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Reading Black, Reading Czech: UnravelingtheFigureofthe Czech TragicMulatta

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Abstract

Following Ann DuCille's (2010) call to explore what black feminist theory can offer to its "other,"this paperoffers a blackfeministreadingof*Životopis černobílého jehněte* (2009) by Tomáš Zmeškal, a novel set in communistCzechoslovakia, to demonstrate that such reading not only reveals how communist ideology challenges notions of blackness but also unravels a new African female Diasporic figure—the figure of a Czech tragic mulatta—that exposes a slippage in Czech racial homogeneity and epitomizes the racial anxieties of Czechs. This figure, a reincarnation of Viktorka's [Božena Němcová's fictional character's] drowned baby, points to a line of Czech tragic female fictional characters who dared to love "the dark other," whom the Czech society has, historically, linked with evil. The paper thus points to and makes the first step in a new direction for black (and Czech) feminist literary studies: a search for and an investigation into what happened to Viktorka's drowned baby and its many reincarnations.

Key words: Black feministreading, communist ideology, Czech tragicmulatta, Viktorka, *Životopis černobílého jehněte*

Introduction

Inher 2010 essay"The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory,"AnnDuCilleponders the benefits of the mutual relationship between black feministtheory and literature "which does not immediately or organically invite a reading at once gender wise, race sensitive, and class conscious" (p. 32), i.e., literature which seems far removed from the project of black feminist criticism.Reflecting on the relevance of black feminist criticism in the 21st century[2]and its frequently narrow subject of inquiry, she urgesblack feminist criticstoturn to other literaryterritories to explorewhat black feminist theory can offer to its 'other', i.e., to "that which is not its own" p. (33). Echoing Toni Morrison's call for acritical exploration of 'the Africanist presence' in American literature written by white canonical authors,[3]DuCillejoins the line of black feminist critics who had pushed the textual boundaries of theirfield beyond literature produced by black authors.[4]

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[2] I read the essay as a possible response to the 2006 *PMLA* discussion about the *present* status quo of feminist criticism, which failed to include a black feminist contribution. Instead, it featured an interview with Nellie Y. McKay, recording her memories about the *past*life of black feminist literary criticism: the emergence of black literature in the academy, and the establishment of black women's literature in the canon. See *PMLA*(2006), 121.5,pp. 1678-1741.

[3]Morrison, T. (1992).*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* New York: Vintage. DuCille acknowledges her debt to Morrison explicitly in the text on pp. 32, 40.

[4] Among these critics are, for example, Kim F. Hall, with her 1995 seminal work on blackness in Elizabethan England, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), and Jennifer DeVere Brody, with her 1998 groundbreaking book exploring blackness in Victorian ideology, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press).

In this paper, following the lead of these critics, I want to move beyond the already mined territories of American national literature, Caribbean literature, and/or British literature to offer a black feminist reading of a novel originating in a country rarely associated with blackness—the Czech Republic. Although Czech literature is not readily associated with blackness due to the country's non-involvement in either slavery or colonization and a statistically insignificant number of blacks living in the country, a careful study revealsthat anumber of Czech literary works across all genres—poems, stories, plays, children's books, novellas, and novels—feature black characters.[5]In the vast majority of these works, however, these characters are, predictably, minor and/orforeigners. While it would undoubtedly bea worthwhileproject to explorethe use of these characters, formy own purposes I have chosena novelin which black characters are both center-stage and Czech citizens: *Životopisčernobíléhojehněte* [*The Biography of a Black-and-White Lamb*] (2009) by TomášZmeškal.[6]

Choosing a novel set in the country's communist past, I hope to demonstrate that reading (in) this context can not only challenge notions of blackness (and Czechness)but also unravel a new African female Diasporic figure—the figure of a Czech tragic mulatta—that exposes a slippage in Czech racial homogeneity and epitomizes the racial anxieties of Czechs.[7]

2. Methodology

Although some of the chapters in the novel are inspired by personal experience,Zmeškal maintains that the main storyline,exploring the process of growing-up of two racially-mixed twins, is not autobiographical. As he explains in an interview:

I never had a sister. She was born purely for the purposes of the novel so I could [...] make the novel less overtly autobiographical. [...] I also thought that the story of the sister could be more interesting than that of the brother, and that [idea] was key to the way in which I would approach my own story (Horak, 2010).

