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New Perspectives on Imagology

Edited by

Katharina Edtstadler, Sandra Folie and Gianna Zocco



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“I have gotten used to the whites, but I tremble before the blacks!”: Fashioning Colonial Subjectivities in *The Brave Rabbit in Africa*

Kristína Kállay

Abstract

The ways in which Self and Other are represented in fiction play a significant role in the formation of racial and other stereotypes in any culture. This article is a reading of the children’s book *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* (1931) by Slovak modernist author Jozef Cíger-Hronský. It attempts to point out and analyse the ways in which racial and national identities are constructed in the written text of the book. Arguably, the story deploys colonialist motifs typical of Western literature in order to appraise the modern, civilized identity of the young Slovak nation.

Keywords

children’s literature – Slovak – Central and Eastern Europe – Africa – representation

I follow him to serve my turn upon him:
We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly follow’d.

Iago in *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 7–9)
by WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



1 Introduction

Although Slovakia has never been part of a colonial enterprise, an understanding of the non-Western world as wild, dangerous, and inferior sits well and alive in the Slovak cultural and literary imaginary. As I hope to demonstrate,

this discrepancy has also been made manifest in children's and youth literature. This article is a discourse analysis of the children's story *Smelý Zajko v Afrike* (1931, *The Brave Rabbit in Africa*)—a sequel to *Smelý Zajko* (1930, *The Brave Rabbit*)—by Slovak modernist author and intellectual Jozef Cíger-Hronský (1896–1960). Both books continue to hold a prominent place in the canon of Slovak children's literature. This study focuses on racial or ethnic representations and stereotyping in the story. It will be argued here that Cíger-Hronský fashions imagined historical and cultural identities by mimicking Western colonial motifs in order to conjoin Slovak subjectivity (particularly the white Slovak man) with the modern, “civilized” world. I suggest that the story, in spite of being situated outside of the Saidian paradigm, evidences the presence of *colonialist* literature in Central and Eastern Europe.

2 Orientalisms and Others

What I refer to as the Saidian paradigm is the imagined dichotomy of a modern, “civilized” West as opposed to the primeval, “uncivilized” East as posited by Edward Said in his ground-breaking study *Orientalism* (1978). Said argued typical representations of the “Orient” to be a “European invention,” “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and remarkable experiences,” “the place of Europe's richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its most recurring images of the Other” (1978, 1). The concept of Orientalism buttressed the existing foundations of postcolonial literary criticism and has become a primary prism through which colonialist discourse has been approached in literary studies. But representations of colonial relations have not always and everywhere been rendered and experienced through the eyes of either colonizer or colonized; there are also those whose dialogue with Western forms of imperialism took place in the gray area between this dichotomy.

One such area is Slovak literary history. In order to better understand how colonialism has been experienced by Central and Eastern European culture and popular imagination, the Austrian anthropologist Andre Gingrich has proposed a modification of Said's framework, the concept of “frontier Orientalism,” to be applied in cultural analyses in contexts of countries “without any colonial past whatever” but that were “to some extent themselves subjected to dominant influence from other European powers in the past” (1996, 101).¹ To

1 For an analysis of the frontier Orientalist in Slovak literature, see Pucherova (2019).

come to an understanding of how the Self and the Other have been rendered in Central Eastern European literatures, it could be useful to speak of literary representations and stereotyping, that is, to approach the source material from an imagological perspective and in imagological terms. The stereotype, of course, does not need to concern the textual representation of people exclusively but needs to be regarded as “also concerning places, landscapes etcetera, which is to be scrutinized as to its investment with purportedly ‘characteristic’ qualities” (Beller 2007, 13).

One of the reasons it seems particularly interesting to look at children’s literature for examples in stereotyping is because these books are likely to influence the very early stages of the formation of national consciousness or identity in one’s life. We should bear in mind that children’s and youth literature, while often itself on the margins, is consumed culturally by both children and adults. After all, which adult does not reminisce about their favourite childhood stories, which parent does not select literature for their children based on their own judgement of what is appropriate, educational, and imparting a certain set of approved values and representations onto the psyche of the child? As we have seen in Emer O’Sullivan and Andrea Immel’s recent edited volume *Sameness and Difference in Children’s Literature* (2017), books for children perform a vital cultural function in the formation of identity.

