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Hierarchies of Flesh: Racialised Embodiment on the Thai-Burma Railway in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013)

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*This article reads *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) through the lens of the racialised body, arguing that the labouring on the Thai-Burma railway exposes the unequal valuation of human life under empire. Whilst the novel is often understood as a meditation on white Australian suffering, masculinity, and memory, its most unsettling insight lies in its attention to those who are already marked as marginal within their respective societies before the war begins. Focusing on Darky Gardiner, an Indigenous Australian soldier, and Choi Sang-min, a Korean conscript in the Japanese army, this article traces how the railway intensifies pre-existing hierarchies, rendering certain bodies especially vulnerable to violence and erasure. Through a close reading of Darky's brutal beating and death, this article explores how the body becomes the primary site upon which imperial power is exercised. Darky's destruction is not exceptional but continuous with the racial logics that precede the camp. Choi Sang-min's violence, however, reflects the unstable position of the colonised subject compelled to perform authority through brutality – in many ways, their interactions can be framed as the ultimate violence of colonisation. In foregrounding these intersecting trajectories, the novel reveals war not as simply a rupture, but as an intensification of the structures that render some lives less visible and, ultimately, seen as less human.*

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013) follows Dorrigo Evans, an Australian army doctor and prisoner of war, across the Second World War and its aftermath. The novel centres on Dorrigo's experiences as a prisoner on the Thai-Burma Railway, while its narrative also shifts between his wartime captivity and later life in Australia. Constructed by the Japanese Empire between 1942 and 1943 using forced labour (including that of Allied prisoners of war), the railway brings together soldiers whose experiences of empire are markedly different. Among them are Darky Gardiner, an Indigenous Australian soldier serving in the Australian army, and Choi Sang-min, a Korean conscript serving in the Japanese military. Their eventual confrontation provides the central focus of this article because it brings two histories of colonial subordination into direct contact: Darky serves a settler-colonial nation

that continues to marginalise Indigenous Australians, while Choi exercises military authority within an empire that has colonised his own country.

Recent scholarship has begun to move beyond framing the novel in terms of the ANZAC tradition, masculinity, and psychological consequences of war, instead situating it within the intersecting imperialist histories of the nations represented by Flanagan. Ben Holgate, for example, argues that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* reveals the unstable relationships between British, Australian, and Japanese empires, where Dorrigo “fights in a series of foreign battles effectively on behalf of his country’s former colonizer, Britain”, exposing the complex relationship between Britain and Australia whilst Japanese expansion transforms the regional balance of power (1). Meanwhile, Susan Strehle identifies Darky Gardiner as the novel’s ethical centre and “as Flanagan’s hero”, emphasising his commitment to communal responsibility under extreme conditions (81). Daniel McKay’s discussion of Korean characters in prisoner-of-war narratives is particularly useful for understanding Choi Sang-min, whose position within the Japanese military is complicated by Korea’s status as a Japanese colony (53-54). Taken together, this scholarship demonstrates that the novel cannot be understood solely through a national account of Australian wartime experience. My intervention is to bring these approaches into closer relation through the question of embodiment: what happens when these intersecting histories of empire are experienced through bodies, and how does the novel represent racial hierarchy through physical vulnerability, violence, and memory?

In this article, I use the term ‘racial hierarchy’ to describe the unequal distribution of authority, recognition, vulnerability, and social value according to racialised identities within imperial and settler-colonial systems. The concept is particularly important to the novel because its characters do not enter the railway as socially equivalent subjects who are subsequently divided by wartime circumstances. They carry with them different histories of racialisation and colonial power. John Kane’s account of white Australian racialism is useful here: he observes that white Australians conceived of themselves as belonging to a superior British “race” endowed with qualities considered absent or less developed in other racial groups (122). David Pearson similarly situates Australia within the history of the settler-nation state, emphasising the continuing significance of the ethnic foundations upon which that state was established (7). These arguments provide a historical context for reading Darky’s

position within the Australian military, where formal participation in national service does not erase the racial inequalities attached to Indigenous identity.

This article approaches these intersecting histories of empire through the question of embodiment. Postcolonial theory draws attention to the ways colonial power structures social relations and assigns unequal value to racialised subjects. In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, these hierarchies become particularly visible through the body: through military rank and uniform, physical labour, punishment, injury, and death. Embodiment therefore provides a way of tracing how structures of imperial and settler-colonial power become lived experiences. Darky's position as an Indigenous Australian soldier exposes the contradiction between military service and the continuing inequalities of settler colonialism, while Choi's position as a Korean conscript reveals the subordinate position of a colonised subject within the Japanese military. Reading the two characters together allows this article to examine how these different histories of colonial power meet through the body.

