what storytelling promises me; it connects me, roots me, to the context in which I am in, and the people that share that very context, but it branches out across the temporal and spatial materiality from which I write, or read – as such, storytelling, in literature as well as orature, exists beyond time and space. This has always been the power of storytelling for me, whether I read a book by an author I’ll never meet or ask my mother about her mother, about her childhood in Chile. Since she passed, this was how I knew I’d keep my abuelita\(^25\) alive – she is always alive in my mother. But some stories remain unknown and underappreciated. The binary categorisations constituted by modernity still exist and are continuously reproduced by powerful institutions and continuously inscribed through language (rational/emotional, logical/illogical, culture/nature, man/woman, self/other, humanitas/anthropos), and as such, storytelling mirrors the powerful (Ashcroft et al. 2004, 7; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009, 12). I have never read a story of “halvchilenaren”\(^26\), or “la chilena sueca”, the “chilena”\(^27\) in-between worlds, daughter to a man whose mother is Chilean and whose father is Swedish, daughter to a woman whose mother is Chilean and whose father’s origins are unknown (French? Spanish? A matter of white-washing? I don’t know). “the thing you’re most / afraid to write. / write that” (Waheed 2013, 233). But I am not alone in not feeling represented. Underrepresentation of people of colour, especially underrepresentation of queer,

\(^{25}\) Grandmother in Spanish.

\(^{26}\) Half-Chilean in Swedish.

\(^{27}\) Swedish Chilean and Chilean in Spanish.
dis/abled, poor people of colour, in popular culture, ads, industries, academia, etc., is common in the Western context from which I write. Instead, the forms of resistance in my own temporal and spatial context are visible and, more importantly, accessible through social media channels; platforms of resistance by and for people of colour have been creating space and people are unapologetically being themselves (not holding back any part of who they are), telling their truths. Here is where I’ve found storytelling that mirror the uncertainties I grew up with, never feeling like I’ve belonged, always in between two places, as the physicality of being non-Western materialised through the culture my mother and her sisters, their children, enveloped me in as a child; their knowledges that they have kept alive as to keep their origins alive, their parents alive, that connects them to the siblings that couldn’t (or wouldn’t) make the journey to Sweden.

(The white kids at school, their parents, my teachers, always marked me as different, and I’d look in the mirror to see it too, I’d wear that difference as a shield, no matter how much my parents wanted me to assimilate. Assimilate – what does that even mean? What do I discard in order to fit in? The colour of my eyes? The darkness of my hair? The very body I wear?).

How do we create a physical space in which the violence of assimilation is not enforced, the physical as well as spiritual? I mentioned resisting – here, I am considering writing, as constituted by storytelling, also a significant form of resistance. Resisting the macro-narrative; breaking the macro-narrative; re-existing in a narrative that is not premised on the binary macro/micro. That reconfigures the slash in which so much is sucked into non-existence, that instead recognises the micro as macro, in which all narratives depending on context are validated. “I am possessed by a vision”, writes Anzaldúa (1987), “that Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect. It’s a validation vision” (87). Resisting by theorizing subjectivities, by writing our selves, our multiplicities, into existence. Sara Ahmed (2017) writes that “Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical […] the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life” (10). Theory is not the absence of selves, but encompasses selves. Theory speak realities into existence, and vice versa; our lived experiences taking form on a page, or our lived experiences that inspire a story taking form on a page, lived experiences that mirror the complexity of being alive in the various forms here on earth. That cannot be reduced to a canon that is constituted by institutions that conveniently choose to white-wash history, for
example; a canon that protects the nation-state rather than reflect the voices of people with a consciousness in dual or multiple contexts, that could instead protect these voices through visibility. Here, I am engaging with such writing; writing that starts from the self and transcends, that have moved me across the world, not on ships or trains, but their worlds, the writer’s world. This to exist, again.

i. Resisting: shattering, breaking, disrupting

So how can we conceptualise resistance here? Anzaldúa (1987) frames a history of resistance in the lineages of her people, writing that “Our mothers, our sisters and brothers, the guys who hang out on street corners, the children in the playgrounds, each of us must know our Indian lineage, our afro-mestisaje, our history of resistance” (86, emphasis in original). For Anzaldúa, it’s remembering what has been forgotten, of trying to identify that which unites rather than separates. Thus, by remembering, there is the possibility of discarding the harmful stereotypes imposed by the “white dominant culture” that instead is “killing us slowly with its ignorance”.

Resistance is also the conscious choice of writing solely in your mother tongue –like Thiong’o (1986) who, after writing novels in English, moved on to write in Kikuyu/Gĩkũyũ, as a way to resist the hegemonic status of English as a language within academic and literary production, as well as to contribute to a growing tradition of African literatures, written in African languages (27). He states: “Their literature [the literary tradition of Europe/West], even at their most humane and universal, necessarily reflected the European experience of history” (ibid., 91). This dimension of history was imposed through colonial schools and universities and as such, African children, Thiong’o writes, experienced the world as “defined and reflected in the European experience of history” (ibid., 93). Therefore, their entire worldview, as well as their “immediate environment”, was Eurocentric: “Europe was the centre of the universe” (ibid.).