Related to stereotyping, this study therefore concerns itself with the function of colonial motifs. Adhering to the distinctions among colonial, colonialist, postcolonial, and imperial literatures as made by Elleke Boehmer, I suggest that *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* exemplifies a case of *colonialist* literature; that is, literature that is “specifically concerned with colonial *expansion*” (emphasis mine throughout this article) (Boehmer 2005, 3). “Colonial” is used by Boehmer to refer to all literatures produced during the colonial era and can be written “by metropolitans, but also creoles and indigenes, during colonial times” (ibid., 2). In what follows and in chronological order, I will be looking here at ways in which this book reproduces orientalist stereotypes in order to affirm the Western narrative of colonial expansion as civilizing, moral, and ultimately unproblematic.

3 Institutionalization, Representation, and Nation Building

The decision to look at the interwar period for case studies in ethnic stereotyping and nation building in Central Eastern Europe makes sense insofar as Czechoslovakia and with it respective national cultural institutions effectively only came into existence after the Great War. It matters that the Slovak literature published in the interwar period was largely coordinated and published

by state-financed, “national” institutions; their role in the interwar years became crucial to the nation-building processes in the country. The proliferation of Slovak culture (and the formation of the Slovak canon of children’s and youth literature) was most notably fostered by the cultural and academic institution Matica Slovenská (but also other publishing houses such as Štátne nakladateľstvo or nakladateľstvo O. Trávníčka) (Sliacky 2007, 87). Matica in particular held the monopoly on the production of educational material for children, as well as magazine and book publishing (children’s, youth, and adult). It is because of the unprecedented state-sponsored institutional support of literary production in this period that a case study of ethnic and racial stereotyping seems especially intriguing.

Inhabiting the southeast perimeter of the Habsburg Empire until 1918, the narrative of Slovaks bearing the brunt of imperial political marginalization and the onslaught of the “Turks” (the Ottomans) has always been intrinsic to Slovak national consciousness (the Ottoman Empire also appears in *The Brave Rabbit in Africa*). It is certainly true that the only major (and rather direct) historical contact of the Slovaks with the Orient has been via Ottoman encounters throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, and indeed a substantial amount of Slovak literature generally has and continues to thematize these (for examples in Slovak children’s and youth literature,² see Sliacky 2007). We will see in the case of *The Brave Rabbit* that twentieth-century fictional accounts of these encounters may, in some cases, constitute a symbolic stepping stone to more modern and contemporary discourses of race and empire than those that Slovak writers have tended to depict in the nineteenth and earlier centuries.

4 *The Brave Rabbit in Africa*

Since its first publication in 1931, *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* has managed to retain its popularity across four political regimes—the First Czechoslovak Republic (1919–1938), the fascist Slovak State (1938–1945), the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (1948–1992), and finally the modern-day Slovak Republic (1993–present). It is the sequel to *The Brave Rabbit* (1930), a story that charts the coming of age of the young Rabbit who, seeking wisdom, ventures to explore the unknown perimeters of the woodland. A testament to its enduring cultural relevance is that, unlike a great many other books produced in said period,

2 In Slovak academic discourse, the umbrella term for what the Anglophone world designates as “children’s literature” is *literatúra pre deti a mládež*, literally “children’s and youth/young adult literature.”

the original story of *The Brave Rabbit* (1930) and its sequel *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* (1931) are still in print and available in all major Slovak bookstore chains today. It is perhaps the only Slovak colonial-themed children's book to have had such lasting cultural pertinence. Brave Rabbit is a household name and his adventures are among the most beloved stories in Slovak children's literature. The book form (first to recent editions) is structured such that illustrations and text mostly alternate, and that the voice of the narrator is interspersed with dialogue (the ratio of which changes throughout and which I will address).³