The sister'sstory is also central to my black feminist analysis,whichbuilds upon close reading andknowledge of Czech history, culture and literature.

3. Analysis

Six minutes older than her twin brother Václav, Lucie is theoffspring of a Czech mother and a Congolese father. Believing in the lie that her parents died in a car accident, she is raised, together with her brother, by her grandmother Božena, who shields her from thetruth about her parents.It is not until she is nearly fifteen that she learns the family secret, which involves a far more profound tragedy. Soon afterthe twins were born, their fatherhad toleave Czechoslovakia and return to Congo, a country "that wasn't following the right kind of leftist path" (Vaughan, 2012,p. 2).Their mother lost her job, presumably on account of having children with an African, her friends deserted her, and she became subject to racist threats and intimidation. Unable to cope with the situation andto take care of and provide for her children, she suffered a breakdown, ending up in a mental asylum. Lucie's newly acquired knowledge that her mother is aliveproduces in her an instantfeeling of happiness—which, however,does not last long. Visiting her mother in a mental asylum, she is shocked to hear that her mother refuses to accept her, renouncing bothtwins as animal-like monsters whom she fears and from whom she wants to distance herself:

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[5] See, for example,FrantišekGellner's poem "John Sambo" (1919), Benjamin Klička's novella *DivoškaJaja* (1925), Karel Konrád's collection of stories *Rinaldino* (1927) and his story "Dinah" (1928), BohumilHrabal's novel *Obsluhovaljsemanglickéhokrále* (1971),Josef Škvorecký's novel *Příběhinženýralidskýchduší* (1977),Jan Novák's collection of stories*Striptease Chicago* (1983), LadislavDvořák's collection of stories *Šavlemeče* (1986), Iva Procházková's book for children *Jožinjede do Afriky* (2000) and Milan Kozelka's collection of stories *Ponorka* (2001).For this information I am indebted to Iva Málková, Professor of Czech Literature at the University of Ostrava, Ostrava, Czech Republic.

[6]TomášZmeškal is the winner of several literary awards, among them the European Prize for Literature for his debut novel *Milostnýdopisklínovýmpísmem*[*A Love Letter in Cuneiform Script*] (2007). *Životopisčernobíléhojehněte* [*The Biography of a Black-and-White Lamb*] (2009) is his second novel. It has not been translated into English; all subsequent translations are mine.

[7]Thispaperfollows and extends my earlierdiscussionofhowblacknesswasperceived in communistCzechoslovakia in"To Look High, Low, and Beyond: Shifting the Textual Terrain of Black Feminist Literary Criticism," *From Theory to Practice 2013*, 235-244,wheresomeofmyideasappearedoriginally.

Not a mother. Not a mother. I am Zdenička. Zdena.[8] Not a mother. How could I. Look at them. […] Look at me. How could I? Could I? Could I? Could … I give birth to monsters? *Could I give birth to these monsters? It would be like giving birth to lizards, earthworms or boars. Am I a wild swine or a lizard?But I am totally, totally pure white.* And they, they, they resemble their father, my wretched husband, who left me with them, alone, totally alone. […] Leave me alone. I gave birth to you and you now haunt me in the forest of shadows and sins of my youth. Monsters.*Black monsters*, I will run away from you. I will run away and you will never get me. Never. Never! (Zmeškal, 2009, pp. 115-116, emphasis mine)[9]

To help Lucie deal with her pain, Dr. Mikeštries to provide an explanation of her mother's behavior, which he sees as a result of a self-defense mechanism. In his theory, Lucie's mother loved her children but, having internalized ideological hatred toward her husband and, by extension, toward herself, she was forced to give them up:

You know when there's a lot of hatred and evil around someone who is very fragile, like your mother, and this person cannot fight back, in order to protect herself from the pain, *she gives up the most precious thing she owns. She sacrifices what is most precious to her, and that was you.* People kept hurting her so much that by so doing, she tells them: leave me alone, leave me be, *I'll be a good girl.I'll never have anything to do with anyone whom you hate.* (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 119, emphasis mine)

Histheory, shedding *some* light on the behavior of Lucie's mother (as I will discuss further in the paper), does not, however, provide a satisfying explanation as to why the Czech society views Lucie's father in a negative light. Is it because of his being a political enemy? Or does the negative attitude have something to do with his blackness, since his wife is fired *on account of having had children with an African* and is the victim of*racist* threats? Neither does it explainthe specificracist imagery with which Lucie's mother describesher children, projecting her internalized hatred onto them. Yet both issues deserve close scrutiny.

