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**VIOLENCE TOWARDS THE BODY AND DEHUMANISATION IN
SOLOMON NORTHUP'S *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE***

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of slave narratives reveals violence as one of the most common methods of exerting power in colonial societies. In scholarly research, the focus usually tends to be on the violence itself, not on the body it destroys. This thesis analyses how the slave body was targeted through physical violence and deprivation of hygiene as portrayed in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. The thesis consists of four parts: an introduction, a literature review, an empirical analysis of the narrative, and a conclusion.

The introduction discusses the slave narrative as a literary genre and recognises the problems in determining its historical accuracy. It also states the topic of the thesis

The literature review examines the representation of the black slave body and defines the concepts of dehumanisation and body politics.

The empirical part analyses how hygiene and deprivation of violence were used for dehumanisation from the point of view of body politics in *Twelve Years a Slave*.

The conclusion summarises the findings of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

To understand the horrors of slavery in American history, analysing literature can provide valuable insight into the lives of enslaved people. The slave narrative is a literary genre based on the slaves' recorded accounts of their ordeal, written down either by the person themselves or by someone to whom they have narrated their story (Kachun 2014: 21). The slave narrative is distinguishable from (auto)biography by its extremely mixed production: in addition to the narrative itself, it often includes the narrator's personal photographs, illustrations, poetry, and documents. However, the lives of the narrators are almost exclusively discussed only as illustrations of slavery. (Olney 1984: 49-51) The origin of the term has remained unclear to this day: even though a large number of works were produced in the late 19th century, it is believed that the term was first used only in 1913 by W.E.B Du Bois. (Kachun 2014: 22) The significance of the genre was understood even later, in the 1930s, when a reviewer praised Vernon Loggins's *The Negro Author* and proposed that similar works should be regarded as a specific genre (Kachun 2014: 21-22).

The scholars, however, have not always agreed to call it a genre. Many have been critical of the genre as they questioned the narrator's honesty as well as the faithfulness of their memories (Kachun 2014: 23). In his systematic analysis of southern slavery *Life and Labor in the Old South*, American historian Ulrich B. Phillips completely disregarded the experiences of former slaves as ex-slave narratives "were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful" (Phillips 1929: 219). More extensive research on the narrative began only in the 1930s when The Federal Writers Project conducted interviews with thousands of former slaves (Kachun 2014: 22). Before the 1970s, those interviews were largely dismissed as historical evidence: between 1902 and 1972, just three out of sixteen state studies on plantation slavery used former slaves' testimonies as evidence (Blassingame 1975: 473). A

large amount of historical information was based on the observations of former slaveholders, instead (Kachun 2014: 27).

According to Kachun (2014: 30-31), the slave narrative gradually became popular among the general public as historical monographs on slavery began to spread widely. It was also depicted in literature, TV shows, and movies. Alex Haley's book *Roots*, which was published in 1976, and its subsequent TV series started a discussion about slavery's brutality among the society. However, this would only be one of many works based on the slave narrative. The presidency of Barack Obama starting in 2009 was an especially significant period for the slave narrative as it showed that 'outsiders' can reach the status quo (Izzo 2014: 7). This inspired the movie industry, which could be seen in the increased number of cinematic works based on black history and slavery (Kaisary 2017: 94), such as Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (Denby, 2013a) and Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (Scott, 2012). The best-known of such movies, however, is Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, which was the winner of the Academy Award in 2013 (ITV News, 2014).

The success of the movie triggered a more extensive research into the narrative itself. The movie is based on Solomon Northup's 1853 life writing, *Twelve Years a Slave*. As an African American man born free in New York, Northup documents his life after he was kidnapped and sold to slavery from 1841-1853. The book was published before the Civil War, a significant event in the American history which led to the passing of Thirteenth Amendment and the abolishment of slavery in 1865 (Tsesis 2004: 103-104). Before McQueen's movie, there was relatively little research conducted on the narrative. However, after the release of the movie, many of the aspects mentioned in Northup's writing were further explored in studies, such as the suffrage and representation of women (Tillet 2014; Horton 2017; Li 2014), the role of marriage and its relation to civil rights (Williams 2014), or the mediation of history and

movie's accuracy to the book (Ernest 2014; Cobb 2014). Most of the research is limited to one journal, *American Literary History*.