Thus, to resist is to decentre Europe, and to decentre its enlightened, universal and secular education as seen in Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818, 2012), in which the local, represented there by Safie’s Muslim father, is instead brutish and threatening (Spivak 1985, 257). bell hooks (1990), on the other hand, envisions resistance as potentially brewed in marginality, writing: “When I left that concrete space in the margins28, I kept alive in my heart a way of knowing

28 hooks (1990) refers here to the railroad tracks that divided the Kentucky town she grew up in, writing: “As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality” (341).
reality which affirms continually not only the primacy of resistance but the necessity of a resistance that is sustained by remembrance of the past, which includes recollections of broken tongues, giving us ways to speak that de-colonize our minds, our very beings” (342). hooks reaffirms here what both Anzaldúa and Thiong’o assert – that resistance is possible through remembering, outlining its history, as well as recollecting mother tongues, showing them light again. It is against this framework that I am considering resistance in this segment, and I want here to analyse examples by poets of colour and see how they are (potentially) in conversation with the writing by thinkers such as hooks, Anzaldúa and Thiong’o.

Anzaldúa (1981) writes that we “must use what is important to get us to writing. No topic is too trivial. The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment” (170, emphasis in original). Write, indeed, from your self, selves, or any self, the multitudes within you. Nayyirah Waheed (2013), for example, writes:

never
trust anyone
who says
they do not see color.
this means
to them,
you are invisible.

— is (140).

I want to start with this short poem because of its apparent triviality that is particularly framed as such through its appearance on the page – the short lines, the apparent decortication, its stringent form. And yet, the absolute honesty of this short poem is not trivial at all; its form is instead what is effective about the poem. To me, it speaks of colour-blindness within a majority that constructs itself as “post-racial” and/or anti-racist (for a Swedish context, see Hubinette and Lindström 2014). The invisibility mentioned here is also rendered, I would claim, as a side-effect of the “universal” and “secular” education that we are subjected to within the “‘banking system of education’ where students are regarded as merely passive consumers” and that grounds itself on ideas of “equality” at the cost of differences (hooks 1994, 40; Kumashiro 2000, 29; Lykke 2014). The poem urges the need to see a person’s skin colour in order to emphasise that it does not inherently damage; quite the opposite, what actually damages is to remain colour-blind, to ignore difference, because as such, there is the assumption that
everyone starts off from the same circumstances and that social mobility is guaranteed if you “work hard enough”; this thinking, in fact, represents a neoliberal meritocratic system which suggests “that whatever our social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for ‘talent’ to combine with ‘effort’ in order to ‘rise to the top’” (Littler 2013, 52). It is a system that instead maintains social and cultural inequalities through these very mechanisms (2013, 53). A similar way to emphasise the importance of seeing race is done by Danez Smith in their poignant poem “alternate names for black boys” (2014), in which they suggest alternate names, as the title reveals, for Black boys in the form of a 1-17 list (see the poem in its entirety in the appendix). For example, they write: “5. guilty until proven dead”, “7. monster until proven ghost”, “14. brilliant, shadow hued coral”, “15. (I thought to leave this blank / but who am I to name us nothing?)”, “17. a mother’s joy and a clutched breath”. Again, this invokes not “the eternal” but the particular, showing how the latter renders the particular experience of being a Black boy within a particular context (Smith is a Black, queer poet from the U.S.), and in this poem, there is a clear reference to the death of Black men and boys, significantly at the hands of police brutality, which is how I read no. five and seven, as well as 17. What I find significantly powerful about no. 17 is that it goes beyond the written word, conjuring the image of the mother’s joy in juxtaposition to her worry, anxiety, her “clutched breath”. The words go beyond their immediacy, and yet somehow lingers there; it conjures the figure of the mother clutching her breath before she knows the truth – the uncertainty and dread before or as she hears the news: it’s either her son, her joy, or someone else’s, who is dead. Moreover, no. 14, as well as no. six, (“6. oil heavy starlight”), prompts notions of ethereal and cosmic beauty (by evoking brilliance and starlight) in order to defy stereotypical racist images of Black men, such as “the savage brute or the hypermasculine ego” (Candy 2017). And with no. 15, in which the narrator shines through the poem, there is a direct reference to the important act of naming, of giving name not only to pain, but significantly, giving name to the attempt of erasure and invisibility, instead reconfigured into creation and visibility. That line also suggests, in my reading, a kind of despair – the fact that the narrator thought of leaving it blank hints at the kind of devastation caused by no. five and seven, as well as no. eight and eleven, “8. gone” and “11. gods of shovels and black veils”. Lastly, the importance of naming is cemented in the poem’s title. What Smith does by giving these “alternate names” is to demonstrate the power we hold in being able to name ourselves, rather than be defined by stereotypical images, for example, which is also what Waheed urges in her short poem, showing that in naming lies power; otherwise you will either remain invisible or be continuously reduced to images that do not mirror or reflect your humanity.
In Danez Smith’s “Tonight, in Oakland” (2015), resistance is conceptualised explicitly through imagery that seeks to establish redemption. This is seen in particular of the kind of violence the narrator witnesses (and is potentially subject to), constantly juxtaposed to the possibility of utopia as related by the nameless first person narrator (see poem in its entirety in appendix). I read this poem informed, again, by Anzaldúa’s (1981) appeal to (specifically Third world women) writers, to find what is important, no matter the subject (“No topic is too trivial”), as an outset for writing. Indeed, Smith does not invoke the eternal/universal or the humanitarian but instead establishes the importance of locality and embodied knowledges as a starting place. Here, I also want to consider bell hooks’ (1990) approach to marginality, where she aims to “identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation”, asserting that “it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse” (341). I want to make clear that I do not mean to romanticise the subject matter that I am here analysing as I am well aware of the sensitive nature of these themes, not to mention their urgency and the material implications of these topics on peoples of colour throughout communities all over the world.