Although without a history of slavery and colonization, and despite the rhetoric of communist ideology thatemphasized the abstract equality of all racesCzechoslovakia was not exempt from absorbing, producing, and disseminating the discourse about "the Dark Continent."Martina Vitáčková's research on the creation of an African discourse in communist Central Europereveals the impact of literature produced by Czech travelers whorecorded their observations in books and journals for the reading public. Analyzing the work of the most esteemed and influential writer and journalist of the communist era, LadislavMikešPařízek, who published 31 books about Africa (most of them, pertinently, about Congo),[10]Vitáčková argues that his writing presented a stereotypical image of Africa, emphasizing its primitive, mystical, exotic, and erotic aspects (2009, p. 176). More importantly, despite his criticism of colonialism and itsexploitation of black people(both of which wereabused by the communist regime for its own purposes),PařízekdepictedAfrica and its people "in a very colonial way as the […] Other, as *he was expected to do by his reading public*" (2009, p. 176, emphasis mine). Thusit can be established that the colonial discourse of "the Dark continent," inextricably linked to the Western scientific discourse intent on proving that people of African descent are naturally less civilized and therefore savage because they are closer to nature, was something with which the readership in communist Czechoslovakia would be familiar.

It is also important to note that folded into the discourse of "the Dark continent" were preexisting notions of blackness, whichhad been part of a framework that European (especially British)colonizers had incorporated into their observations about Africans.[11]

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[8]Zdena is a Czech female name. Zdenička is its diminutive.

[9] The first part of the monologue is addressed to Mrs. Pechrová, a white female guard in the mental asylum, as if Zdena is seeking an affirmation from her. The remaining part of her monologue is addressed to Lucie and Václav.

[10] He was also a prolific lecturer and writer of articles. For a detailed summary of his work, see Martina Vitáčková's2009 article "In Search of adventure: LadislavMikešPařízek, a Czech in the Congo," *TydscriftvirLetterkunde* 46.1, 167-178.

[11]For more detailed information about white attitudes of Englishmen toward Africans see, for example, the first chapter of Winthrop D. Jordan's 1968 seminal book *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro: 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press), or the more recent 1995 publication *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press) by Kim F. Hall.

In this framework, originating in Biblical imagery, white and black are constructedas"opposites of purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, and God and the devil" (Collins, 2004, p. 98), darkness always having negative connotations. Consider, for example, a description of a *dark* soldier from a text that was required reading text in Czech schoolsduring the 1970s and 1980s (the temporal frame of*The Biography of a Black-and-White Lamb*), which clearly articulates the dichotomy, associating darkness with evil:

… *I am afraid of him*. I feel the cold chills creeping over me whenever he is around, and those eyes of his make my head swim. Those eyes, those eyes! Everybody said they meant no good; some said that at night they shone like live coals, and that *those dark eyebrows* which overshadowed them *like raven's wings*, meeting in the middle, were a sure sign that *he possessed the power of "the evil eye."*[…] When he happened to look at one of the village children, the mother hastened to wipe the child's face with a *white* cloth; and when a child became ill, the gossips at once said that the *dark* chasseur had overlooked it. […] Their opinion of him amounted to this: "[…] God only knows where he is from; *perhaps he is not human*; *one feels like signing oneself when he is about and saying: '*God with us and *evil away!*'" (Němcová, 1891, *Grandmother*, pp.85-86)

Traces of this discoursecan be found in the language and imagery used by Lucie's mother. The imagery (black monsters as opposed to pure whiteness) is based on the white/black dichotomy in which whiteness is seen in a positive light, whereas blackness is associated with ugliness and physical abnormality. The Czech word "zrůda", which can be translated as both "monster" and "freak," highlights the aspect of physical deformation or deviation from the norm, and calls to mind the language of nineteenth-century European freak shows, displaying black bodies for entertainment.Moreover, it points to the human inferiority of Africans,further underscored by their association with animals: lizards, earthworms, and wild boars. Although removed from the nineteenth-century scientific discourse of less intelligent, *ape*-like Africans, the choice of the species is also inherently negative, positing Africans as repellent creatures, exhibiting primitive sexuality. Further traces of the colonial discourse can be observed in the sequence of phrases uttered by Lucie's mother: "Could I give birth to these monsters?," "It would be like giving birth to lizards, earthworms or boars,""Am I a wild swine or a lizard?" and "But I am totally, totally pure white." The order of the last two sentences highlightsLucie's mother's belief that whiteness precludesone from being an animal and thus it would be*unnatural*for a white (Czech)woman to give birth to one.[12]Declaring herself white, she thus distances herself from anything black (and deviant).