One of the topics that has been under-researched regarding slave narratives, however, is the depiction and meaning of the slave's body as the target of violence. Violence is a common theme in slave narratives that has been represented by many antislavery writers and artists (Ball 2016: 178), however there has not been enough research elaborating on the relationship between violence, body politics, and social attitudes. The focus has usually been on the violence itself, not the forms of violence on the body it targets or the social implications behind it. The aim of this thesis is to discuss the representation of the slave body as the site of politics in the colonial world through Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. I propose that the body was targeted through physical violence to dehumanise the slave, which was necessary for exertion of disciplinary power and biopower. Disciplinary power targets the activities of the body to make it more obedient and useful (Hoffman 2011: 28), whereas biopower targets mechanisms that allow life, such as bodily care, food, and dwelling (Taylor 2011: 43).

In the first chapter of the thesis, I will discuss the importance of the body based on Foucault's principles of body politics and define the concepts of violence and dehumanisation as well as the role of hygiene in the process of dehumanisation. In the second chapter, I will examine the scenes of Solomon Northup's novel *Twelve Years a Slave* to see how the concepts of hygiene and violence are interconnected and analyse their implications in this slave narrative from the point of view of cultural superiority.

1. PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, HYGIENE AND DEHUMANISATION IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVE

1.1 Representation of the black body

To explore the reasons why the slave's body became the target of violence to the master, it is necessary to discuss how black (slave) bodies were represented in colonial societies. Henderson (2002: 20) discusses how the polarisation of white and black bodies led to the formation of negative social attitudes about African Americans. Because of their darker skin, African Americans were considered as deformed savages. This discrimination contributed to the gradual shift from 'societies with slaves' to 'slave societies' as white people began to see African Americans as the inferior race that are only good for labour. The spread of such racist biases created a landscape of hatred against people with dark skin. (Henderson 2002: 20-23)

Smith (2011: 114) states that American colonialists believed black slaves were subhuman and compared them to beasts or soulless animals. Some people justified their beliefs on religious grounds: they referred to 'son of Ham' and 'curse of Noah' theories, which saw African Americans as the descendants of Ham, who were condemned to subhumanity due to Noah's curse. In the 19th century, a new polygenist mind-set defined black people as a lower species in comparison to white people. (Smith 2011: 116-120) Godwyn (2003: 3 in Smith 2016: 421) makes an even bolder statement: black people carry "some resemblance to Manhood, yet are indeed no Men".

Whereas Jacoby (1994: 92) recognises the resonance between the conditions of domestic animals and slaves: both animals and slaves were punished by similar tactics (whipping, chaining, castration, etc.) and were subject to the master's control, Bradley (2000: 111) deems it the animalisation of the slave by stating that the slaves were seen as "human, but animal-like, property". Furthermore, according to Jacoby (1994: 95) for American colonialists

slavery was for people the same as domestication to animals and that without their masters, slaves would become extinct.

1.2 Body politics, violence, and dehumanisation

The previous descriptions of how black bodies were treated as soulless beasts and domestic animals illustrate how the body is more than just a physical entity, it is rather a site of body politics. The term *body politics* refers to “the practices through which powers of society regulate the human body as well as the struggles over the degree of individual and social control of the body” (ERR, 2022). In colonial societies, the representation of the slaves’ black bodies came to symbolize a conflict of supremacy between white and black people and the struggle of individual control among African Americans.

However, the slaves’ black bodies were also a site of power. Hoffman (2011: 28) elaborates on Foucault’s concept of ‘disciplinary power’ which targets and controls the activities of the body in order to make it more obedient and useful. The body essentially becomes silenced as it loses its ability to show resistance. Another type of power mentioned by Foucault (2003: 240-241) is biopower, which is the “right to make live or to let die”. Biopower is not related with the right of taking life, but more concerned with mechanisms that allow life, such as the care of the body, hygiene, education, and dwelling (Taylor 2011: 43). Both the concepts of disciplinary power and biopower are appropriate to describe the power types used by slave masters in colonial societies.

According to Lynch (2011: 24), resistance is a key component of power exertion in social interactions as power relations would not exist without their interplay. This could also be observed in slave economy as there was a power conflict between white slave owners and black slaves. Sidbury (2011: 213) mentions how slave owners would assert their dominance mainly by using physical violence: they would torture, rape, publicly humiliate, and, in extreme

cases, even decapitate their slaves. However, slaves would occasionally fight back or opt to engage in more safer forms of resistance, such as running away (Sidbury 2011: 204). This fact reveals that in order to suffocate their resistance and make them more obedient, slave owners targeted the slaves' bodies to dehumanise them. Dehumanisation is a process "by which one person or group views others as not worthy of humane treatment" (ESTE, 2022). Haslam (2014: 36-37) mentions the two possible core approaches of dehumanisation, which target different dimensions of humanness: animalistic dehumanisation and mechanistic dehumanisation.