Trauma theory extends this focus from the immediate experience of violence to its aftermath. Irene Visser's account of postcolonial trauma is particularly relevant because it places trauma within the longer history of colonial oppression, while Michael Rothberg's work complicates fixed distinctions between victims and perpetrators. These approaches are important for understanding Choi, whose participation in violence against Darky occurs within a system that also subjects him to racial and imperial domination. Visser and Rothberg also inform this article's final discussion of Dorrigo's memory of Darky, where the effects of violence persist after the body itself has disappeared. Trauma, then, is not a separate theoretical concern, but a means of considering what happens to embodied violence after the moment of its infliction.

The novel's historical setting of the railway makes these questions particularly visible. Forced labour brought together soldiers positioned differently within the competing imperial systems of the Asia-Pacific. White Australian prisoners entered captivity as members of a British settler society whose racial assumptions shaped their relationships with Indigenous Australians. Therefore, as an Indigenous Australian, Darky has the complexity of serving a nation that has dispossessed Indigenous peoples while still demanding their military service. Similarly, Choi occupies another contradictory position. As a Korean conscript, he exercises authority within the Japanese military while remaining a subject of the empire that had

annexed Korea in 1910. The railway therefore provides the setting in which these distinct histories of colonial power come into contact, with the beating and death of Darky being the central example through which the novel makes that convergence bodily visible.

This article consequently focuses on three connected processes: the production of racial hierarchy before captivity, its inscription upon the body through Darky's beating, and its persistence after death through the instability of memory. The first section establishes the different colonial histories carried by Darky and Choi into the camp, showing why their apparent similarity as marginalised soldiers should not obscure the differences between Indigenous dispossession in Australia and Korean subordination within the Japanese Empire. The second examines Darky's beating as the point at which these histories converge, asking how the camp transforms pre-existing racial inequalities into physical violence and how Choi becomes implicated in that violence. The final section considers Dorrigo's inability to remember Darky's face, extending the analysis from bodily injury to historical remembrance. I argue that Flanagan's representation of these characters reveals imperial power as something lived through bodies and relationships; colonial hierarchies determine not only who is vulnerable to violence, but also how that violence is subsequently remembered.

Racialised Bodies Before the Camp

Darky Gardiner's position within the prisoner community is defined by a tension between the authority he acquires through his actions and the limited recognition afforded to him by the institutions around him. As the only Indigenous Australian among the central group of prisoners, Darky enters the railway carrying a racial history that is not erased by military service. Strehle identifies him as the novel's ethical centre, describing his commitment to "communal values that protect human lives under extreme duress" (81). The significance of this ethical authority becomes clearer in the contrast between how Darky is valued by his fellow prisoners and how he is positioned within the structures of military power. He is trusted because he takes responsibility for others, yet his institutional status does not grant him equivalent authority. The novel thus places two forms of value alongside one another: the communal authority Darky earns through care and the formal authority attached to military rank and racial status.

The tension between Darky's communal authority and his institutional position appears through small material details. Before the prisoners are captured, Dorrigo notices that "Darky Gardiner's kitbag seemed only half the size of anyone else's" (Flanagan 35). This detail draws attention to Darky's physical position within a group that otherwise appears to share the same military identity. Although the men wear the same uniform and belong to the same army, their material circumstances are not identical. The undersized kitbag therefore becomes an early indication that military participation does not necessarily produce equality among the soldiers. Darky's body is already marked by difference before the Japanese camp imposes its own racial and military hierarchies, making his later treatment part of a longer history rather than an entirely new experience of inequality.

The novel develops upon Darky's moral authority most clearly through his response to conditions which encourage resignation and self-preservation. He is described as someone who "was always looking for the good thing, no matter how small, and consequently he often found it" (178). The repeated emphasis on his ability to locate something positive within deprivation distinguishes his outlook from the fatalism that increasingly characterises life on the railway. Darky's optimism is not presented as ignorance of suffering; he understands the brutality of the camp but continues to direct his attention towards the people around him. His willingness to share food, assist other prisoners, and support the sick gives his optimism a practical rather than merely psychological dimension. What makes Darky an ethical figure, then, is not simply that he remains hopeful under pressure; but that his response to suffering takes the form of responsibility towards others.