4.1 *Leaving Home*

The following analysis will focus on the parts of the story most relevant to questions of racial and ethnic stereotyping. "Rabbit does not fetch cabbage from the fields anymore; he has no need to. Nor does Mrs. Rabbit cook soup anymore; the servants cook it for her" (Cíger-Hronský [1931] 2001, 5).⁴ Donning traditional Slovak folk costume, walking upright, and speaking Slovak, the main protagonists—a married couple of anthropomorphous rabbits by the names of Rabbit ("Zajko") and Mrs. Rabbit ("Zajkuľa") embark on a journey to foreign lands to seek their fortune. Having abandoned their primeval home in the soils of the woodland, they construct a "human house" (ibid., 8).⁵ As soon as the task is accomplished, Rabbit generously gifts the new-fangled hominal burrow to his parents and (to their great sadness) announces his departure. "He [Rabbit] will travel the world and will not return until he has found the sun and pocketed the day, so that he might use it to cast light unto the night" (ibid., 20).⁶ The day here represents knowledge about the world (or specifically Africa) that Rabbit wants to wield to gain a certain degree of control over it. The ideal of comprehensive knowledge (that presents the desire to acquire it as invariably positive) has been a common denominator of imperial fiction (Richards 1993, 9). The Rabbits make haste to pack and ready their car, and their inconspicuous voyage south to the shores of the Mediterranean begins.

The first sequence of events in the story takes place in the familiar surroundings of the Rabbits' homeland. They make a stop on the roadside to gather logs in an adjacent vacant felling yard. This is Rabbit's idea; they will need logs if

3 Both books are illustrated by the prominent Czech illustrator of children's and young adult books Jaroslav Vodrážka (1894–1984). This study will concern itself with written text only.

4 "[...] Zajačík nechodí už po kapustu, lebo nemusí, ani Zajačková nevarieva polievku, lebo navaria jej slúžobci." Unfortunately, the book has not been translated into English. All translations are my own.

5 "[...] chalupu ľudskú."

6 "[...] ba ani nevráti sa domov za ten čas, pokým nenájde slnce a nenaberie si do vriec dňa, aby s ním i v noci mohol zasvietiť."

they are to engineer a raft to carry and navigate both themselves and the vehicle in the unruly waters of the Danube (they will be sailing downstream). Mrs. Rabbit, in turn, laments that if they linger too long in the yard, “the woodsman might see them” and then “that will be the end of them” (ibid., 28).⁷ Rabbit reproves his wife for being ignorant and cowardly. “Don’t you know,” he exclaims, that “as soon as a rabbit puts a pair of pants on, no human can harm him?!” (ibid., 28).⁸ The Rabbits’ folk costumes can be read as representing Slovak ethnic subjectivity; now that the Slovaks have a state and therefore a tangible, enshrined identity (much like the clothes of the rabbits), the more powerful folk cannot harm them. It is clear that the more ignorant folk (like Mrs. Rabbit) are not aware that civilized rabbits need no longer fear humans. It is precisely on this matter that Rabbit seems to be schooling his wife (and the readership). The relationship of the Rabbits with humans will become more complex and problematic later in the story, when they encounter humans of different racial and ethnic identities.

4.2 *Trenčín Castle*

Determination and desire driving the Rabbits forward, they make a stop at Trenčín castle (in today’s northwest Slovakia). The site of the castle constitutes the first part of a sequence of fanciful temporal excursions through Slovak history; it is also their last stop that is still in their homeland. The choice of Trenčín castle is arguably not insignificant as the castle played a strategic role in the defence from the onslaught of the Ottomans in the sixteenth century and is a sort of symbol of fortitude in the face of adversity. In the story, it is the first in a series of encounters to represent intercultural contact. Rabbit contends that “the rabbit king once lived in this castle,” in a time when rabbits “did not hide away in their burrows” (ibid., 30).⁹ Mrs. Rabbit gasps in disbelief, while Rabbit continues to explain to her that not only was the castle once a site of great “rabbit knight feasts” but that “rabbits then could write, and write they did—using their tails!” (ibid.).¹⁰ It is interesting to see that not once does the narrator intervene in the storytelling to engage with what Rabbit is saying; not even here, when Rabbit is very obviously bluffing. Not only that, Rabbit is patronizing Mrs. Rabbit and, like so many times in the story, reprimanding and

7 “Jaj, veď nám beda, keď nás horár zazrie!”