Animalistic dehumanisation divests a person from uniquely human traits such as rationality, morality, civility, and maturity, and is often applied to ethnic and racial outgroups. This approach may motivate and justify the use of violence: as the subjects are perceived to lack qualities that distinguish people from animals, they are seen as animal-like (Hetey and Ebelhardt 2014: 147-148). The comparison between slaves and domestic animals mentioned by Jacoby (1994: 92) appropriately illustrates the consistent theme of animalistic dehumanisation, which is comparing its consistent people to animals. Animalistic dehumanisation is often related to humiliation and degradation, which usually has a prominent bodily component, such as people being stripped of clothes or access to personal hygiene. This is because people tend to associate disgusting appearances with animal nature. (Haslam 2006: 258) Whereas mechanistic dehumanisation diverts a person from traits of human nature, such as emotional depth, cognitive openness, and agency, and transforms them into instruments. If a person's human nature is denied, they begin to appear rigid and passive, almost mechanical. (Haslam 2006: 257-258).

Based on Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, it can be argued that slaves were subject to both animalistic and mechanistic dehumanisation. Slaves were "looked upon merely as a valuable and handsome animal" (Northup 1853: 259) who were supposed to be resilient and hard-working for their master's benefit. However, as could be seen from Northup's

description of the slave market in Chapter 6, they were also seen as commodities that could be sold. Both forms of dehumanisation targeted the body through physical violence as a method of exerting disciplinary power and biopower.

1.3 The role of hygiene in dehumanisation

As previously mentioned, biopower targets mechanisms that allow life (Foucault 2003: 240-241). One of such mechanisms is hygiene, which is a practice that has been related to lifestyle, cleanness, medicine and, most importantly, health (Anderson 2008). Hygiene plays an important role in stopping the spread of diseases and increasing the chance of survival. People who clean themselves regularly and live in hygienic conditions are less likely to come into contact with harmful bacteria that could cause serious illness.

In colonial societies, however, access to hygiene among slaves was insufficient. This played a great role in the deterioration of their health. The issue has been discussed by Herschthal (2021: 2), who proposes that during the long raids to their captivity, slaves were more likely to catch diseases. They were often contained in tight and unhygienic dungeons for weeks, which were a breeding ground for bacteria. The conditions were similar in slave ships: the slaves were unable to wash or go to the toilet, which led to sweat, urine, and feces soaking the floors. Living in such filthy conditions contributed to the outbreak of diseases such as smallpox, dysentery, lice, and scurvy. (Herschthal 2021: 2) Unhygienic conditions could also be observed in slave quarters, where options for personal (bathing, hair washing) and environmental hygiene (changing bed sheets, washing clothes) were scarce. The water supplies and food were often contaminated with slaves' feces due to poor waste handling, which led to the spread of bacterial diseases and parasites. (Byrd and Clayton 2000: 225)

Because of the illnesses caused by poor personal and environmental hygiene, slaves would often be in need of medical help. However, Byrd and Clayton (2000: 225) acknowledge

that the public health situation of African Americans in the early-mid 19th century was poor. The society followed the 'survival of the fittest' mind-set which contributed to an ineffective health care system (Byrd and Clayton 2000: 254-255). African Americans received poor medical care in municipal hospitals, where the facilities were primitive and unhygienic. The patients often had to take care of janitorial and nursing tasks themselves. (Byrd and Clayton 2000: 263-264) As hygiene and proper medical help are necessary to stay healthy, they are essential for life.

In addition to hygiene being closely linked to health and survival, it is also connected to social values and power relations. McClintock (1995: 208), for example, conceptualises hygiene, specifically the use of soap, as the cornerstone of (commodity) racism in Victorian society. She recognises soap as one of the most important symbols of hygiene and thus also a sign of civilization which was used to justify racism and Great Britain's superiority over the colonial subject. Soap, through its advertisements and packaging, was embodying all emergent middle-class values, such as monogamy, Christianity, class control, and imperial civilising mission. According to McClintock (1995: 214), soap (starting with Pear's Soap) was also used as an important symbol for racial progress as it was presented as if it could wash off or lessen racial and class stigma. Soap was the perfect commodity to represent racial hygiene and imperial progress as it was both cheap and portable and reached the most intimate areas of domestic life – the bathroom (McClintock 1995: 209). Similar ideas are discussed by Berthold (2010: 2) who adds that in the early United States, whiteness was associated with high class, civility and purity. Clean and white people were believed to not carry any physical or mental marks of pollution while dirtiness was associated with impure behaviour. (Berthold 2010: 10-11) Zimring (2015: 6) further elaborates on this association by mentioning that in the 18th-19th century, skin colour became a marker of purity or pollution and embodied the boundaries between freedom and slavery in the United States.