The contrast between Darky's ethical authority and his institutional status becomes particularly clear when he assists Dorrigo in moving medical supplies into the medical tents. Colonel Rexroth calls him "a thief", with Dorrigo countering that "The Black Prince helps me save lives" (47). The opposing descriptions attach different meanings to the same action. Rexroth understands Darky's behaviour through military discipline and the ownership of supplies, while Dorrigo interprets it through the practical demands of keeping men alive. The exchange therefore distinguishes formal authority from the authority Darky acquires through care. Yet Dorrigo's recognition of Darky's value does not alter the institutional hierarchy within which he operates. Darky can be respected by individual prisoners while remaining vulnerable to forms of authority that do not recognise the ethical legitimacy of his actions.

This distinction becomes more significant when Darcy's representation is read alongside Indigenous scholarship on the continuing structures of Australian colonialism. Walter, Kukutai, Henry, and Gonzales argue that analyses of Australian society must recognise its "colonizing foundations", warning that ignoring those foundations produces a "blinkered analysis" of contemporary social relations (9). Their intervention is useful here because Darcy's military service might otherwise be read as evidence that the national community has temporarily overcome the racial divisions of settler society. The novel instead keeps his Indigenous identity significant alongside his status as a soldier. His participation in the Australian military does not remove the colonial history that structures his position within it. Darcy can therefore be incorporated into a national narrative of military service without becoming fully equal within the society that narrative represents.

Choi Sang-min occupies a different but related position within the structures of empire. As a Korean serving in the Japanese military, he exercises authority over the Australian prisoners while remaining subordinate within the imperial system itself. Japan annexed Korea in 1910, after which time Korean political and cultural autonomy was progressively suppressed (Lissington 13). McKay describes Korea under Japanese rule as a colonial "possession" (45); a formulation that is particularly useful for understanding the contradiction at the centre of Choi's position. His military uniform gives him authority over the prisoners, but it does not make him an equal member of the Japanese imperial nation. He is both an agent of imperial power and a subject of that power.

Darcy and Choi therefore occupy comparable but non-equivalent positions within their respective imperial systems. Darcy is an Indigenous Australian serving a settler-colonial nation whose institutions have historically marginalised Indigenous people; Choi is a Korean serving the empire that has colonised his homeland. Their positions should not be collapsed into a single category of colonial victimhood. What connects them is the conditional nature of their authority: neither man is fully equal within the institution whose uniform he wears. The railway brings these different forms of subordination into contact, creating the conditions in which one colonised subject can be made to exercise violence against another. Choi's role in Darcy's beating is therefore not simply a reversal of victim and perpetrator. It is the point at which two different histories of racial and imperial power intersect.

These different histories become materially consequential once the prisoners enter the camp. Darky arrives with a form of authority grounded in communal responsibility but marked by the racial inequalities of Australian society. Choi arrives with formal authority that remains conditional upon his position within the Japanese imperial hierarchy. Their relationship makes visible a central tension of the novel: the camp brings differently positioned subjects together without erasing the histories that have produced their unequal status. The beating of Darky is where that tension becomes physical.

The Beating: Empire Inscribed on Flesh

Darky Gardiner's beating transforms the racial and institutional inequalities established earlier in the novel into bodily violence. Its significance lies partly in the chain of responsibility that precedes it: Darky is punished for the actions of white Australian prisoners who have already challenged his authority before the Japanese guards intervene. The scene therefore brings different structures of power into the same physical encounter. Darky's position within the Australian work party, Japanese military discipline, and Choi Sang-min's subordinate role within that hierarchy all contribute to a punishment ultimately inflicted upon Darky's body. The beating makes embodiment central to the novel's representation of empire because inequalities of authority become consequences of injury, vulnerability, and physical degradation.

The conflict begins when several Australian prisoners, led by Rooster MacNeice, avoid their assigned labour. Darky responds by reminding them, "But you blokes are in my gang today", before asking, "How's it fair on the other blokes?" (Flanagan 254, 255). His choice of words is important. Rather than invoking his rank or demanding obedience, Darky frames the problem through its effect on the other prisoners. The question of what is "fair" turns leadership into a collective obligation: if some men avoid work, others must carry an additional burden. This understanding of authority develops the ethic of care established earlier through Darky's assistance to Dorrigio. His leadership derives from responsibility towards the group rather than the assertion of power over it.