The title “Tonight, in Oakland” frames a kind of corpo-politics of knowledge in a geo-political context, which I think is significant to the poem’s outcome. Smith starts off with the lines: “I did not come here to sing a blues. / Lately, I open my mouth / & out come marigolds, yellow plums. / I came here to make the sky a garden”. These first four lines stand in clear juxtaposition to each other, in which the narrator clarifies that they will not sing a blues, will not sing a song of sorrow, but of hope (warmth, the absence of blues), as represented through the marigolds, the colour yellow and the plums. The narrator suggests that a blues would not help them create a garden in the sky – I read “make the sky a garden” as heaven on earth, or rather, heaven in Oakland, an attempt to re-imagine Oakland not as a site of deprivation but of hope. This reading is however complicated, because, firstly, “the sky has given us no water this year” suggests a drought and barren land. Smith underlies this with imagery of connections, and potential sexual relations, between the narrator and other men as a form of survival, in which the narrator claims to have started “seeking men to wet the harvest”. The following passage is, I believe, crucial to my reading of Oakland as potentially re-imagined:

Come, tonight I declare we must move
instead of pray. Tonight, east of here,
two boys, one dressed in what could be blood
& one dressed in what could be blood  
before the wound, meet & mean mug  

& God, tonight, let them dance! Tonight,  
the bullet does not exist. Tonight, the police  
have turned to their God for forgiveness.

The reference to movement instead of prayer reminds me specifically of the calls for prayer on social media in light of “worldwide” (Euro/Western-centric) news\(^{29}\), in which movement symbolises action as opposed to the passivity of prayer (I understand prayer as passive because of my upbringing as Catholic in a “secular” Swedish society; if and when I prayed, it was in solitude and in silence, and it was short-lived). Moreover, movement also alludes to survival: in a kind of premonition, the narrator declares “we must move”, as though they know the outcome of the following altercation. Movement, then, becomes necessary for the survival for these two boys, who, “before the wound”, “meet & mean mug”, that is, argue but avoid a physical altercation. Their “wound” is caused by police, and their condition remains unknown as the narrator calls to god, asking god to let these boys dance, which also stands in contrast to an altercation – in the end, there is the implication of a union in dancing, which is also suggested further into the poem. In this ‘tonight’, the bullet that may or may not have pierced them (“one dressed in what could be blood”) does not exist, and the police, significantly turning to their god (suggesting the multitudes of gods and belief-systems while making a distinction between gods in this particular geo-political context) have recognised their faults and how they’re implicated in upholding white supremacy, and as such, ask for forgiveness. In the temporal and spatial context of “tonight”, “we bury nothing” and have “no need for shovels”; instead, the god they serve is conceptualised as mortal, a god “with a bad hip & a brother in prison”, is conceptualised as “them”, or rather, as “us”. My reading of Oakland here as re-imagined as a place of not only hope, but resistance through hope through biblical imagery, is further cemented in the allusion of god walking amidst these Black boys, or having been one of them – god has also lived their experiences, which is also why I believe that Smith chooses to make

\(^{29}\) I am here referring to calls for prayer in response to attacks throughout Europe, such as #prayforParis, #prayforStockholm and #prayforLondon, for example, hashtags that have been criticised for being selective of the kind of news the world pays attention to. I do not think, however, that Smith is making that reference; public calls for prayers in a U.S. context has been for victims of mass shootings, where people on social media have instead of “thoughts and prayers” called for “policy and change” (Newsbeat 2018).
a distinction between the police’s god and the god in (and of) Oakland, this “sweet black town”. As we move towards the end, the language becomes more urgent and immediate, and the poem almost reads like a prayer, though not passive in any way, and one that solidifies the world the narrator is trying to conjure, their utopia. In this potential site for resistance, for growth, the narrator calls to god to let “wherever two people stand be a reunion / of ancient lights”, which commemorates a kind of unity across time and space, to their ancestors and their knowledges, their “ancient lights” always connected but now, finally, reunited. This recalls Thiong’o’s (1986) assertion to decentre Europe (or rather decentre Anglo-America in this poem), and suggests replacing (white supremacist) Anglo-America with these ancient lights; ancient lights, in this context, makes me think of knowledges and communities prior to the transatlantic slave trade, and that this reunion speaks specifically of remembering. Here, I’m also reminded of language, and resistance seen through the recovering of languages to reimagine a world that names, that brings to light. Thiong’o (1986) writes that the “choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe” (4), which I find not only significant in conceptualising resistance in general, but also in this poem. Smith’s use of naming as a central theme in the two poems I’ve analysed thus far is one such way of using language, of grounding a definition of themselves in relation to their geo-political contexts, of embodying knowledges. It is the possibility of holding the power to define oneself, as I discussed above. The importance of naming is seen in the lines “shouting our names to the stars until we are / the stars” and “I will not give him the name of your newest ghost”, the first line emphasising remembrance, suggesting possibly that by becoming named stars there is also the outset for being remembered; while the latter instead stands in contrast – once you’re named as gone, it’s true, you’re gone (but you are still named). And lastly, the narrator meets with this boy, the boy they would ride their bike to: “but I will say / I made it a whole day, still, no rain / still, I am without exit wound”. Their utopia, the re-imagination of Oakland, is not yet made possible, there was no rain so nothing can yet grow, but the narrator has survived another day – they are not the one with the exit wound. It is the final line that incites hope, however: “& tonight, when we dream, we dream of dancing / in a city slowly becoming ash”. In this line, there are dreams of (re)unity through dancing in a city that has already burned, that is becoming ash, giving way for a site, not of deprivation, as hooks phrased it, but of possibility, of resistance.
ii. Re-existing: we were never gone