Western scholars have long pointed out the constructed nature of whiteness vis-à-vis blackness. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison argues that "a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their [whites'] sense of Americanness" (p. 6), while Jennifer DeVere Brody reveals in *Impossible Purities* (1998) that Victorian "Englishness" posited as white, masculine, and pure is only a construct *dependent* on a feminized black figure (p. 7). In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman posits that "the value of blackness resided in its *metaphorical* aptitude […] understood as the imaginative surface upon which […] the nation came to understand [itself]" (p. 7, emphasis mine). In other words, it is in the opposition to black that one becomes white or "totally, totally pure white"—as Lucie's mother describes herself. But why the need to describe herself as white,or "totally, totally pure white" in a country of white people, where the official ideology proclaims equality of all races? In order to answer this question, we must unpack the layered meaning of the words "pure white."

The words "pure white"are a translation of the Czech expression "*čistě*bílá," which, at first sight, indicates no relation to the word "purity" (in a sense of being morally or sexually pure) but rather an absence of contamination by any other color (in a sense of having no stain). Thus the expression can also betranslated as "only white" or "clean white," because the Czech adjective*čistý*,from which the adverb*čistě* is derived, means *clean*. Etymologically, however, the word is also linked to the word*čistota*, which has, according to the leading Czech-English dictionary,[13] four equivalents in English: cleanliness/cleanness, tidiness/neatness, purity, and chastity. While the word "čistě" is used morphologically as an adverb, not as an adjective, thus explicitly privileging the reading of whiteness as stain-free, by the very association with the word *stain*, which translates into Czech as *skvrna*, the expression also invokes moral purity (morální*čistota*) because the Czech expression for someone who is morally pure, i.e., untainted, contains a kin-word po*skvrna* (full expression: bez poskrvrny).

[12]The belief parallels, to large extent, the 19th century Victorian sexual theories which depicted the procreation of white English women with black men as "impossible." For more on this topic, see Brody, J. (1998).*Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture.*Durham: Duke University Press,p. 8.

[13]Fronek, J. (2000).*Velkýčesko-anglickýslovník*.Praha: LEDA, p. 87.

In other words, when referring to herself as"totally, totally pure white," Lucie's mother is referring not only to the color of her skin (a fact underscored by the following sentence, in which she refers to the color of the skin of her husband and her children who resemble their father) but also, metaphorically, to her (moral) purity and (sexual) chastity, which stand in contrast to the "sins of my youth", i.e., her relationship with and pregnancy by"the dark other," mentioned in the next sentence.

In the last decades, feminist scholars have produced an impressive amount of scholarship about the role of women in the construction of nationhood,[14]pointing out how the construction of nationhood involves (and depends on) definitions of masculinity and femininity, placing a high value on female chastity and, simultaneously, nationalistic motherhood. Arguing that nations often figured as women, and women were constructed as bearers of nations, these scholars have demonstrated how thepurity, honor, and vulnerability of one's nation are directly linked to women's chastity, which must be, for that very reason, policed. Lucie's mother's need to describe herself as a pure, moral, chaste woman(or, in Dr. Mikeš's words, a good girl)[15]seems to testify to the power of this ideology, which posits her as a disobeying, sullied *enemy* of the nation, who threatens its purity (i.e., racial homogeneity) by producing offspring with an African. Yet the issue is more complicated, for in the communist Czechoslovakia, therhetoric of nationhood is first and foremost defined by the communist motto "He who is not with us is against us." In other words, the contaminating element is posited in ideological, not racial terms. Why, then, does Lucie's mother express her internalized hatred inspecificallyracial language, using the black/white dichotomy?Let us return to the questionsraised earlier and determinewhy Czechoslovak communist society views Lucie's father in a negative light, and where its negative attitude to him originates, i.e., whether it has do with ideological hatred or with his blackness.