Rooster's response exposes the fragility of this authority. Assuming that Darky will conceal the men's absence, he tells Darky, "You'll cover for us" (255). When Darky refuses,

Rooster dismisses him as “too weak a sergeant to ever say anything” and “Not a leader like the old leaders” (256). The accusation is revealing because Darky has just demonstrated leadership by insisting upon responsibility to the group. Rooster nevertheless interprets his refusal to exercise authority through intimidation as evidence of weakness. His appeal to “the old leaders” places Darky against an established model of military authority associated elsewhere in the novel with figures such as Colonel Rexroth. Read alongside Darky’s position as the only Indigenous Australian within the central prisoner group, this exchange raises a question about whose authority is readily recognised within the supposedly common structure of military service. Darky possesses rank and exercises responsibility, but neither guarantees that the men under his command will recognise him as a legitimate leader. Shared captivity consequently does not produce social equality among the Australian prisoners. The military camp reorganises the men’s circumstances, but it does not erase the assumptions through which authority was recognised before imprisonment. Rooster’s rejection of Darky is significant precisely because it occurs among men whose dependence upon one another might otherwise appear to suspend such distinctions.

The injustice becomes explicit when Darky is punished “for a crime he had not committed” (238). Responsibility for the absent workers is transferred onto the person charged with supervising them, so that the earlier challenge to Darky’s authority produces consequences for his body rather than for the men who refused to work. The phrasing matters because it separates culpability from punishment; Darky does not suffer because the narrative has established his guilt, but because his position makes him responsible for the actions of others. Once the beating begins, this institutional vulnerability becomes physical. His face assumes “a strange look of astonishment each time the guards hit him with their fists or bamboo poles” (284). “Astonishment” recalls the ethical outlook established earlier in the novel. Darky has repeatedly understood survival through fairness and responsibility towards others; the arbitrary violence inflicted upon him operates according to a radically different logic. His expression registers the collision between these two systems of value on the body itself.

The physical transformation of Darky during the beating shows how violence strips away the forms of recognition through which he has previously been understood by the other prisoners. Choi beats him “with a bamboo pole as thick as his arm, as if the prisoner were a particularly filthy carpet”, and by the end of the assault Darky “no longer looked like a man,

but something wrong and unnatural" (285, 295). The comparison with a "filthy carpet" reduces the human body to an object that can be struck repeatedly without reciprocal recognition or obligation. The adjective "filthy" intensifies this degradation by making the object appear to require punishment or cleansing. By the later description, even Darky's recognisable human form has been altered to the extent that he no longer "looked like a man". This sequence gives material form to the unequal valuation of bodies as Darky moves from being a soldier whose authority is contested to a body upon which violence can be repeatedly enacted.

Darky's Indigenous identity gives this bodily degradation a further significance within the novel's Australian context. Although the violence is inflicted by Japanese and Korean members of the camp hierarchy, its victim has already been positioned differently from the white Australian prisoners through references to settler-colonial history. The scene should not, however, be read as making Japanese imperial violence equivalent to the violence of Australian settler colonialism; the histories and forms of domination are distinct. Instead, Darky's beating places an Indigenous Australian body at the point where different imperial structures meet. His vulnerability in the camp consequently cannot be separated from the unequal position he occupies within the Australian society for which he serves.

The consequences of the beating continue after the guards stop striking Darky, extending imperial violence beyond the immediate moment of punishment. When he later leaves the hospital tent, he finds himself "swimming in shit ... If he closed his eyes he was back there being beaten. If he opened his eyes he was drowning in shit" (296). The repetition of "shit" collapses bodily degradation and traumatic recollection into the same experience. Darky moves between the physical reality of the latrine and the remembered sensation of the assault, so that closing his eyes offers no escape from what has happened to his body. By the following morning, he is discovered "floating head-down", apparently having fallen into the latrine without sufficient strength to pull himself out (297). The precise circumstances of his death remain uncertain, but its relationship to the beating does not: the assault has left him physically incapable of saving himself.

The beating changes the terms of the article's argument. The racial and imperial hierarchies established before the camp are no longer visible only through differences of status or authority; they have become consequences for the body. Darky's contested

leadership contributes to the circumstances in which he is punished, Japanese officers determine the form that punishment will take, and Choi Sang-min is required to enact it. Choi's participation, however, introduces a further complication. The person who physically inflicts much of the violence is himself a colonial subject whose authority within the Japanese military remains conditional. Understanding the beating therefore requires attention not only to Darky's vulnerability, but to the position of the man ordered to strike him.