Hygiene is, therefore, an important practice for ensuring good health and survival. Based on McClintock's theory on hygiene's relation to social values, it can further be argued that it served a decivilising purpose, as well. It appears that in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, slave masters deliberately deprived their slaves of hygiene to exert biopower. As hygiene is a mechanism that allows life, masters provided insufficient access to hygiene to show dominance, reminding the slaves that they have control over their survival. Without proper access to hygiene, black slaves would appear polluted and impure as they were unable to wash off racial stigma. This would instil in them the belief that they were not worthy of being a member of the civilised society.

2. PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, HYGIENE AND DEHUMANISATION IN SOLOMON NORTHUP'S *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE*

Twelve Years a Slave is a slave narrative written by Solomon Northup in 1853. The book documents the story of Northup, who was a free-born African American working as a carpenter from Saratoga Springs, New York. He was kidnapped and sold to slavery in 1841 after he was offered a job as a violinist in Washington. He spent 12 years in slavery from 1841-1853. Despite being born as a free man, Northup's heritage was closely related to slavery as his father was a freed slave who once belonged to the Northup family. Thanks to his father who was "a man respected for his industry and integrity" (Northup 1853: 19), Northup and his older brother were able to receive proper education, which allowed them to thrive as free citizens in a society dominated by white people.

Northup's first-person narrative is divided into 22 chapters which describe the events leading to Northup's captivity, the years of slavery, and his release from captivity in past tense. Northup, who had previously not experienced any racial prejudice or conflict with white people before, focuses on illustrating the inhuman slave treatment by providing details about the slave market, poor living conditions, and, most of all – violence. At the beginning of his narrative, Northup states that his goal is "to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it to others to determine, whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage" (Northup 1853: 5).

This statement raises a question common to the slave narrative – whether it should be read it as literature or as history. Winks (1985: 112) argues that a person's account of their turbulent past is always suspect and the authors of slave narratives "were bound at least to be intent upon self-explanation if not self-serving". Olney (1984: 48) adds that to provide a truthful account of the past, the narrator must exercise neutral memory and retain from creative

memory, meaning that his narrative remains largely episodic and lacks the “configurational dimension”. Based on Winks’s and Olney’s viewpoints, it appears that *Twelve Years a Slave* should be classified as a fictional narrative of history. This statement is further supported by the book’s editor David Wilson, who says that even though he believes Northup has been truthful in his account, it also contains information which rests solely upon Northup’s assumptions (Northup 1853: 15). Therefore, it can be argued that despite Northup’s attempts to describe slavery accurately, the narrative nevertheless remains fictional. This should be considered in the analysis of the novel.

The empirical part of the present thesis focuses on the central object of slavery in *Twelve Years a Slave*, which is the body of a slave. Based on the numerous descriptions of violence and hygiene in the book, the body appears to be the main target of violence. I propose in my reading of Northup that slave masters targeted the slaves’ bodies to exert disciplinary power and biopower. Physical violence and the deprivation of hygiene were tactics that served dehumanising purposes. To support my hypothesis, I will analyse the extracts of the book that portray hygiene and its relation to violence from the point of view of cultural superiority.

2.1 Violence

The central symbol of slavery in *Twelve Years a Slave* is the body of a slave, which remains as the main target of bodily harm. The most frequently used method to exert disciplinary power on slaves is physical violence. Violence is mentioned already in the third chapter of the book, where Northup woke up in an underground slave den and realised he has been imprisoned. Up until that moment, he had been a citizen of New York with the right to freedom. As no one has challenged his status before, Northup’s first instinct was to believe that his captivity must be some sort of an unfortunate mistake. Never experienced slavery firsthand, however, Northup was unable to predict its inhumanity: he naively expected that his capturers will release him

and continued to insist to his capturers that he must be released immediately. He viewed himself as a person with an innate right to freedom that cannot be removed from him.

His capturer, Mr Burch, was enraged by his protest and proceeded to whip him to silence his rebellious spirit. He refused to believe Northup's claims and continued to remind him that he is a slave. For the first time, Northup experienced the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery and was shocked after his protest was forcefully silenced with violence. He continued to insist that he is a free man until his body was in too much pain to speak. After this experience, Northup admitted that "a human face was fearful to me, especially a white one" (p.46). However, although his body was violated ("I was all on fire. My sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!" p. 45), his spirit was not broken yet as he held onto the belief that if he gets access to his papers, he will be released.