On the one hand, as official documents indicate, the issue is political—Lucie's father is considered an ideological enemy because he comes "not from an allied communist African country but from a country that supported American imperialism" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 288). Therefore, he represents an evil that cannot be tolerated. On the other hand, however, Lucie's mother issubjected to *racist* threats and fired *on account of having had children with an African*, which are examples of behavior that hasto do with race and racial homogeneity. I want to suggest that both attitudes reflect the nation's anxieties: one epitomizes the official ideological anxiety, the other an anxiety of the "common people,"whofear otherness.[16]Both anxieties converge in Lucie's mother's defensive speech, as she employs racial language in distancing herself from a public enemy, or rather, given his absence, from his offspring, who share in his otherness. Denying her own motherhood and the very humanity of her children that she has had with her enemy becomes her strategy for coping with a situation in which sheis punished and subject to harassment because she dared not to *conform*to the (cultural) normin a society whichrequires utter conformism on the part of all of its citizens, automatically considering*anydifference* as inimical and/or ideologically suspicious.

The twins' experiences testify to this fact.Although they pose no ideological threat to communist Czechoslovakia, both Lucie and Václavfeel that they are subject to discriminatory treatment due to their *visible* difference.

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[14] See, for example,Brody, J. D.(1998). *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press; Coly, A. A. (2010). *The Pull of Postcolonial Nationhood: Gender and Migration in Francophone African Literature.*Lanham: Lexington; Hogan, J. (2011).*Gender, Race and National Identity: Nations of Flesh and Blood.* New York: Routledge; and Padilla, Y. M. (2012). *Changing Women, Changing Nation: Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives.*Albany:State University of New York Press.

[15] The fact that Lucie's mother refers to herself as Zdenička (a diminutive of a female name) and makes this reference aftershe has denied her motherhood supports Dr. Mikeš's theory.

[16]It would be easy to assume that the fear of otherness is largely a result of the communist regime's brainwashing, in which any difference was considered suspicious. But, as is evident in the description of a darksoldier from a required reading text in Czech schools (quoted earlier),a fear of otherness (darkness in particular) existed even prior to the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Also, we must take into account that certain negative attitudes toward other nationalities were common among Czechs at the time, as evident in the description of Lucie's grandmother who, viewed by both twins as a symbol of unconditional love,did not trust "any foreigners with whom a Czech person could come into contact and whose country bordered on Czechoslovakia" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 138).

Their blackness poses a challenge in communist Czechoslovakia—notbecause it threatens the country's racial homogeneity (which is, ideologically, irrelevant) but because it represents something for which the abstract, colorblind, communist rhetoric of racial equality, in which race is subsumed under the category of class,[17] does not have appropriate terms. In the absence of language to describe that which was never thought of beyond the stereotype of an exploited American black or under-developed African black (used in political propaganda against capitalism and bourgeois racism), there is no way of dealing with blackness other than making it disappear from the public sphere, where it is too visible—hence Václav's experience of not being able to join the army's music ensemble and Lucie's experience of not being allowed to teach Roma children.The twins' experiences thus expose a discrepancy between the communist official rhetoric and its exclusionary practice of solely embracing countries and individuals willing to follow the communist path, i.e., ideologically *useful* blacks who can be used as token "'representatives of all the colored people in the world' for whom [...] 'the humanists in the socialist camp,' were ready to fight [...] to protect [them] from the evils of capitalist exploitation and racial injustice" (Jařab, 1997, p. 289).Václav summarizes the debilitating and oppressive situation, in which their lives are thwarted by forces they cannot control: "They can always get at us, communists as well as the racist idiots, whenever they want. Here, we are too visible, sis" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 224, emphasis mine).

Interestingly, Zmeškal distinguishes between people's racist attitudes and the communists' inability to deal with blackness that cannot be exploited for the purposes of its internationalist propaganda, suggesting that while the visibility of blackness is the main reason for the discriminatory behavior of Czech officials, these experiences should not be understood as mere instances of racism based on skin color, but rather as instances of discrimination based on conformism to communist ideology, from which many white Czech citizens were not exempt either. As he explains in an interview: "I think it wasn't really racism. I think it was much more this conformism. If anything was ordered by the authorities, people would follow it" (Vaughan, 2012, p. 3).