8 “Či ešte ani toľko nevieš, že keď si zajac natiahne nohavice, už mu nijaký človek ublížiť nemôže?!”

9 “Keď mali zajace kráľa a neskrývali sa po kadejakých dierach, nuž zajačí kráľ býval na tomto hrade.”

10 “[...] vtedy zajace vedeli i písať, a písavali chvostom. Aj mnoho, premnoho písali, chvostíky si zodrali a zato ich majú dnes také krátke.”

even mocking her for her alleged ignorance while he himself performs the role of the wise man. “Oh, how unknowledgeable you are,” he tells her (*ibid.*).¹¹ By remaining withdrawn throughout the story, the narrator leaves much of the interpretative work up to the reader. Yet there is clearly a level of irony in this representation of Rabbit’s claim to erudition by undercutting the reference to the medieval past of the rabbits with an allusion to the (rather humorous, certainly so to the child readers) image of rabbits in a jousting tournament. (It deserves mentioning here that the illustration of the scene includes rabbits in plated armour holding a shield with a radish as an emblem, a wooden horse with medieval kit, and a giant carrot guarded jealously by a couple of rabbit-squires). The scene can be read in a number of not necessarily mutually exclusive ways: as mockery of representations of a cultural Other, as self-irony, or simply as an allusion to a mythical, long-standing past of an ethnic group (if we accept that in this instance this is roughly what Rabbit represents). The rendering of the main characters as anthropomorphous animals allows for some distancing from ideology that would be less obfuscated were the characters human (see Bradford 2015, 151). We might also read this as a mockery of masculinity, though it is doubtful that that is what the implied child reader would infer. Rabbit’s claims and actions remain uncontested throughout the story, and so no matter how silly, his journey will represent a successful enterprise.

4.3 *Constantinople*

The Rabbits have journeyed south on their raft. Passing Constantinople as they cross the Black Sea, Rabbit suggests they make a stop, for “they had never been among Turks before.” Mrs. Rabbit protests fearfully, exclaiming that “women there are like phantoms, their faces are covered” (Cíger-Hronský [1931] 2001, 36).¹² Since the Rabbits act as carriers of the values of progress and modernity in the story, the niqab reference is meant to designate a frightening Otherness that had best be avoided. Importantly, the concern is raised by Mrs. Rabbit, rather than by her husband. Her categorical scrutiny of the women of Constantinople, in spite of never having seen them (it is worth adding that Mrs. Rabbit, overall, also speaks very little), is at once an affirmation of her European, Christian identity and can be read as disapproval of Islam.

The bestial form of Mrs. Rabbit might allow the reader to interpret her fears as innocent, though perhaps femininity (were Mrs. Rabbit human) would have been enough to excuse her of her ignorance. The narrator also tells us that Rabbit would have liked to make a stop at the home of the Turks, to “learn a thing

11 “Či si neumná, ej!”

12 “Vraj keď sú u Turkov ženy sťa mátohy, majú zakrytú tvár iba oči čo im trochu vidieť.”

or two" (ibid.).¹³ The couple heed to Mrs. Rabbit's apprehensions and decide to continue their journey. Interestingly, we learn that the Rabbits worried that "they would not be able to understand the language" and yet, as we will see later on, the Rabbits will have no trouble at all understanding and speaking to the people or animals in Africa (ibid.).¹⁴ This can signal a number of things. It could simply signal a bypassing of the Ottoman past in favour of striding forward toward a more contemporaneous and fashionable sort of cultural contact with Africa. It can also signal a plain disinterest, or simply that the difference between the Rabbits' and the Turkish world are too great to be overcome. Religion is nowhere mentioned once the main characters are in the environment of Africa. The logic of this representation would seem to suggest that the inhabitants of Africa are lacking in religion or religious sentiment entirely, or that religion ceases to be relevant for their representation.