Choi Sang-min and the Victim/Perpetrator Divide

Choi Sang-min complicates the ethics of Darky's beating because his role cannot be contained entirely within either the category of perpetrator or victim. He is responsible for inflicting severe violence upon Darky and must remain accountable for that participation, yet at the same time, his authority is exercised from a subordinate position within the Japanese imperial hierarchy. The distinction matters because recognising Choi's own colonial subjection does not make his suffering equivalent to Darky's or diminish the violence he enacts. Instead, his position exposes the uneven distribution of agency within imperial systems, in which a subject can exercise coercive power over others while remaining vulnerable to coercion from above.

Choi is first complicated through the discrepancy between the Australian prisoners' perception of him and the narrative's attention to his responses to suffering. The prisoners nickname him the Goanna and imagine that he might be "the devil himself", identifying him through monstrosity before the novel has fully established his position within the camp (Flanagan 184). Yet during the punishment of Tiny Middleton, Choi is described as "stunned", and "With Darky, he looked on in amazement" (184). The shared "amazement" of Choi and Darky creates an unexpected correspondence between men positioned on opposite sides of the camp hierarchy. Choi remains the person inflicting violence upon Tiny, so the moment does not make his position equivalent to Darky's, but it does reveal a gap between the monstrous identity the prisoners attribute to Choi and the emotional response the narrative allows him to display. His capacity to be disturbed by another man's suffering complicates the assumption that his brutality expresses an uncomplicated or innate cruelty.

The relationship between Darky and Choi is further complicated by moments of pragmatic cooperation. Their exchange of smuggled goods establishes a relationship based on mutual usefulness rather than friendship, allowing negotiation to coexist with the violence of military occupation. This distinction is important: the two men do not occupy equal positions, nor does their cooperation dissolve the hierarchy separating guard from prisoner. It nevertheless creates a form of recognition between them that later makes Darky's beating more troubling. Choi knows Darky as an individual with whom he can conduct "good business", rather than solely as an interchangeable Australian prisoner (282). The violence he later inflicts therefore occurs against a prior relationship in which Darky has already acquired a particular identity for him.

The limits of that recognition become clear during the inspection of the prisoners' sleeping quarters. Darky believes he has folded his blanket according to "the regulation Imperial Japanese Army Fashion", but Choi interprets the result as mockery (198). He throws the blanket into the mud, strikes Darky with his rifle and kicks him after he falls, leaving him "confused", bleeding, and covered in "foul mud" (199). Jimmy Bigelow later explains that "The Goanna thought you was taking the piss" (200). The explanation does not excuse Choi's violence, but it changes its significance. His response is triggered by a perceived challenge to his authority, suggesting that his position within the camp is sufficiently insecure for an apparently minor mistake to be interpreted as humiliation. The episode therefore reveals how violence can become a means of defending authority that Choi himself does not securely possess.

McKay's account of Korean service within the Japanese Empire provides an important context for this insecurity. Korean soldiers could occupy positions of military authority without possessing equivalent political status within the imperial order, leaving their "dignity and freedom" constrained by colonial rule (McKay 53). Strehle consequently describes Choi as both "villain and victim" (98). The formulation is useful, but only if the two terms are not allowed to cancel one another out. Choi is a "villain" in the immediate sense that Darky experiences him: he beats prisoners and later participates directly in Darky's death. His status as a "victim" belongs to a different relationship of power, that between Choi and the Japanese Empire. Reading the categories together therefore reveals not moral equivalence but

hierarchy: Choi can be subordinated by Japanese authority while simultaneously exercising destructive authority over Darky.

Choi's insecurity derives from the fact that the authority he exercises over prisoners is not matched by recognition from the Japanese officers above him. Colonel Kota regards him as "untrustworthy and unreliable", interpreting even attempts at deference as possible contempt or mockery (Flanagan 281). The imbalance becomes physical when Kota, frustrated by his own failed attempt to behead a prisoner, finds "the Korean sergeant whose name he could never remember" and strikes him repeatedly (282). The forgotten name is particularly revealing. Choi can enforce Japanese military discipline, but the institution he serves does not grant him equivalent individuality or respect. His authority is therefore conditional: he is sufficiently empowered to punish prisoners while remaining sufficiently subordinate to be punished himself.

