

Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: The Afterlife of an “Emember” – Decoloniality and Privacy in Gergely Péterfy’s novel The Stuffed Barbarian – Presentation by Dr. Eszter Ureczky (University of Debrecen, Hungary)

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies’ website.

In today's episode, we will hear the presentation ‘The Afterlife of an “Emember” – Decoloniality and Privacy in Gergely Péterfy’s novel The Stuffed Barbarian’ by Dr. Eszter Ureczky, University of Debrecen, Hungary.

Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be here, and I think the topic I will be talking about actually connects with many of the talks we've heard today, so I think I am, again, in the perfect panel. So, as you can see, I will be talking about a novel, but I will do it in a way that you can actually follow it. I guess no one really has read this book, so I'd rather try to create a historical context for the topic so it's easy to follow. So, I will be talking about a Hungarian novel, which is in my hand here. It's called *Kitömött Barbár* in Hungarian, *The Stuffed Barbarian* in English, and I will address how this novel is about a historical figure, who I think is a very important character in European history, especially in terms of colonial history.

Maybe just a word about the context of this research. I work at the University of Debrecen, and I especially do research in the field of the medical humanities, especially literature and film. So, this is how I've come upon this topic.

Just a brief outline of my talk today.

First, I will introduce to you the real-life historical figure behind this novel, the character of Angelo Soliman, because the novel is about his life and death, and especially about his afterlife. Then, I will also mention the most important poetical and rhetorical features of the novel about him. And in order to approach the novel, I will try to position it within a post-colonial literary context, and I will apply Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction to interpret some aspects of the novel when it comes to the depiction of Angelo's character. Then, I will offer my analysis of the issues of privacy and death in this novel briefly, and then I will have a very brief conclusion as to how we can understand the novel.

Now, let's take a look at the life of this character. Before I go into this section of the presentation, may I ask you, who has heard about the story of Angelo Soliman in 18th century Europe?

Okay, okay. Thank you, Felicia. Okay. Well, actually, that's exciting news, because then I might actually tell you something interesting. The novel has been published in German, so those of you who read in German can read it and let's hope that an English translation will be available soon. So this novel is a so-called postmodern novel. It was first published in 2014, and it's a fictional biography of an 18th

century historical figure, Angelo Soliman. As I've already mentioned, that we are not sure about the exact year of his birth, but he was born in the early 18th century, and as a child, he was sold into slavery into Europe, where he became a black courtier and later a freemason, and he actually had a really, let's say, adventurous life in Vienna, in the late 18th century.

Just to mention a few landmarks of his life, he was a valet and traveling companion of a prince from Lobkowitz, the imperial governor of Sicily. Then after Lobkowitz's death, he entered into the possession of Prince of Liechtenstein in Vienna, where in Vienna, he also became a royal tutor. He actually was kind of a local celebrity around that time in Vienna. He knew Mozart, Haydn, and even Emperor Joseph II, and he even became Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge in Vienna at that time. So he was a really erudite person, speaking multiple languages, and a widely acknowledged member of the upper circles of Viennese society. This is why it's especially actually shocking what happens, because in his life, he was regarded as a model for the assimilation of Africans in Europe, in a way he was paraded as this good example of an African person who could successfully assimilate into European society. But then when he died, actually, the emperor, Francis II, actually ordered his dead body to be taken to the Museum of Natural History in Vienna, where his body was skinned. And then, of course, this happened against the objections of his family, especially his daughter, Josephine, so his body was skinned, stuffed, and exhibited as a noble savage wearing loincloth, feathered crown, necklaces of shells, in a cabinet of curiosities, along with exotic stuffed animals. Actually, let me just emphasize it again that he was a well-known academic in Viennese society at that time.

In the picture, you can see a copy of his death mask and the cutout of the silhouette of his face. And actually the mummy, the stuffed body of Angelo Soliman stayed in the Vienna Museum until the revolution of 1848 when the museum burned down and that's how the body was destroyed. And in this painting you can actually see Angelo Soliman as a little boy as like a decorative element of his aristocratic owner, quote unquote. So he really was both an ornamental object and something of an academic in his own life. And let me offer a sentence from the novel at this point where actually we are looking at the stuffed body of this person at the end of the novel when the novel says: I can watch his body become a sculpture. The body that went from being a toy to a father figure, from a father figure to an icon has now become what his ultimate sense, a scandal.