The landscape surrounding Constantinople is showcased as hostile, its inhabitants but mysterious and frightening figments of the Rabbits' imaginations. The "Turkish" environment bears no semblance to the proverbial riches of the "world" Rabbit has taken upon himself to explore. During their brief stop outside of the city, the narrator describes the area as empty but beset with "Turkish churches" with "little towers" (ibid., 36).¹⁵ The whole scene bears a sort of religious aura. Prior to the Rabbits' decision to move on, Mrs. Rabbit picks a lemon up from the ground, thinking she has found a "sweet orange." Sinking her teeth into the bitter morsel, the ensuing sour taste brings her to tears. Representing deceit, the presence of the treacherous fruit can be read as an allusion to the fruit of knowledge of good and evil in the creation myth of Adam and Eve. Here, our two travellers are not chastised by any supernatural being, nor are they forcefully exiled; instead, they choose to take the presence of the sour fruit as a cue to continue their journey on across the "great water" (ibid., 41).¹⁶ While there is no space to elaborate on this aspect more in this article, the fruit tasting is not the only instance in the narrative of *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* that can be read as allusion to a Biblical tale.

4.4 *Arrival*

Sailing with their car on a raft, the Rabbits encounter a storm and, after some panic, the car is swallowed by a shark. Later, the shark is fished out of the water by a group of indigenous Black men. The Rabbits seem to have arrived at their destination. Peeking out of the darkness of the shark's interior, Mrs. Rabbit

13 "Zajko aj rozmýšľal, že sa u Turka zastavia, dačo poučia, iba Zajková nie a nie."

14 "Aj sa báli, že sa nedohovoria v tureckom svete [...]."

15 "Veľa tureckých kostolov a na každom rohu hĺba tenulinkých, vysokých veží."

16 "Voda veličzná!"

exclaims “I only see black humans!” (Cíger-Hronský [1931] 2001, 63).¹⁷ Unwavering, Rabbit takes it as a good sign; if there are Black humans, they must indeed be in Africa. Mrs. Rabbit does not share in his confidence. “I have gotten used to the whites,” she cries, “but I tremble before the blacks!” (ibid.).¹⁸ In order to circumvent emasculating Rabbit, Cíger-Hronský displaces any perceived weaknesses (such as fear) onto Mrs. Rabbit who, as a woman, can wear them comfortably without it reflecting negatively on her partner. Furthermore, the spouses are occasionally referred to by the narrator as *muž* (man/husband) and *žena* (woman/wife). Cíger-Hronský uses these in the text as a means to bypass their bestial form; *muž* and *žena* as universal concepts together constitute an equally respectable representation of normative gender relations. Much to her surprise, the dozen or so of the fishermen hastily scatter out of sight, frightened by the unexpected emergence of the Rabbits from the fish’s entrails. “We are here, in Africa, they will surely gift it [Africa] to us, because they are afraid of us,” remarks Rabbit (ibid., 66).¹⁹ The episode, again, shows Rabbit as the unflinching, even fearless hero, whose “knowledge” of the world affords him no hesitation. Like in a number of other moments in the story, here too the narrative doubles on both a colonial trope of the cowardly and ignorant indigenous population and the trope of the vulnerable, dependent woman. The two intersecting stereotypes serve to underscore the image of the Rabbit (the white man) as heroic.

4.5 *Encounter*

The people of colour the Rabbits encounter are mostly people who trick them or who are represented as different (by both the Rabbit and the narrator). There are two sequential incidents in particular that stand out. The first is when the Rabbits progress inland and their car is stolen by a group of “blacks lurking in the bushes” as the Rabbits are distracted looking around “enjoying the flowers” (ibid., 70).²⁰ This moment marks another occasion on which the Rabbits blunder as a result of their distracted indulgence (like they did outside Constantinople). Mrs. Rabbit is devastated—for how will they “make their way across Africa now if they do not know the roads or how to traverse the desert sands”?! (ibid.).²¹ It comes as no surprise then that the Rabbits need not wait long to

17 “Veď ja iba samých čiernych ľudí vidím!”