Still my spirit was not broken. I indulged the anticipation of escape, and that speedily. It was impossible, I reasoned, that men could be so unjust as to detain me as a slave, when the truth of my case was known. Burch, ascertaining I was no runaway from Georgia, would certainly let me go. (Northup 1853: 47)

This scene describes the first, ultimately failed attempt of dehumanisation as suggested by Haslam (2014) and illustrates the targeting of different domains of humanness. It can be argued that Burch had moved Northup's rationality, an uniquely human trait usually denied in animalistic dehumanisation. He did not believe Northup's claims to freedom and even called him "black liar" (p. 43). Using violence, Burch also sought to remove Northup's agency, a trait of human nature that is usually denied in mechanistic dehumanisation. It appears that Burch's main goal was to silence Northup's protest to remove his humanness and kill his spirit. Violence, however, only helped to suffocate Northup's protest for a moment and did not kill his spirit. It could be argued that this scene also portrays the changing power dynamics. Northup began to think of white people as his enemy and realised that they cannot be trusted or argued with. They do not care for his rights and freedom and declaring it would only lead to a renewed whipping. The papers proving Northup's freedom were stolen from him, meaning

that he had no proof that would save him from captivity. He recognised that in order to survive long enough to make his escape, he must keep a low profile and deny his citizen status. Even though Northup used to share a quality of freedom with white people, he realised that he has now become inferior to them.

Based on the previous example, it becomes apparent that subduing to dehumanisation allowed slaves to survive. They began to understand that rebellion would lead to more violence, which in turn would lead to injury and consequently death. They realised that while they are waiting for the right opportunity to make their escape, they must keep their head low and be submissive to their masters. However, subduing to dehumanisation also contributed to them becoming submissive animals that could be sold, which appears to be the ultimate goal of violence in the book. Slave masters were searching for bodies that would be commodities serving the demands of the colonial labour market. Such profit-oriented mindset, characteristic to mechanistic dehumanisation (Haslam 2006) can be seen in Chapter 6 that describes the operation of the slave market. Northup recalls how buyers were choosing their slaves by their physical attributes and talents, examining them in a way that “a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for a purchase” (p.80). He also mentions how human qualities hurt a slave’s sale: “Sometimes a man or a woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave’s back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale” (p.80). This reveals how the buyers focused on the slaves’ physical, animal-like attributes, which is characteristic to animalistic dehumanisation (Haslam 2014: 36-37).

As slave masters were profit-oriented, they expected their animals to have broken spirits but resilient bodies that work hard. Due to their racist mindset of white supremacy, they wholeheartedly believed that the destiny of a black slave is to serve their white master.

He looked upon the black man simply as an animal, differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and, therefore, the more valuable.

To work like his father's mules – to be whipped and kicked and scourged through life – to address the white man with hat in hand, and eyes bend servilely on the earth, in his mind, was the natural and proper destiny of the slave. (Northup 1853: 261-262)

After the slaves were sold to their owners, masters had to continuously use violence to guarantee their efficiency. This is best illustrated through the character of Master Epps, who was also known as a “nigger breaker” (p.188) for his cruel and violent behaviour. During cotton-picking season, he expected each slave to pick at least 200 pounds of cotton every day. If a slave was not able to meet this quota or make even the smallest mistake, such as breaking a branch off the plant or leaving some cotton unpicked, they would be punished: “It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time, on Epps’ plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton-picking season.” (p.179) This once again describes both the profit-oriented mindset of slave masters and mechanistic dehumanisation. Seeing the slaves as subhuman commodities, it was very easy for masters to disregard their basic human nature.

Similarly to machines that function without outside assistance, slave owners expected that their slaves’ productivity remains the same regardless of their needs. Any attempt to complain or make a negative comment about work was forcefully suffocated. Northup describes how he was tired from cotton-picking and dreamt about working for a tanner instead. Unfortunately, Master Epps happened to overhear this comment. Seeing Northup as a machine for labour or a mere object, Epps attacked him when he tried to exercise a human quality – agency.