So the novel is actually about the story of this person's body and what was done to it by European civilization. Now actually the best article I've come across in my research was written by Iris Wiger and Spencer Hadley. So if you would like to read up on this topic, I think this is the most thorough article and historically really detailed. And they actually follow through Angelo Soliman's life story and they identify, let's say, five stages of his identity in Europe, where initially he was a court moor, like a servant, basically. Then he became a noble moor as he was climbing the social ladder. Finally, he became a priestly moor when he reached the climax of his career. And then he became a physiognomic moor when he was basically identified due to his racial identity. And finally, he became the taxidermized moor. And this is important because we know from historical sources that around this time, let's say late 18th century, there were about 40 people of African origins in Vienna. And most of them died at a young age. So Angelo Soliman's presence there and his erudition both made him a very special citizen of the city. And this is why in the history of the European Enlightenment, Angelo's character has usually been connected with Enlightenment notions like, you know, the great chain of beings or the racial contracts or as, you know, Felicia also mentioned, quote unquote, race science today, which was also connected to biblical stories back then, like being black, being Noah's curse.

So Angelo Soliman's story is deeply rooted in Enlightenment philosophy and Enlightenment notions of the human being and human rights, even. And here you just can see the work of a contemporary Austrian artist who created this installation. She created the box of the object, which were owned by Angelo Soliman in his lifetime, which are there, to your left, yes, which are actually symbols of his position in Viennese society. And the other picture shows the object with which he was exhibited with, you know, like Egyptian pyramids and objects which are absolutely not connected to his real identity. So this is why we can claim that when we read Angelo Soliman's historical character he is an example of what we can call representational violence. Because the violence which was committed against his body was many things. But representational violence is one notion we could use. And this is where I would like to briefly rely on Anne McClintock's book 'Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest'. This is a really exciting source, I would say. And if you do research on the consumer culture of the Victorian era, I think this is a really resourceful book.

Now, let me jump to my second topic, the novel itself, after this really brief historical introduction. So this novel, as I've mentioned, is also available in German as 'Der Ausgestopfte Barbar'. Just as a side note, let me mention that the Hungarian author, Gergely Peterfy, he wanted to call this novel 'The Stuffed Negro', but his own publisher told him that he just cannot publish a novel in 2014 with that title, which I think was a really good advice he was given. So that's why he chose the word barbarian, which is, of course, equally a heavily loaded notion, but it conjures up maybe different associations.

Now, the novel has a typically postmodern framework, by which I mean that it has a framed narrative. The novel is actually narrated by a woman, the wife of the Hungarian writer and language reformer, Ferenc Kazinczy, who lived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. And in real life, Ferenc Kazinczy, this Hungarian author, was good friends with Angelo Soliman. And the novel is, in a way, the story of this strange friendship these two men had, because Angelo Soliman was an outsider because he was black, and Kazinczy was an outsider in his own country, Hungary, because he was too progressive for his own era. As a language reformer, you know, he invented new words in Hungarian language. So they actually shared an experience of being outcasts in their own society. So the novel starts when the widow of Ferenc Kazinczy is standing in the Vienna Museum looking at the Stuffed Barbarian. And actually, we hear the story through her narrative. And she's looking into the glass eyes of this figure, and she thinks about the word Ferenc Kazinczy, her husband, created. This is the word 'Remember', and I will get back to what this means, but she starts to see Angelo as this remember notion. So this is why this topic actually connects, I think, very well with the previous panel on the museum space as a cultural space, because in a way, the whole novel is framed by this museum visit. There we see the exhibit of Angelo Soliman.