18 “Na belochov som si navykla, jaj, ale pred černochochmi sa trasiem.”

19 “My sme tu v Afrike, a iste nám ju celú darujú, lebo sa nás boja.”

20 “[...] dvaja čemosi, šli za hlasom, našli Zajkovcov pod palmami.” “[...] nazbierali si afrických kvietkov a teraz sa im tešia.”

21 “keď sa ani v cestách nevyzná, ani behať nevie po sypkom piesku.”

come upon a convenient replacement for their automobile—one that is more suited to the terrain. When the Rabbits stop to marvel at the Egyptian pyramids, they spy a caravan of Bedouins in the distance. When darkness sets in, the two rabbits decide to investigate them. The men of the caravan are gathered in council, sitting on rugs, “arguing loudly” (*ibid.*, 78).²² They are described by the narrator as “strange.” Rabbit listens to them for a while and then whispers to Mrs. Rabbit that it is a good thing they had been cautious in approaching the men. “We must get used to the fact that people in Africa are strange, but there is nothing good to be said of this lot! I have guessed it already. They are thieving Bedouins! Just look at them closely and you can tell!” (*ibid.*).²³ From these two incidents onward, the Rabbits encounter both human and animal inhabitants of the area. There are no white people there; arguably but for the Rabbits (if we agree to read them as such) who have brought civilization and order to the destitute and lawless land. In these scenes, the narrator concurs with Rabbit’s assessments and vice versa. Clearly, these representations work to reinforce negative stereotypes about the human inhabitants of Africa.

4.6 *Emulating Strength*

The animals of Africa, even if superior to the Rabbits in terms of their respective places in the food chain hierarchy, subordinate themselves to Rabbit’s authority. Rabbit signifies status that is conferred to him by his upright posture and bravery. After pulling out the sore tooth of a lion who is “king of the desert” (*ibid.*, 83),²⁴ for example, Rabbit is pronounced as the “court dentist” and later “court judge” (*ibid.*, 99).²⁵ At the request of the lion-king, who “consulted with Rabbit how to make his subjects healthier and stronger,” Rabbit swiftly takes on the task of educating the local animals on exercise, justice, and work ethic (*ibid.*).²⁶ Mrs. Rabbit gives dancing lessons. Rabbit rallies the African animals and lectures them that they need to work together and stop squabbling among themselves; then there will be only one enemy—the humans, “because the humans are smarter” (*ibid.*, 104).²⁷ Throughout the story, it is usually stated whether or not a human is Black or white (at the beginning, the humans Mrs. Rabbit warned about in the felling lot were clearly white, though it was not emphasized). In the narrative, *human* signifies by default a white human.

22 “[...] o niečom sa hlasito radia.”

23 “Že sú tu ľudia čudní, tomu musíme v Afrike privyknuť, ale tu ani jednému nič dobré z očí nevyzerá! Už som aj uhádol, že sú to lúpežní Beduíni.”

24 “Kráľ púšte.”

25 “dvorný zubár” and “dvorný lekár.”

26 “I radil sa s ním, ako by mohli byť všetci jeho poddaní zdraví i mocní.”

27 “Toho sa všetci bojíme, lebo je múdry.”

The fact that a human is white or not white matters here because, in the case of people of colour, race is always emphasized (as either Black people, Blacks, Bedouins, or natives) and the cue to the qualities of either of those groups is how our brave, upstanding heroes respond to them.