In this segment, I am using the term re-existence as conceptualised by Colombian artist and theorist Adolfo Albán-Achinte (2013), as well considering what Madina Tlostanova (2017) calls a “paradigmatic shift from resistance to re-existence” (29). Let me first, however, (in a rather grossly simplified way) outline what Albán-Achinte indicates with re-existence. His theorization is, importantly, grounded in the temporal, as well as the spatial, looking at how the modern/colonial world system enabled the prefix “pre-” to that which wasn’t (/those who weren’t) “modern” or “civilised” as per the white Europeans’ definition. As such, the peoples that came to be identified with this “pre-modern”, the peoples settled on the various continents that were colonized by white Europeans, were thus ontologically fixed to these sites temporally, that is, ontologically fixed as pre-modern (2013, 444). This distinction – the “antes y después”, the before and after modernity – was also made possible, Albán-Achinte writes, through white supremacist ideologies; the distinction between the people who came to define the after, indeed who came to hold the power of defining, lied in the hierarchies based on the social construct of race, conceptualising whiteness as “human” and brownness/blackness as “non-human”. He calls this the “chromatic of power”, which in time, not only endured but transformed, became “sophisticated and perfected the systems of exclusion that they generated”30 (ibid., my translation). As Mendoza (2016) puts it: “Using conquest as proof of their superiority, the conquerors reclassified entire populations in accordance with finely honed hierarchies grounded in religious doctrines, physiognomies, myths about blood and divine mandates to spread the message and means of salvation” (113). Thus, because of the hierarchal categorizations and reclassifications imposed by white colonizers, power was also manifested in the matter of representation. It is this representation (the outset of the exclusionary practices that I have discussed in this thesis thus far) that needs disruption, intertwined with other categorisations of identities. Again, to recall systems of representations as constituted by

30 “En el antes quedaron ubicados todos aquellos que fueron determinados como ‘otros’ y atrapados desde entonces hasta hoy, es decir, atrapados en un tiempo inmóvil que los dejó por fuera de la historia; en este sentido se construyó lo pre, un impresionante prefijo definitivo de lo anterior a la modernidad. En el después se ubicaron quienes organizaron la estructura de nuestras sociedades, desestructurando sus cosmogonías, formas productivas, sistemas alimentarios, maneras de representarse y organizarse, para imponer una lógica de existencia sobre la base de la jerarquía que el color de la piel de forma piramidal estructuró. Quizá podríamos hablar de una cromática del poder que ha perdurado en el tiempo, transformándose, sofisticándose y sutilizando el sistema de exclusión que generó” (Albán-Achinte 2013, 444).
language, I want to evoke Thiong’o (1986) who writes that language had “suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning”, asserting that language (“through images and symbols”) holds power to understand and view the world (11). This is why language also is policed\textsuperscript{31}: consider for example the stigmatisation of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) as synonymous with “uneducated” in a U.S. context, and how this, according to writer Jae Nichelle (2018), holds Black people “back from liberation”. This is why re-existence is significant. It is, on one hand, a matter of “different histories and trajectories that have historically suffered from being inferiorised and disqualified, such as indigenous and afro-descendants who, in the modern/colonial project, have been silenced and relegated, […] to reaffirm their positions within their societies”\textsuperscript{32} and on the other, to actively centre and confront the hegemonic discourses that devalue these trajectories (Albán-Achinte 2013, 44, my translation). Albán-Achinte conceptualises re-existence mainly in relation to indigenous and afro-descendants’ communities; he indicates that re-existence means to reclaim or “search for the keys of organisation, production, nourishment, rituals and aesthetics which make it possible to lead a dignified life and reinvent it in order to keep transforming oneself” (ibid., 455; translated from Spanish to English by Jonna Tinnervall\textsuperscript{33}). This is also where Tlostanova’s

\textsuperscript{31} My own experience with the policing of language is maintained in distinguishing “castellano”, Castilian Spanish, from “chileno”, which is the distinct Chilean dialect/vernacular Spanish that is, according to my mother, filled with slang and foul words. This also creates a distinction, at least in the geo-historical location of Norrköping, Sweden, where many Chileans settled when fleeing the dictatorship (in 1970’s and 1980’s mainly), of “good” and “bad” Chilians. Now, this is not in any way institutional, but rather localised to the Chilean community in Sweden of which I am part. This is thus one way language is not only value-laden but affirms our realities, give us a way to view the world. My mother is convinced that by “talking good”, that is, castellano, she is somehow better, less “improper”.

\textsuperscript{32} “Quizá por estas razones las acciones y productos creadores de pueblos con historias y trayectorias diferentes que sufrieron la acción de la inferiorización y descalificación, como los indígenas y los afrodescendientes en este proyecto moderno/colonial, quedaron silenciadas y relegadas, considerándolas como artesanías o productos para el consumo de los turistas necesitados de exotismo para reafirmar sus lugares de posición dentro de las sociedades” (Albán-Achinte 2013, 447).