How do you like *tanning*?” he exclaimed, as the rawhide descended upon my flesh. “How do you like *tanning*?” he repeated at every blow. In this manner he gave me twenty or thirty lashes, incessantly giving utterance to the word “tanning”, in one form of expression or another. When sufficiently “tanned”, he allowed me to arise, and with a half-malicious laugh assured me, if I still fancied the business, he would give me further instruction in it whenever I desired. (Northup 1853: 252)

The analysis of the scenes involving violence in *Twelve Years a Slave* reveals that violence was used as a method to exert biopower and disciplinary power over slaves. According to Northup,

slave salesmen and masters view African Americans as subhuman, which meant that they were often compared to animals and machines/objects. They were considered unworthy of humane treatment and their bodies were violated through whippings, which illustrates the process of dehumanisation. The end goal of slave salesmen and masters is to transform slaves into commodities, into useful domestic animals that could be easily dominated and would serve the demands of the colonial labour market. It can be argued that slave masters were ultimately successful in achieving this goal. Upon his release to freedom thanks to his friendship with Mr Bass, Northup left the plantation only to see how other slaves are left behind, unaccounted for. This reveals how the slaves' sense of agency was successfully suffocated by violence, leaving their fate dependent on the assistance of other people.

2.2 Hygiene

Besides physical violence, another method used by masters to dehumanise their slaves can be said to be deprivation of hygiene, which they used to exert what is called biopower. Biopower is related to the mechanisms of the body that allow life (Foucault 2003). It is important to mention here that in case of *Twelve Years a Slave*, 'hygiene' is a broad term which stands not only for washing of the body, but also for other necessary components that maintain the body. It is possible to identify two components of hygiene in the book: environmental hygiene (living conditions, food) and personal hygiene.

The first component of hygiene frequently mentioned by Northup is poor environmental hygiene, which is illustrated through tough living conditions. He describes how he was confined in an underground slave den full of "damp, mouldy odors" (p. 40). The room had barely any furniture except a "wooden bench on which I sat" and "an old-fashioned, dirty stove box" (p. 41). He was forced to sleep on hardwood floors without a blanket. Only later did he receive a coarse, uncomfortable blanket. "such as are used upon horses" (p. 49), which would

be his only bedding for the next 12 years. It was enough to keep him from freezing to death but did not provide any comfort. Northup compares the slaves' living conditions to "a farmer's barnyard" which was constructed in a way that "the outside world could never see the human cattle that were hearded there" (p.42).

Northup's description of the slaves' living conditions and the comparison of humans to cattles reveals how animalistic dehumanisation manifested itself in the colonial world. Slaves received blankets originally meant for horses, illustrating how they were considered domestic animals themselves. It also portrays how the slaves were given the bare minimum for survival: enough to keep them alive, but too little to make them feel comfortable. A similar approach could be seen in slave plantations, where the conditions were equally poor. Northup describes the log cabin in Epps's plantation as "comfortless and extremely disagreeable" because it did not have any flooring and the crevices between the logs allowed rain and wind to enter the room (p.170). The only way that a slave could provide themselves with some luxury was through working as they were allowed to retain the compensation they obtained for services performed on Sundays, which made them even more dependent and obedient to their master:

When a slave, purchased, or kidnapped in the North, is transported to a cabin on Bayou Boeuf, he is furnished with neither knife, nor fork, nor dish, nor kettle, nor any other thing in the shape of crockery, or furniture of any nature of description. He is furnished with a blanket before he reaches there, and wrapping that around him, he can either stand up, or lie down upon the ground, or on a board, if his master has no use for it. (Northup 1853: 195)

Poor environmental hygiene could also be observed in the distribution of food. Each slave received a weekly allowance consisting of three and a half pounds of bacon and "corn enough to make a peck of meal" (p.168). Tea, coffee, sugar, and salt were commodities not allowed for the slaves, as well as vegetables, which were only cultivated for the master and his family (pp. 168-174). Bacon was often infected due to poor preservation: "In so warm a climate it is difficult to preserve it, and very many times myself and my companions have received our weekly allowance of three pounds and a half, when it was full of these disgusting vermin"

(p.173). Food was only the source of energy that would keep the slaves alive and active, not a source of pleasure. At times, actual domestic animals would receive better food than the slaves:

Master Epps' hogs were fed on *shelled* corn - it was thrown out to his "niggers" in the ear. The former, he thought, would fatten faster by shelling, and soaking it in the water - the latter, perhaps, if treated in the same manner, might grow too fat to labor. (Northup 1853: 169)

Based on this quote, it can be argued that slaves were seen even worse than animals. Masters believed that slaves are mere animals only meant for work, which is why they would only provide them with enough food for survival to ensure they would not get too comfortable and lazy.

The third component of hygiene was personal hygiene, which is mentioned less often in the book, mostly in relation to appearance. However, Northup describes one instance which vividly portrays the relation between insufficient access to hygiene and violence. He recalls how one of Master Epps' most hard-working and profitable slaves, Patsey, gets whipped after getting soap from a neighbouring plantation. As Epps' favourite, Patsey became a subject of her master's (unwanted) attention and was forced into a sexual relationship with him. Understandably, Mrs. Epps did not like the nature of their relationship and tried to secretly end Patsey's life numerous times.

Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see her suffer, and more than once, when Epps had refused to sell her, had she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp. (Northup 1852: 189)

Mrs. Epps tried to sabotage their relationship by not giving Patsey any soap. Northup describes how Patsey went to a neighbouring plantation to get some soap, which caused her to be missing for a while. Master Epps considered it disobedience and punished her with over fifty stripes. The extremity of the violence formed numerous lacerations on Patsey: "She was terribly lacerated – I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed" (p.257). Even though Patsey was actually an innocent victim that was sabotaged into disobedience by Mrs. Epps, Master Epps still punished her.

This scene reveals how poor personal relationships within the plantation can contribute to the insufficient access of hygiene as well as how deprivation of hygiene can lead to more violence. Mrs Epps was jealous of Patsey's relationship with Master Epps and blamed her for enticing her husband, even though Patsey did not even consent to this relationship. Nevertheless, Mrs Epps decided to punish and shame Patsey by not giving her soap. It can be argued that McClintock's (1995) theory about soap's ability to wash off shame and stigma could apply here: by not allowing Patsey to wash her body and clothes with soap, Mrs Epps removed her ability to wash off her racial stigma. Besides that, dirtiness is also related to animalistic dehumanisation as it is thought that only animals are physically dirty (Haslam 2006).

Northup also mentions personal hygiene in relation to appearance. The importance of being clean and looking good is most frequently mentioned before market days. This fact shows the status of the slaves as a mere commodity, which describes the process of mechanistic dehumanisation. Before the clients' arrival, the slaves were expected to make themselves look good to appear as an attractive purchase to potential buyers: "Freeman charged us to remember our places; exhorted us to appear smart and lively, – sometimes threatening, and again, holding out various inducements. During the day he exercised us in the art of "looking smart", and of moving to our places with exact precision" (p.79). Northup describes how men and women were expected to look like:

In the first place we were required to wash thoroughly, and those with beards, to shave. We were then furnished with a new suit each, cheap, but clean. The men had hat, coat, pants and shoes; the women frocks of calico, and handkerchiefs to bind about their heads. (Northup 1853: 78)

This illustrates the importance of a commercially viable body: in order to attract buyers, the slave had to stand out for their physical attributes.

Insufficient hygiene in plantations contributed to the spread of illnesses that are directly connected to the threat to the body. During their sea journey to New Orleans, Northup describes

the poor conditions that led to an outbreak of small-pox among slaves. He mentions how they were all kept in a holding room full of boxes and barrels and were forced to lay wherever they could stretch out their blankets. The boat was “overtaken with a violent storm” and caused many to vomit from sea sickness, which made their room “loathsome and disgusting” (p. 68). Living in these unsanitary conditions started an outbreak of small-pox among slaves and Northup was even close to death (pp. 82-83). Slaves did eventually receive medical help, however it was not because the masters were concerned of their condition but rather because they could not allow the financial loss from losing an ‘animal’ (p.177).

Based on the aforementioned descriptions of physical violence which targeted the body to suffocate the spirit, it could be argued that depriving slaves from environmental and personal hygiene served similar purposes. Proper hygiene is paramount to recover from the wounds of abuse or remain physically healthy. As a mechanism that targets the health and survival of the body, removing the options for environmental and personal hygiene could be seen as another type of violence used to exert biopower. Deprivation of hygiene can also carry social implications: being dirty is associated with animal behavior, which further suggests that slaves were compared to animals. It also removes slaves from the civilised world that valued whiteness as a symbol of high class and purity: as dark skin as well as physical dirtiness was associated with impurity and pollution, African Americans were not considered worthy members of society.

CONCLUSION

In colonial societies, violence was one of the most used tactics by slave holders to assert their dominance over African American slaves. Most of the scholarly research conducted on violence, however, has focused on the act itself, rather than on the body it abuses. Because of this research gap, the objective of this thesis was to recognise the body as a site of politics and examine how the slaves' black bodies were targeted through violence and deprivation of hygiene. It was proposed that the slave master's goal of targeting the slave's body in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* was to ultimately transform them into a domestic animal that would serve the needs of the labour market. It was also proposed that the body was abused as it was necessary for the dehumanisation of the slaves, a process which removed their humanness.