This hierarchy changes the significance of Choi's role in Darky's public punishment. When ordered to retrieve him, Choi considers the accusation "even more pointless than most" and remembers that the two have always conducted "good business" (282). He assumes that after the punishment "Gardiner would still need him and he Gardiner", revealing that he does not anticipate the violence destroying their relationship altogether (283). Yet his private reservations do not become refusal. Choi instead reflects, "You could go to war with the world, but the world would always win. What could he do?" (283). The question articulates a form of learned powerlessness; Choi understands the hierarchy surrounding him as something against which resistance cannot succeed. His obedience is therefore neither evidence of complete freedom nor evidence that he lacks agency altogether. He acts within conditions that make compliance the strategy through which he has learned to survive.

Choi's position illustrates the instability of the victim/perpetrator distinction identified earlier in relation to trauma theory. Visser's insistence that trauma studies account for "colonialism's systemic oppression" is useful because Choi's actions take place within a structure of domination that has already constrained his political and racial position (276). Rothberg's warning that the categories of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' should be understood as "abstractions" that exist within "contexts of injustice [which] are multiple and often contradictory" further clarifies why acknowledging Choi's subordination need not diminish his responsibility for Darky's suffering (8). He occupies different ethical positions within

different relationships of power: victimised by the imperial structure above him, he becomes a perpetrator in relation to the prisoner below. The significance of this contradiction lies precisely in its asymmetry. Choi's own subordination does not make Darky less of a victim; it reveals how imperial hierarchy can transmit violence through people whom it has already subordinated.

The phrase "on the monster's face, a monster's mask" gives this divided position a visual form during Darky's beating (285). "Monster" recalls the Australian prisoners' earlier construction of the Goanna as "the devil himself", but "mask" complicates the apparent identification between Choi and monstrosity. A mask is worn and distinguishes the role being performed from the person beneath it. The image does not make Choi's actions less brutal, nor does it establish a hidden innocence behind them. Instead, it suggests a tension between the violent role Choi performs within the Japanese military and an identity that cannot be completely reduced to that role. When Dorrigo orders him to stop and Choi ignores him, the hierarchy governing that performance becomes clear. Dorrigo may command the Australian prisoners, but Choi is answerable to Japanese authority.

The conditional nature of Choi's authority becomes unmistakable when Nakamura notices that he is "putting less force into his blows" against Darky (291). Nakamura responds with the contemptuous judgement, "Koreans. Useless Koreans. No wonder they didn't use them as front-line troops", converting Choi's apparent hesitation into evidence of racial inferiority (288). He then turns physical violence upon Choi himself, striking him before ordering the beating to continue. The sequence places Choi between two forms of bodily violence: he inflicts punishment upon Darky while being disciplined by Nakamura for failing to inflict it with sufficient force. His hesitation does not amount to refusal, but it reveals that the violence demanded of him is not performed without friction. Japanese authority responds to that friction by reminding Choi, through both racist language and physical assault, of the subordinate position from which he exercises power.

Choi's role in the beating consequently changes how responsibility operates within the novel without dissolving it. Darky remains the victim of a punishment that destroys his body; Choi remains one of the men who inflicts that punishment. What complicates the relationship is the assumption that perpetration necessarily originates in secure or autonomous power. Choi exercises violence from within a hierarchy that also racialises, disciplines, and physically

assaults him. The beating therefore brings two central forms of embodiment into the same scene: Darky's body bears the destructive consequences of imperial hierarchy while Choi's body is disciplined into continuing its violence. Yet the consequences of Darky's destruction do not end with his death. They persist in the novel's later concern with whether his body—and the life attached to it—can continue to be remembered.

Death and the Erased Body

Darky's death shifts the novel's treatment of embodiment from physical destruction to the problem of remembrance. The beating has reduced his body to an object of violence and what remains of Darky after death depends not only upon the survival of his body, which has already been destroyed, but upon the ability of others to remember him. In the novel's later chronology, Dorrigo confronts a different form of loss as his memory of Darky becomes increasingly unstable. Dorrigo's memory of Darky is marked first by shame rather than coherent recollection. After an uncomfortable interview with a journalist, he finds that "something about the journalist had reminded him of Darky Gardiner", provoking "a strange shame" (20). The association unsettles the moral confidence upon which his public identity has come to depend. Dorrigo reflects that he has increasingly relied upon the assumption that "what he said was right, and what was right was what he said", before conceding that "Perhaps, since that day of Darky's beating, he had been sure of nothing" (19, 20). Darky's memory therefore functions less as a consoling remembrance than as a disturbance. Recalling him returns Dorrigo to an event that continues to challenge the certainty with which he understands both himself and the past.