\textsuperscript{33} “To me, re-existence is the mechanisms that communities create and develop to make up life on a daily basis, so that they can confront the reality which has been established by the hegemonic project. This project has, since the days of colonization up until today, forced the Afro-descendant communities to inferiority and silence, and has portrayed their existence in a negative way. Re-existence aims at decentralizing the established logics, and in the depths of the cultures – in this case the indigenous and Afro-descendant ones – search for the keys of organization, production, nourishment, rituals and aesthetics which make it possible to lead a dignified life and reinvent it to keep on transforming oneself” (my friend Jonna Tinnervall’s translation).

Original quote: “Concibo la re-existencia como los dispositivos que las comunidades crean y
“paradigmatic shift” (2017, 29) from resistance to re-existence manifests: while resistance combats and disputes oppression, re-existence opens up for ways of living on your own terms, it “creates forms of existing, including forms of sensing, thinking and acting”34 to quote Maldonado-Torres (2017, my translation); it decentres the Eurocentric, the “established logics” (Albán-Achinte 2013, 455, see Jonna Tinnervall’s translation), and the hegemonic discourse, through, for example, writing. It is from this point of departure, then, that I am analysing poem “Home” (2016) by British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, a poem that explores the concept of home and displacement for refugees. It is a significant (and heartfelt) response to the often-thrown-around, racist remark “Go home!”. This poem, however, does not embody the concept of re-existence faultlessly, as it doesn’t create or conceptualise new ways of existing and living; it does, however, shed light on material realities that counter the hegemonic discourse – it actively seeks to decentre a Eurocentric approach to the 2015 refugee crisis, while revealing the hypocrisy with both Euro-centricity and Western hegemonic discourses as were perpetuated by the media, for example. It outlines ways of “sensing, thinking, acting” in a vulnerable position, emphasising the then trajectories of the lives that have been affected on a first-hand basis. Therefore, it considers the vulnerability of refugees, and uses bodies as an underpinning of this experience, the violence they are subjected to, as I will explore in my analysis.

“no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark”.

Shire sets the tone of the backdrop immediately, a place of danger, of violence. Importantly, however, she doesn’t essentialise this place, this home, as inherently violent – home is home, and it can be anywhere. The tone of this poem is therefore more “humanitarian” in its style, to

34 “Es decir, que resistencia no se trata solamente de una cuestión de negar un poder opresor, sino también de crear maneras de existir, lo que incluye formas de sentir, de pensar, y de actuar en un mundo que se va construyendo el mismo a través de variadas insurgencias e irrupciones que buscan constituirlo como un mundo humano” (Maldonado-Torres 2017).
recall Anzaldúa (1981), in that it doesn’t invoke a narrator’s specific location, to the same extent as Danez Smith does with their “Tonight, in Oakland” (2015), for example. Hence, home becomes to an extent a blank canvas, at least initially. This home can also be defined by any pre-possessed information and depends on the geo-political context from which we read. Significantly, however, is that we know this experience not to be universal (as it is not a universal experience); there is thus a kind of limbo, in which the narrator emphatically attempts to shed light on displacement by exploring the experience through the second-person narration and through the use of “no one”, which is recurring throughout the poem, while also responding to a larger, existing discourse that has failed to address this violence in a way that puts the body at the centre of it. Shire conveys the loss of innocence, as replaced with violence: “the boy you went to school with / who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory / is holding a gun bigger than his body / you only leave home / when home won’t let you stay”. Here, innocence is both established through the image of the school and through the act of kissing, of this very intimate moment between two people. Here, two bodies are united, to be, in the next sentence, separated; the act of kissing is replaced with the act of holding this gun, of potential violence, but innocence lingers – after all, the gun is bigger than this boy’s body. “You” is replaced with this gun, and emphasises desperate forms of survival – survival here means a wedge between “you” and him, between “you” and them, between “you” and home.

“you have to understand
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land”.

In one of the poem’s most memorable lines is conjured the 2015 refugee crisis; when the image of Syrian child Alan Kurdi spread like wildfire throughout social media channels and Western media, these three lines of the poem would eventually appear too, as a kind of wake-up call, evoking Alan Kurdi. This is also the first time that the narrator actually manifests and is indicative of addressing a “you” who might not understand, or might not want to understand, who lacks empathy. Upon first look, the apparent second-person narration suggests a kind of distancing between the author and the topic of the poem, but is instead revealed to be addressing people who refuse to understand the implications of this crisis, who are more worried about the (distorted) “fact” that “they” who “smell strange / savage / messed up their own country and now they want / to mess ours up”.


“no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching”.

On the matter of the body, or bodies, which in this part becomes tangible, I want to consider what Mara Lee (2014) calls “the corporeal dilemma”. She writes in her dissertation that “If we write against the body, we risk obliterating our subjectivities and devalue our specific experiences, and if we write with our bodies we risk being imprisoned within our bodies” (ibid., 63, my translation). Lee suggests that temporality is one way to overcome this dilemma, writing that “To return to the repressed body, in writing, in time, but without being reduced to one’s body or forget it altogether, is imperative for everyone to whom letters and flesh are interlocked” (ibid., 67, emphasis in original, my translation). The reason I make this connection here is that Shire never really gets stuck in this dilemma, but continuously returns to a body that senses and acts. As Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) wonders: “How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your kind? […] How do you forget without annihilating?” (28). Shire puts a body/bodies at the centre of this narrative without “bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your kind”, does so without annihilating them as they remain in the centre of this experience, attempting to instead embody the multitudes of subjectivities here, inhibiting many different voices without suggesting the narrative to be autobiographical or universal, and never attempting to “speak for” – as I wrote in the previous paragraph, the narrative is framed in a way that allows the narrator to consider the implications of having to seek refuge, of fleeing home, while addressing the not-so-empathetic West.