The literature review suggested that in colonial societies, the slave's black body was the target for slave holders as it symbolised the conflict of power and supremacy between white people and black people. Due to the differences in their physical attributes and skin tone, African Americans were subject of racial prejudice and were consequently represented poorly among the society. The spread of such opinions contributed to the creation of slave societies as white colonialists began seeing African Americans as the inferior race designed for labour. Society perceived black slaves as animals or soulless beasts that are unworthy of humane treatment, meaning that their humanness was removed. Comparing people with animals and removing their human qualities describes the process of animalistic dehumanisation.

The empirical analysis of this thesis focused on how the bodies of African American slaves were poorly treated in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. The analysis revealed that the slave master's main goal was to turn slaves into commercially useful, profitable bodies that would be active and obedient workers. To ensure that, it was necessary to target their

bodies through violence and deprivation of hygiene to dehumanise them. Dehumanisation ensured that their human qualities, such as agency, self-control, and civility, would be removed. Slaves would then turn into commodities that could be sold on the slave market, which describes mechanistic dehumanisation.

The analysis of *Twelve Years a Slave* further suggested that dehumanisation of the slaves was achieved through the targeting of their bodies. The narrative depicted two ways of harming the body: physical violence and deprivation of hygiene. Violence was mostly the masters' outlet for exerting disciplinary power, a power type related to the attack of the body's activities. Violence was used to suffocate the slave's resistance to their captivity, to motivate them to work harder, as well as to punish them for negative comments about their labour. Viewing slaves as domestic animals made it easier for masters to use violence on them.

Another method of dehumanising the slaves was deprivation of environmental and personal hygiene, which could be seen as an alternative form of violence as it also targets the body. Unlike violence, which was used to exert disciplinary power, deprivation of hygiene was used to exert biopower, a power type concerned with the bodily mechanisms allowing life. This was best portrayed in the descriptions of environmental hygiene (living conditions, food and housing), which was purposefully poor to ensure the productivity of the slaves. As masters' saw slaves as animals whose only purpose is to labour, their living conditions were similar to the ones of animals. Slaves were provided only with as much as strictly necessary for survival; comfort was believed to potentially make them lazy and unprofitable. The importance of personal hygiene was deemed especially important during market times, which portrayed mechanistic dehumanisation: in order to make slaves into attractive commodities, they had to look physically attractive.

The analysis reveals that the poor hygiene in slave plantations made slaves more vulnerable to health problems. Deprivation of hygiene targeted the slaves' survival as it

increased the chance of catching diseases and helped to heal wounds from consistent violence. Furthermore, deprivation of hygiene contributed to animalistic dehumanisation as dirtiness was associated with animal behaviour. It also removed slaves from the civilized world as dark skin was associated with impurity.

Although this thesis analysed how the black slave body was targeted through physical violence and deprivation of hygiene in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, the narrative also contains other methods of targeting the body, such as sexual abuse and emotional violence. These aspects could be further studied in future research.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Tessa Toomsalu

Violence towards the body and dehumanisation in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*
Kehale suunatud vägivald ja dehumanisatsioon Solomon Northupi teoses *Twelve Years a Slave*
Bakalaureusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida, kuidas vägivalda ja hügieeni kasutati orjade keha ründamiseks Solomon Northupi teoses *Twelve Years a Slave*. Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatusest, kirjandusülevaatest, empiirilisest analüüsist ning kokkuvõttest.

Sissejuhatus arutleb orjanarratiivi kui kirjandusliku žanri üle, annab ülevaate Northupi narratiivi olulisusest ning sõnastab töö eesmärgi. Kirjandusülevaade selgitab kehapoliitika ja dehumanisatsiooniga seotud mõisteid ning käsitleb nende seoseid vägivalda ja hügieeniga. Empiirilise analüüsi esimene osa pöörab tähelepanu vägivalda kasutamise põhjustele Northupi teoses. Analüüsi teine osa käsitleb, millist eesmärki täitis ebapiisav hügieen Northupi teoses. Kokkuvõtte sõnastab töö tulemused.

Töö tulemusena selgus, et nii vägivalda kui hügieeni saab kasutada orjade dehumaniseerimiseks. Northupi teoses kasutasid orjapidajad orjade suunas vägivalda, et nende inimlikud omadused kaoks ja et nad muutuksid objektideks – koduloomadeks, kes täidaksid koloniaalse tööturu huvisid. Orjapidajad piirasid hügieeni kättesaadavust kesskonnahügieenile ja isiklikule hügieenile, et orjad oleksid produktiivsed, mitte laisad. Orjade isiklik hügieen oli kättesaadav vaid peamiselt enne turupäevi, et nad oleksid ostjale atraktiivsed.

Märksõnad: Solomon Northup, ameerika kirjandus, orjanarratiiv, kolonialism, orjus, vägivald, hügieen, dehumanisatsioon

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