As in any totalitarian system, people would "obey" orders for fear of punishment, which, in the case of communist Czechoslovakia, could range from intimidation to a loss of a job (or a transfer to a second-rate job), imprisonment and/or brainwashing (sometimes being forced to spy and inform on others). In all of these cases, consequences were far-reaching, having a direct impact on the lives of family members. It is in this context that we can best understand the situation of the twins' mother and her subsequent internalization of the hatred toward her husband (and her children), as well as herdesire to present herself as a good girl deserving acceptance (and seeking protection) from the all-too-powerful communist system. Also, whilst unknown to the twins, this "obeying of orders" is very much at the root of the oppressive forces they cannot control. As becomes clear from the dialogue between two doctors treating Václav's simulated mental illness (his way of escaping the communist system), his case deserves special attention because his medical documentation discloses that his father came "not from an allied communist African country but from a country that supported American imperialism" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 288). And this fact, in the words of one of the doctors, changes Václav's diagnosis "[r]adically, quite radically" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 288).

The tragic element of the lives of both twins is furtherunderscored by the title of the novel—TheBiography of a Black-and-White Lamb—which implies the sacrifice of a person of mixed race origins. In some ways, the image of a black-and-white lamb corresponds to the American stereotype of the tragic mulatto/mulatta—a person who, being neither white nor black, fails to fit in the world.In this light, both Václav and Lucie could be seen as tragic mulattos because,lacking any contact with black people, they do not fit into the racially homogenous, white Czechoslovakia. Yet Zmeškal rewrites the stereotype, unknown to Czechs,by translating it into the metaphor of the lamb, which allows him to explore twoadditional layers to the tragedy. The first layerinvokes the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is said to have died to save humanity, taking upon himself the sins of the world. In the novel, both twins are sacrificed by her parents (their father abandons them and their mother rejects them in order to atone, in a rather twisted way, for her own sin).The second layer links the metaphor with the image of sheep (a lamb being its offspring), who are known for blindly following the crowd, i.e., *conforming*. In this light, the sacrifice of Václav and Lucie is a direct result of their mother's conformist behavior which led her to accept and internalize the society's hatred of her husband.

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[17] In the communist terminology, the meaning of the word *class* differs from the meaning in which it is used by black American feminists (i.e., as a social position, e.g. middle class). In communist ideology, it is understood in terms of two antagonistic groups: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Here I mean that race is subsumed under the category of working class (proletariat).

Yet there is another interpretation to consider,for the title of the novel involves just *one* black-and-white lamb. Given the meaning of the word "biography," that is, the life story of a person written by someone else, and the tragic death of Lucieat the end of the novel, we can assume that the title of the novel refers to her.Let us thus turn our attention to her character and return to the moment of her painful encounter with her mother and the ensuing events.

Unable to cope with her mother's rejection, Lucie's reaction is to run away. She goes missing for two days and then an unknown man brings her home, asleep and muddied. Zmeškal describes the past events in the third person singularin a series of images related by a stranger, as if to ensure a detached point of view: "Boris introduced himself fully and began to talk of the rain and muddy fields. Of a blurry image of a girl, walking in muddy ditches under a thunderstorm, in a dirty, muddy, dress, clinging to her body.Of a girl sitting down on dirty soil, refusing to speak, moonwalking on the road" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 121).WhileVáclavdoes not comprehendhis sister's running around in the rain, finding her behavior foolish, silly, inappropriate and stupid, Czech readers willcome to understand it once they canlink itto another scene in the novel, in which Lucie, several years later, finds herself once again lost, not knowing what to do with herself. The scene takes place on Christmas Eve, when Lucie is, for the first time in her life, totally alone—her grandmother is dead, her brother locked up in a mental asylum, her boyfriend abroad, serving in the army, their relationship in crisis. Wandering aimlessly through the streets, she is described as someone who would appear to potential passers-by as "a suspect suburban exotic African Viktorka" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 289): suspect for the reason of not carrying anything on Christmas Eve (no gifts or cookies), suburban because of her location, exotic because of her foreign beauty, African because of her physical features, and Viktorka because she shows symptoms of Viktorka's behavior.