“no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry”.

67
This part of the poem reminds me again of the way language is not neutral, and possesses, as Thiong’o (1986) phrases it, a “suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning” (11). What Shire puts into words here is the current hegemonic discourse. Here, she also juxtaposes “home”: the home the racist majority are referring to is “the mouth of a shark” – to many, there might not be a home to return to. The theme of displacement is palpable, and Shire suggests that “no one could stomach it”, yet this is what refugees are greeted with. Like Nayyirah Waheed (2013) writes: “you broke the ocean in / half to be here. / only to meet nothing that wants you” (5). Shire wonders: “how do the words / the dirty looks / roll off your backs / maybe because the blow is softer / than a limb torn off”. This again puts at the centre the narrator’s attempt to actively understand, a narrator that does not take for granted the fact home is intact – the notion that refugees flee to “suck our country dry”, rather than it being a matter of survival. Here is also the multiplicity of voices, and the reference of how words also do damage: while the narrator claims that the words and dirty looks “roll off your backs” because the blow is softer “than a limb torn off”, there is no mention of the “spiritual” violence, the violence on one’s mind. While not a perfect comparison, this does remind me (again) of Thiong’o (1986), who writes: “[I]t was worse when the colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his coloniser” (18). Here, the coloniser imposed these images in the colonial child’s immediate environment – that is, they were not, physically and spatially, displaced. In today’s context, however, refugees are met with this narrative, these images and symbols (“dirty immigrants”, for example) as they seek shelter in the spatial contexts they flee to. But the similarity in both these two distinct geopolitical contexts – that is, Thiong’o’s and the one I’m writing from – lies in how language is still used to subjugate a specific group of people.

“i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore”.

This is where, towards the end, that the narrator reveals her/his/themselves, suggesting their displacement, and as such, putting their body at the centre of this narrative, as much as the multitudes of voices they’re trying to invoke – the “i” is somehow not singular, but emphasises this longing for home as shared by multitudes. As such, there is here the attempt at re-existing:
it becomes a matter of not only establishing a narrative that simply sheds light on the implications of being a refugee, but also of materialising these experiences and their implications. It is an attempt at re-affirming displaced peoples’ positions in their various contexts, reminding readers that there is a cause in being displaced: “no one would leave home / unless home chased you to the shore”. As I move towards the end of my analysis, I also want to note that this experience is, as I mentioned above, not universal, and that the body/bodies that Shire puts at the centre of this narrative is not a “universal body” – that is, a body that experiences displacement in one way that can then be applied to everyone who has experienced displacement. I’ve wanted with this analysis to engage specifically with the concept of re-existing, a concept that not only addresses the fragments of a dissected self but attempts to re-weave them anew in all their complexity, to come out whole, to explore how this narrative seeks to de-centre the established logics and the hegemonic project that reduces, in Albán-Achinte’s case, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in a South American/Colombian geo-political context, and in Shire’s case, displaced peoples and refugees, to “inferiority and silence”, portraying “their existence in a negative way”. To invoke, in its stead, a narrative that attempts to restore basic worth, no longer based on “established logics”, a universalised standard, but on one’s own premises.
Conclusion

I set out to map what I’ve here called exclusionary practices, looking specifically at the implications of the canon; I found the construct of the canon, at its outset, is embedded in a framework that distinguishes the nation-state and invokes a collective imagination that works into defining an “us”. Canons, if not critically and constantly re-evaluated, will neutralise a narrative that is fundamentally grounded in an inclusion/exclusion binary pair, or a macro/micro-narrative – the macro-narrative reflects thus the nation-state and its “rightful” inhabitants, while the micro-narrative becomes a footnote in the former’s constant re-creation of its own nation-building, its perception of ‘self’. With (few) examples from the British literary canon, literary works that are not only firmly embedded in the consolidation of an English national canon but known worldwide as “classics”, I wanted to further investigate the kind of macro-narrative these are complicit in maintaining, feeding into colonialist discourses.

I realised that it is not only a matter of analysing canonised literary works against their own background, but also against ours – a world that is not post-colonial but structured around processes of coloniality – and to always ask: Whose stories have been sacrificed to maintain a macro-narrative of Western civilisation, a narrative of progress, of modernity, of universality? As Albán-Achinte (2013) observes: the macro-narrative of Western civilisation temporally fixed the indigenous communities around the world it sought to destroy in a “pre-modern”, as having been, as having passed, of not belonging in that single story of modernity. This is the kind of narrative that is constantly reproduced, as a result of coloniality, the “long-standing patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism” (Mendoza 2016, 114). Mansfield Park becomes essential in understanding the grounding of capitalist structures, how slave plantations maintained estates in Britain, but it is also essential to put emphasis on how the effects of this exploitation (and the justifications of slave labour as grounded in white supremacy) continue to maintain the hegemony of Western economic power. With Frankenstein, it is important to be critically aware of the “racial science” of the time against a detached universal that posits whiteness as default. Against the backdrop of a growing national awareness, of distinguishing between people, Safie’s character is particularly interesting in relation to the theme of belonging in a European context. I read her character as being white-washed in order to belong; not just white-washed in her complexion, but also culturally. As she had already been introduced to liberal feminist thought (“the emancipation of woman”), remaining in “Asia” was a sickening prospect (Shelley 2012, 86). This is also equally
significant in our contemporary setting, especially if we see this sentiment against islamophobia in the West, and the inability of mainstream/white feminism to conciliate feminisms in Islam, for instance. With *Heart of Darkness*, I wanted to focus on Achebe’s (1977) critique of the harmful stereotypes Conrad perpetuates with his narrative, further enabling a narrative of Western/European superiority against African primitiveness, enabling the “real dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster the world” (21). As such, it is not only a matter of politicising these narratives against their own specific socio-political backdrop, but also our own, critically aware of how they continue to further the dialectic binary pair of us/them, constitutive of the binary pair of self/other.