The instability of Dorrigo's remembrance becomes more troubling when he admits, "I can't remember his [Darky's] face" (15). The loss is striking because Dorrigo continues to remember Darky's ethical significance while becoming unable to recover his physical appearance. The distinction between remembering what Darky represented and remembering Darky himself matters for this article's concern with embodiment. His body has already been destroyed in the camp; decades later, even its image is becoming inaccessible to one of the men who knew him most closely. The novel thus places bodily destruction and

imperfect remembrance alongside one another, asking what remains of a person when the material body is gone and memory can preserve only fragments.

Dorrigo's inability to recover Darky's face also allows the novel's private act of forgetting to acquire a broader historical resonance. Darky is not simply a dead prisoner but an Indigenous Australian soldier whose place within the national story is already complicated by the settler-colonial history examined earlier in this article. His fading physical presence in Dorriggo's memory therefore raises the possibility that participation in national history does not guarantee equivalent visibility within its remembrance. The point is not that Dorriggo's imperfect memory can stand straightforwardly for Australian collective memory. Rather, the novel uses his failure to remember Darky fully to place pressure upon the relationship between wartime commemoration and the people such narratives risk leaving indistinct.

The movement from the beaten body to the fading face develops an additional dimension of embodiment. Darky's physical destruction is complete, but his disappearance is not; the novel also makes his continued visibility dependent upon an unstable act of remembrance. Dorriggo can retain the moral disturbance associated with Darky while losing the bodily image of the man himself. The afterlife of violence is therefore registered not through another physical assault but through the incompleteness of memory.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* represents imperial power most clearly through its effects upon racialised bodies. Reading Darky Gardiner and Choi Sang-min alongside one another reveals how the Thai-Burma Railway brings distinct histories of settler colonialism and Japanese imperialism into direct contact without making those histories equivalent. Darky enters the camp as an Indigenous Australian soldier whose military service does not erase the inequalities of the society for which he fights; Choi enters it as a Korean conscript who exercises authority within the military structure of the empire that has colonised his homeland. Their encounter makes visible the different forms of conditional authority and vulnerability produced by these imperial systems.

Darky's beating provides the clearest material expression of this argument. His authority is first challenged by Australian prisoners, before Japanese military discipline transforms that institutional vulnerability into bodily punishment. The progression from contested leadership to physical degradation demonstrates how racial and imperial hierarchies acquire material consequences. Darky's body becomes the point at which different structures of power converge, while the language of the beating progressively strips him of the recognition attached to his identity as soldier, leader, and individual.

Choi's participation complicates this process without diminishing his responsibility for Darky's suffering. His position within the Japanese military shows that perpetration does not necessarily originate in secure or autonomous power. Choi inflicts violence upon Darky while remaining racially subordinate to Japanese officers who distrust, insult, and physically discipline him. The relationship between the two men therefore unsettles fixed categories of victim and perpetrator while preserving their asymmetry. Darky is the victim of the beating, and Choi is one of its perpetrators, but Choi's participation occurs within an imperial hierarchy that also subjects him to coercion. This distinction is central because it shows how colonial power can be transmitted through subjects who themselves occupy subordinate positions.

The novel's concern with embodiment continues beyond Darky's physical death. Dorrigo's later inability to remember Darky's face extends the problem of bodily disappearance into the instability of memory. Darky remains morally significant to Dorrigo, yet the physical image of the man is increasingly inaccessible. The movement from the beaten body to the fading face demonstrates that the consequences of violence persist not only through injury but through the incomplete ways in which lives are subsequently remembered. For an Indigenous Australian soldier, that fading visibility also places pressure upon the relationship between national wartime memory and the subjects such narratives may fail to preserve fully.

By bringing postcolonial approaches to embodiment into conversation with trauma theory, this article extends existing criticism of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* beyond questions of Australian identity and wartime remembrance alone. Its focus on Darky and Choi shows how imperial structures become legible through the body: through the recognition or refusal of authority, through physical punishment, through coerced participation in violence, and through the instability of remembrance after death. The novel's representation of empire

consequently emerges through these embodied and unequal relationships, in which differently racialised subjects are brought together by war while remaining marked by the colonial histories that precede and outlast it.

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