What does it mean to show symptoms of Viktorka's behavior? Viktorka refers to a character from BoženaNěmcová's novella *Babička*(1855), perhaps the most frequently read book of the Czech nation.[18]Published more than 300 times[19] and a required reading text in all Czech standard schools, the novella is widely known to Czech readers, who will have no trouble interpreting the symbolic meaning of the name and appreciating the deft analogy Zmeškal creates between the Viktorka-type character, Lucie, and her mother.[20] A symbol of tragedy and a thwarted female life, Viktorkais a beautiful young woman, seduced by a strange, foreign man, described as "dark," who takes her away from her home. Abandoned, she returns to her village, where she lives in a forest as a wild woman, speaking to no one. Always seen by a river in her tattered dress, singing a lullaby to her child whom she drowned in a river, she meets a tragic end, killed by a tree struck by lightning. In the end, she is buried with love by those who have never condemned her—a forester,who finds her body and narrates her story, and an old woman called grandmother,who explains her fateto her grandchildren.

At first sight, details of Viktorka's life seem to parallel the life of Lucie's mother, who, like Viktorka, had a love affair with a strange, foreign, dark man who abandoned her. As a result, just like Viktorka, she suffered a mental breakdown and sacrificed her offspring. Yet,despite the obvious similarities, it is Lucie who is referred to asViktorka, and who shows the "Viktorka symptoms": the feeling of being lost, the love of nature, the crazy experience of moonwalking in the rain and a thunderstorm, the inability to talk (all described by Boris), and finally, a tragic death. What are we to make out of this split subject?What isZmeškal attempting to convey by drawing on the figure of a mad Czech woman from the nineteenth century, the time of the birth of the tragic mulatto/mulatta figure?

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[18] This information comes from the official website of the Museum of BoženaNěmcová. See http://www.muzeumbn.cz.

[19]Published more than 300 times in Czech alone, the novella has also been translated into almost 30 other languages. There exist two official English translations of it: *Grandmother* (1891, 1999), translated by FrantiskaGregorova under the name Frances Gregor, and *Granny* (1976) translated by Edith Pargeter. For more information, see, for example, James Partridge's review of Frances Gregor's 1999 translation of *Grandmother* published in *Central Europe Review* 1.7 (1999), accessed at http://www.ce-review.org/99/7/books7_partridge. html, orthe official website of the Museum of BoženaNěmcová, accessed at http://www.muzeumbn.cz/en.

[20] It is my belief that, just as he rewrites the stereotype of the tragic mulatto/a by translating it into the metaphor of the lamb,Zmeškal also signifies the story of Viktorka. To me, there is no coincidence in the fact that Lucie's grandmother is called Božena, just like the author of *Babička*,and that she resembles, in many respects, the wise and kind grandmother in *Babička*. Also, it can be no coincidence that Lucie's grandmother carefully suppresses the fact that her husband, i.e., Lucie's mother's father, came from Italy, just like the dark soldier from *Babička*, who was presumably a Hungarian or an *Italian.*

I want to suggest that it is not incidental that Lucie starts to show the "Viktorka symptoms" as a reaction to the encounter with her mother, for it is during this encounter that Lucie's mother (whose role is, traditionally, not only that of a bearer of the nation but also, and perhaps more importantly, of a bearer and transmitter of the culture and family history) passes onto her, albeit unconsciously, thelegacy of her encounter with "the dark other." The mother/daughter encounter thus serves as the symbolic moment of Lucie's initiation into adulthood: she is initiated into the racial and racist world, which parallels Viktorka's knowledge of the world beyond her village she has gained by following her owndark "other."[21] The legacy, revealed by her mother, involving tragic consequences resulting in abandonment, madness, and sacrificial death, is—justlike in Viktorka's case—part of Lucie's family past, and therefore part of her own self. Accepting it, taking upon herself her mother's burden, Lucie realizes that she is part of the burden: in fact, she is the burden. She is the drowned/sacrificed offspring, a product of the interracialencounter, whose existence wasdoubly annihilated, and who now stands *in flesh*. She is the reincarnation of Viktorka's drowned baby, the thread that binds Viktorka's life to that of Lucie's mother, a figure of a Czech tragic mulattathat reveals a slippage in Czech racial homogeneity and epitomizesthe racial anxieties of Czechs. Through her,Zmeškalestablishes a line of Czech tragic female fictional characterswho dared to love "the dark other," whom the Czech society has, historically, linked with evil,[22]doomingher to death in a world too hostile to her.