Moreover, with my analysis of *The Far Cry* (2016), I wanted to exercise the concept of exclusionary practices with this chapter, paying close attention to the systems of representations within its narrative structure that were harmful. I called my reading postcolonial, but it was always informed by an intersectional lens, particularly conscious of the intersections of race/gender/class. My choice to use *The Far Cry* was primarily because of the possibility of analysing it from a dual perspective: while the novel is not an example of a canonised literary work (nor used here as representative of an entire discourse fuelled by practices of exclusion), it is rooted in a specific zeitgeist, conveying the dominant cultural and political discourses of the time. As such, I could consider the implications of a literary work being re-published without addressing these harmful systems of representations that the narrative perpetuates. I did this by delving into the UK publishing industry, looking at different narratives by people of colour in the industry, as well accounts that had carried out statistical data, revealing that 90% of the publishing industry identified as white British (Flood 2018). I wanted to consider accountability in regard to this information and the re-publishing of *The Far Cry*, having asked the following question: how can publishing houses be accountable for the literature they publish and distribute, especially when a novel perpetuates racist language and symbolism, without it becoming a matter of censoring? My reply was that the fore and afterword could critically address this as a way to constitute accountability, and thus change. But as Kumashiro (2000) observed: this would require “a particular kind of labor”, not only in classrooms and academic settings, but also in an industry that continues to tell a single story of humanity. He writes that the “importance of laboring” can “stop repetition and rework history/discourse” (42) into processes that enable change. With my analysis of the novel, I demonstrated that Smith’s narrative is indeed orientalist, as it not only relies on discourses and
institutions that are grounded in a dichotomous distinction of “Occident/Orient”, but also maintains them. This was the foundation that allowed me to analyse the white female characters in the manner that I did, not only as somewhat tragic characters in- and- of- themselves, but as part of “a ‘greater’ project”, to use Spivak’s wording (1985, 248). Smith’s narrative, then, manages to uphold systems of knowledge about the “Orient” in a Western context, partly through her language, what it evokes and symbolises, especially with the frequent allusion to strangeness, otherness, as well as through methods of mystification and exotification present in the narrative through the references to the immensity and incalculability of “the land” (Said 1979, 6). What remains tangible in the narrative is that the India that is conveyed is a creative version, a mere “invention” of Western discourses, regardless of the fact that Smith travelled there and was considered to thus depict India in what was perceived to be “painstaking detail” or as captured vividly – this is further emphasised with the central aspect in the novel of tea- planters, tea- gardens and tea- plantations in the narrative, as it is a direct tie to British colonial and imperial structures. It is indeed “India as experienced by the British”, for the British (audiences). And because India has no agency in this narrative, neither does its peoples – trapped in a system of representations that devalue and silence their embodied knowledges that are either taken for granted or simply ignored; instead, they’re reproduced through imagery/images that disenfranchise them through, at times, dehumanisation and subsequent erasure, remaining a “people of mystery in a land of mystery” not because they’re inherently mysterious, but because of the reluctance to consider them, in a macro- narrative, as anything but.