In the sequence in which Rabbit gives the aforementioned lecture, the animals of the jungle are rounded up to engage in a sort of military-style collective exercise drill. This is the result of the lion-king having asked the advice of Brave Rabbit as to how he can improve his subjects' health and strength. "Easy!," exclaims Rabbit, "we will teach them about physical education" (*ibid.*, 99).²⁸ And so, all the animals stand up, on their hind legs, and follow the example of Rabbit. I propose that this is an instance of a sort of scout-like militarism that is being depicted here. The productive "diligence" of the Rabbit is demonstrated again and again in this section when Rabbit puts various animals to work for good measure, sometimes in penance for trespassing justice and obstructing his efforts to civilize the jungle. In one instance, a monkey complains to Rabbit about a crocodile who bit her tail off after she had, on Rabbit's recommendation, gone "to the river" so that she may be "clean and beautiful" (*ibid.*, 110–111).²⁹ Rabbit finds the crocodile, captures him using a piece of rope and a stick. The crocodile expresses remorse and is made to "serve the monkeys" in penance, helping them with their various tasks of tending to the jungle (*ibid.*, 105–117).³⁰ The motif of foreigners bringing justice to the lands of the East is very common to colonialist fiction (Boehmer 2005, 41). It signals indigenous incompetence, the supposed goodwill of the colonizer, and the moral duty to bring affairs into order under his command.

With his physical and intellectual virulence, bravery, sense of justice, and well-intentioned work ethic, Rabbit represents a white colonial masculine identity that renders him safe from any real danger.

4.7 *The King of Africa*

Throughout his time in Africa, Rabbit expresses the wish to be crowned king. In this story, fortune invariably favours the brave. Finally, echoing the career of the popular figure of the Upper Hungarian Count Maurice Benyovszky (1746–1786) who was, according to his own account, proclaimed the ruler of Madagascar,³¹ Rabbit is crowned "king of Africa" (*ibid.*, 124) by a local tribe as a reward for rescuing a native human child from a tiger. The many animals

28 "[...] my ich priučíme telocviku."

29 "Ľšla som k rieke, umyt' som sa chcela, aby som bola najčistotnejšia a najkrajšia!"

30 "[...] budeš u opíc slúžiť, a ak sa dobre nezachováš, nikdy viac sa do rieky nedostaneš."

31 See Benyowsky (1790).

and people of the world of *Brave Rabbit* can be seen to represent a sort of cultural pluralism. The internationalist spirit may well have been one of the factors contributing to the continuing popularity (and ideological approval by the Communist Party) of the story. The narrator tells us that after the Rabbits' departure, "there was much crying and sadness in Africa, and still is today" (*ibid.*, 126) and that "Africa will never know peace" (*ibid.*, 126–128).³² It is inevitable then that, if the internal logic and message of the story is to be sustained, the departure of Rabbit marks a return of disorder and strife for all the animals of Africa. This ending reinforces the colonialist trope of the Orient that cannot rule itself. Once Rabbit has conquered Africa, he is summoned back home by his parents and leaves Africa. Rabbit does not leave any power structures behind in Africa (it is clear that it was his presence that served to uphold an idea of order in Africa). And so the Rabbits dutifully and yet happily return home to Rabbit's parents, deciding to "remain home again, at least for a time" (*ibid.*, 128).³³

5 Civilization, Innocence, and Desire

Next to the colonialist tropes and motifs analysed so far, a more general aspect concerns the representation of the relationship between knowledge and desire that runs counter to the role desire has tended to play in many children's literature classics, particularly those (but not only) thematizing exotic journeys. I will give an example by comparison with a contemporaneous English children's book—Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* (1920). The main character, Dr. Dolittle, is a human doctor who snubs the idea of treating humans and instead prefers to treat animals. Dolittle is able to speak with the animals in their own language—just like Rabbit (who is able to speak with most, though not all, humans and animals he encounters on his journey). In his analysis of *Dr. Dolittle*, Perry Nodelman has suggested that the idea that "supposedly dumb animals outwit [...] the supposedly clever humans [...]" represents a [particular] kind of relationship between knowledge and desire" (2008, 43). The further Dr. Dolittle strays from adult ideas of what is desirable and possible, the more his life improves and the happier he is.

32 "A bolo plaču v Afrike, bolo náreku, ba dosť je ho i dnes, lebo bez Zajka nemohol sa uzavrieť večný mier."

33 "Synko-Zajko ostal doma, ostala i Zajková a že budú vraj teraz aspoň na čas v chalúpke bývať ... [...]"