While the circumstances under which Lucie dies remain unclear (the readers do not laern whether she commits suicide, which she contemplated, having suffered from depression, or whether her death in a car accident is a result of tragic circumstances), the readers do know that Lucie's life wastragic.Her otherness (and femaleness) denied her genuine subjecthood, making her a victim of objectification and exploitation of her body. Being exotic and female made her desirable in every possible way: sexual, political, economic (dating her, men could demonstrate their anti-regime liberal thinking and enhance their own status), and scientific—as becomes evident upon her death, when her brother is asked to sign papers granting consent to the preservation of her sister's body so it can be used for medical purposes.

In a situation reminiscent of the aforementioned freak shows, Václavis being reassured that Lucie will not be publicly displayed as an attraction, in the manner of Angelo Solimano (a court Moor posthumously displayed in a Viennese museum as a half-naked savage), but preserved for the eyes of Czech medical students only. Lucie's objectification iscomplete when it is disclosed that "Czech science cannot let such a beautiful specimen go [and that] the law allows this to be done [even without Václav's consent]" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 324). The oppressive forces of the communist regime seem to close in upon her just as they wouldhave done in nineteenth-century colonial Europe.Yet with the help of Boris, Václavsteals Lucie's body from the morgue and, resorting to the last, illegal, option of rebellion against the communist system—emigration—he takes it to Bulgaria, to the land of her boyfriend, to bury her in the sea. Thus, just like Viktorka before her, Lucie is buried with much tenderness by those who loved her, returning, just like Viktorka's drowned baby, to the womb of the Mother Ocean—the mother who embraces her with love, never to forsake her.

YetLucie's return to the maternal embrace is not a happy ending. Neither is the ending a happy one for Václav, who is left alone in aforeign land, nor for the Czech readers, who realize that unlike Christ, who took upon himself the sins of the world and died on the cross to save humanity, Lucie, having taken upon herself the sadness of the world, died a futile death. We are not saved, and we do not deserve it. As the foreign priest who recognized in Lucie the unhappiest person in the worldexplains: "When the saddest person in the world appears in our part of the world, we have disappointed our Creator. And this mean[s] that sooner or later, we will, so to speak, experience a loss of hope" (Zmeškal, 2009, p. 312). With Lucie's death and her burial in a foreign land, Czech people experience a loss of hopefor a society free of racial prejudice in which difference can be embraced.

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[21]The fact that she is initiated into adulthood as opposed to womanhood is underscored by two factors. First, Lucie has already been ushered into womanhood by the onset of menstruation. Second, Lucie is *nearly* fifteen, i.e., on the threshold of obtaining the official I.D. that is issued to Czech citizens to indicate that they are legally responsible for their deeds.

[22] "The dark other" may not be necessarily of an African *race*; diabolic darkness can be projected onto him via the discourse founded upon the black/white dichotomy. Viktorka's lover, for example, whose description I quoted in entirety as evidence of the Czechs' knowledge of preexisting notions of blackness, is a dark-skinned European, who is depicted in contrasting terms to whiteness. This depiction is important because he figures as a negative element in Viktorka's life. Although we never learn what happened between him and Viktorka, what his fate was, and whether the drowned baby was indeed his, the all-powerful contrast serves to reinforce the evil part he has to play in the story.

They will have to wait for another Viktorka or Zdena to embrace her dark(ened) child and for someone to rewrite the story of the black-and-white lamb into a story of love. Perhaps in the twenty-first century, the new Viktorka/Zdena will find her own (black feminist) voice to speak boldly of her love for a dark "other"in order to dispel the racial anxieties of Czechs and to make the figure of the Czech tragic mulatta a thing of the country's (communist) past.

4. Conclusion

Reading the Czech novel *Životopisčernobíléhojehněte* through a black feminist lensreveals how communist ideology complicates the reading of both blackness and racial/cultural homogeneity of the country. In doing so, it also unravels a new African female Diasporic figure—the figure of a Czech tragic mulatta—that exposes a slippage in Czech racial homogeneity and epitomizes the racial anxieties of Czechs.This figure, a reincarnation of Viktorka's drowned baby, points to a line of Czech tragic female fictional characters who dared to love "the dark other," whom the Czech society has, historically, linked with evil. As such, it also points to a new direction for black (and Czech) feminist literary studies: a search for and an investigation into what happened to Viktorka's drowned baby and its many reincarnations. This paper hopes to have made the first step in that direction.

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