In the second part of this thesis, I wanted to conceptualise a decolonial project that actively resists the abovementioned practices of exclusion through re- imagining a decolonised literary study, in which we understand literature in its own socio- political contexts as much as in ours, principally informed by an intersectional framework and with a critical and self- reflexive approach to reading. In chapter III, I did not want to exemplify what a decolonised syllabus could be, but rather establish the ways we can use the decolonial option to both criticise and ensure change through the concepts of delinking and border thinking within literary studies. On the one hand, it means to be aware not only of the sites we inhabit – the sites of privilege and of oppression, as these are not always mutually exclusive – but to also be critically mindful of the systems of domination and the epistemological power present in our studies, the way we produce knowledge and regurgitate knowledge. For example, when Olufemi (2017) writes that “Postcolonial writing is not an afterthought; it is British literature”, it recalls the very
emergence of English Literature as a subject in colonial contexts (Batsleer et al. 1985; Viswanathan 1990; Johnson 1996). Decolonising means to therefore disrupt the location of ontological and epistemological power inherent in the concept and premise of “English”, as well as “American”, literature. Following this chapter, I explored two modes of breaking the master-narrative: that of resisting and re-existing. This to illustrate the ways these poems actively decentre Europe/the West by looking into embodied knowledges within those very contexts (as well as outside, as with Shire’s “Home”). I wanted to disrupt the macro-narrative of Western civilisation that I started investigating at the inception of the thesis, and how it informs exclusionary practices. Furthermore, I wrote in the introduction of this chapter that I wanted to engage with narratives that transcend the self – not in an attempt to remove the local or annihilate the “otherness” – but that transcend the temporal and spatial inscription of otherness, that reconfigures the micro into macro, that removes the slash that upholds the binary, that centres the embodied knowledges and transmits them across time and space. Not universally, timeless, but informed by the temporal and spatial. Writing the subject, or theorizing subjectivities through poetry, as anchored in material realities, effectively shifts the narrative from a Western cultural hegemony and resists these processes. I want to clarify that it is not a matter of essentializing this locus of embodied knowledges to peoples in the margins, but that it is a matter of understanding how this applies to a Western majority as well, in order to disrupt the very premise of the universal, and thus of European/Anglo-American cultural hegemony, as they, too, "always speak from a particular location in the power structures” (Grosfoguel 2009, 13). Embodied knowledge production and geopolitics of knowledge moves actively away from the universal, and from discourses embedded in racist/sexist/classist/ageist/ableist/homo- and transphobic societies, thus resisting the erasure/neutralisation embedded in Western cultural hegemony. From this point, it becomes a matter of breaking that master-narrative, shifting focus, de-centring modes of hegemonic discourses, re-centring these stories and their importance – this is also where re-existence becomes significant, in how we conceptualise modes of existing that are not only premised on the Western universal. Here, it became a question of being moved into and out of worlds that defy and disrupt the established logics, the macro-narrative. That offer, not the alternative, but the simultaneous ways of existing.
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Appendix

Poems by Nayyirah Waheed (2013)

the thing you’re most afraid to write.
write that.

— advice to young writers

never trust anyone who says they do not see color.
this means to them, you are invisible.

— is

you broke the ocean in half to be here.
only to meet nothing that wants you.

— immigrant
Tonight, in Oakland by Danez Smith (2015)
(content warning: police brutality)

I did not come here to sing a blues.
Lately, I open my mouth &
out comes marigolds, yellow plums.
I came to make the sky a garden.

Give me rain or give me honey, dear lord.
The sky has given us no water this year.

I ride my bike to a boy, when I get there
what we make will not be beautiful
or love at all, but it will be deserved.
I’ve started seeking men to wet the harvest.

Come, tonight I declare we must move
instead of pray. Tonight, east of here,
two boys, one dressed in what could be blood

& one dressed in what could be blood
before the wound, meet & mean mug

& God, tonight, let them dance! Tonight,
the bullet does not exist. Tonight, the police have turned to their God for forgiveness.
Tonight, we bury nothing, we serve a God

with no need for shovels, we serve a God
with a bad hip & a brother in prison.

Tonight, let every man be his own lord.
Let wherever two people stand be a reunion

of ancient lights. Let’s waste the moon’s marble glow
shouting our names to the stars until we are

the stars. O, precious God! O, sweet black town!
I am drunk & I thirst. When I get to the boy

who lets me practice hunger with him
I will not give him the name of your newest ghost

I will give him my body & what he does with it
is none of my business, but I will say *look,*

*I made it a whole day, still, no rain*
*still, I am without exit wound*

& he will say *Tonight, I want to take you*
*how the police do, unarmed & sudden*

& tonight, when we dream, we dream of dancing
in a city slowly becoming ash.

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**alternate names for black boys by Danez Smith (2014)**

(content warning: police brutality)

1. smoke above the burning bush
2. archnemesis of summer night
3. first son of soil
4. coal awaiting spark & wind
5. guilty until proven dead
6. oil heavy starlight
7. monster until proven ghost
8. gone
9. phoenix who forgets to un-ash
10. going, going, gone
11. gods of shovels & black veils
12. what once passed for kindling
13. fireworks at dawn
14. brilliant, shadow hued coral
15. (I thought to leave this blank
       but who am I to name us nothing?)
16. prayer who learned to bite & sprint
17. a mother’s joy & clutched breath
Home by Warsan Shire (2016)
(content warning: violence, sexual violence, abuse)

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well

your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilets
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences
no one wants to be beaten
pitted

no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough

the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
niggers with their hands out
they smell strange
savage
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks
roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off

or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your [child’s] body
in pieces.
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be [hungry]
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important
no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear
saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i don’t know what i’ve become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here
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Decolonising Literature: Exclusionary Practices and Writing to Resist/Re-Exist

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Abstract
This thesis examines elements of the conceptualization of literature within literary studies and literary production in a UK context, considering the concept of exclusionary practices based on the negligence of intersectional categories of identity such as race, gender, class, sexuality, etc., in the practice of understanding and interpreting literature. The methodologies I employ are close reading of various narratives, such as literary texts, as well as a narrative analysis aimed at a holistic understanding of my material. The second part of this thesis envisions a decolonised approach to literature in which we situate our positionalities when we read and interpret literary works. I demonstrate this through the analysis of several poems, informed by decolonial concepts and sensibilities. The results show that the maintenance of these exclusionary practices advances a grand-narrative of Western civilisation, ignoring the multiple sites people inhabit both from within, and outside, the West and that these practices are effectively harmful. I argue that through the project of decolonising literature there is a possibility of disrupting the perpetual macro-narrative of Western domination and universality.

Keywords
decolonising, literary studies, English literature, American literature, canons, macro-narrative, grand narratives, close reading, narrative analysis, postcolonial theory, decolonial theory, canonisation, Romanticism, othering, nation-state, publishing industry