While differing in many ways, the two stories share what Nodelman has called a “wish-fulfillment fantasy” (2008, 43). He suggests that when Dr. Dolittle thinks and acts on instinct, he succeeds, and his life improves; as we follow the story of the Rabbit further, however, we will see that the opposite is true of his journey. In other words, Dr. Dolittle purposefully strives (by reverting from reason to instinct) and succeeds to recover the unsullied Rousseauian innocence of childhood that is to be found outside the realm of reason and civilization. But Rabbit’s desire is more human, more adult, and more rational; Rabbit acts against the instincts of an animal (as is evidenced throughout the text and by his “civilizing mission”). This civilizational desire drives him, so to speak, forward in historical development; his is, “like almost all colonial journeys, a journey forward in space but backward in time” (McClintock 1995, 242). To say that Rabbit’s journey to Africa is one that is “backward in time” is to say that his own special movement represents a historical development from the primitive to the desired modern where, at the same time, the Rabbits’ experience of a premodern world (in this case “Africa”) represents the assumed backwardness the Rabbit has taken upon himself to conquer.

Like all colonial tales (though this is by no means exclusive to them), the journey to the exotic is in part driven by capital, or a desire for accumulation, which underpins the entire premise of the colonial undertaking. Born and bred in a rabbit hole, Rabbit is the only animal in the forest to have progressed to building a human home; he is able to do this thanks to the money he has acquired from his previous, more regional adventures. “What is true is true, I am brave, I am wise, I’ve stashes of money, now I also want a human house” (Cíger-Hronský [1931] 2001, 8).³⁴ Here, wisdom (reason) and capital (money) function to designate the Rabbits’ transition to modernity; bravery comes part and parcel with the two aforesaid ingredients, and the status they confer sanctions Rabbit’s civilizing mission. But the racial and national locality of Rabbit’s identity is not so clear-cut; Rabbit’s unique equidistance from both animal and human, from oppressor and oppressed, renders him the perfect incarnation of the emerging yet ambivalent and very much pliant Slovak national self-image.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that the fecund years of national consciousness building in Slovakia included the production of colonialist texts for children and youth, and that these at once problematized the liminal position

34 “A čo je pravda, to je pravda, smelý som, múdry som, peňazí mám plné vrecia, nuž chcem mať i chalupu ľudskú.”

of former Habsburg borderland identities as much as they sought to affirm a civilizational albeit fragile newfound affinity with the modern world. Given that the Slovaks never had colonies, it is likely that authors such as Cíger-Hronský drew on Western adventure and children's literature for inspiration. In addition, the narrative of *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* offers much more material for analysis than has been showcased here (it would be enriching to dissect the intermedial relationship, for example, between visual and written representations). Perhaps the national and racial anxieties of the story are best encapsulated by Mrs. Rabbit's cry, "I have gotten used to the whites, but I tremble before the blacks!" (Cíger-Hronský [1931] 2001, 63). If the Rabbits represent Slovak ethnic and national identity, then the "whites" encapsulate the ambiguous admiration and fear toward imperial superpowers, while the "blacks" represent identities that are distant, idle, and not to be trusted. That the people of colour (and the animals in Africa too) are lazy is iterated on several occasions throughout the story; productivity and prospects are both attributes that are clearly ascribed to race. Rabbit's European identity renders him safe from any real danger. Given the chronology of the plot (particularly the stop in Turkey), *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* is an example of a moving away from a frontier Orientalist idea of the Other being "something different but not geographically remote" (Mitrić 2018, 28) as the plot progresses toward a more contemporaneous, Western type of colonial fantasy. Perhaps this is what makes *The Brave Rabbit in Africa* so unique; in a way, it is able to incorporate and follow a historical trajectory from primeval burrowing, through medieval myth, Ottoman encounters, modernity, and empire. The story very clearly reinforces many negative racial and gender stereotypes. The identity of Rabbit hinges on an implicit and constantly negotiated ambivalence between that of a well-intentioned commonfolk Slovak adventurer, a white man on a civilizing mission, and a member of a marginalized community. In cases where the child (and adult) is unlikely to ever encounter certain phenomena in their lives, the values and representations conveyed in children's stories can indent a series of lasting and outdated impressions of themselves and the world.

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