Now, maybe one more word about the novel itself. In the picture here, you can see the author, Gergely Peterfy. I know it shouldn't matter, but I just wanted you to see him. He's a contemporary Hungarian author and, you know, he's one of those postmodern authors, who first write a PhD about the research topic, and they also write a novel on it. He is actually an academic as well. He wrote the PhD about Ferenc Kazinczy and the Enlightenment era in Hungary and then he used this research to write this novel. Actually, it took him 10 years to write this novel and to do all the research. And actually, the novel is quite exciting in terms of Enlightenment history as well. So this is how he chose the widow of Kazinczy as the narrator of the story and, you know, this woman, Sophie, says that Angelo was the history of his kin and by his own contemporaries, he was seen as the enemy, an animal, a stranger in

Europe. So Angelo Soliman was the ultimate other, let's say, for Enlightenment era Viennese society and European culture as such.

Now, this is where I get back to this special coinage, Ferenc Kazinczy created the word 'Emember'. In English, it could be expressed as a hu-human, because 'ember' in Hungarian means human and emember is like a kind of a superhuman, more human than an average human, which basically means for Ferenc Kazinczy's Enlightenment thinking that it's a person who is capable of bettering themselves and moving beyond the bounds of social determination. And this is what Angelo Solomon managed to achieve in his life and this is what was eventually radically disrespected by the emperor and his own social and cultural environment. And again, you can see a passage from the novel itself, what we can mean by this notion of the emember, this, let's say, superhuman or hu-human person. So the Western spiritual emember is set against the Eastern physical barbarian: The emember is the cultured man, the erudite man. The Western man. The emember is Ulysses and Faust and Don Giovanni. The emember is the reducticated man who doubled himself, who did everything to become better, to become more. The emember is the freemason, the adept. The emember is the artist. The emember is the philosopher, the scientist, the poet.

So this is the notion of Kazinczy's emember and this is what he saw in Angelo Soliman, as opposed to what, you know, the Viennese, the, uh, government did to him.

Now, I continue with one more slide about the novel. Actually, the picture is an illustration. And I wonder if you can guess the story where this is taken from. Because in the Hungarian reception of the novel, uh, thank you so much. Uh, uh, we very often compare Angelo Soliman's character with this Shakespearean figure, you know, Caliban, as this hybrid of the noble savage and the civilized person. Actually, I will run through this slide quite quickly, okay? But I just collected basically the Hungarian reception of this novel. It's been called an anti-Diodon's (?) novel, Umberto Eco kind of cultural thriller or meta-novel. The Pelivan trope has been mentioned very often, how the novel is about xenophobia, and a critique of the Enlightenment project as such. The memoir, a novel about the basic dichotomies of European culture, like, for instance, cosmopolitanism and provincialism. So all of these are potential contexts to read the novel in. And actually, Angelo Soliman has also inspired a filmic version. I just mentioned this in half a sentence. I will not talk about this film, but it shows that his character has already inspired literary and filmic pieces in the 21st century.

Yes, and here you can see one of the most exciting examples of this post-colonial analysis of Angelo Soliman's story. In Vienna, there was a very exciting project some years ago, a special exhibition entitled 'Angelo Soliman, an African in Vienna', in the museum, which was a really well-received exhibition offering a really diverse reading and the critique of Angelo Soliman's treatment in European culture. This piece was one of the works of art created for this exhibition.

Okay, and as just a short list, you can see two other novels by Dusan Simcoe (?) and Robert Musil, both of which actually mention the historical figure of Angelo Soliman. So actually, he is quite often depicted in 20th and 21st century European literature especially in a post-colonial light.

Okay, now to finish, to offer some points of analysis. Actually, at this point in this research, I have more questions than answers, but these are the questions I am currently working on. Like these, for instance:

What is the ethical behavior posterity can offer to Soliman's body once it has been irredeemably deprived of its privacy?

Had the mummy survived, should he be kept in the cellar of a museum, like the embalmed body of Sarah Bartman, which was mentioned today before the repatriation, or the hot-tempted Venus, to use the racist term from her past? Or could it be displayed as the auto-icon of Jeremy Bentham, the Enlightenment era philosopher?

How should 21st century Europe look, gaze, or stare at the history of Soliman's remains?

So what ways can a novel like this offer to us? What should we do with bodies and stories like his?

And here you can actually see the two famous mummies I've mentioned before, you know, Sarah Bartman's body and Jeremy Bentham's body.

Now, I do not have time to elaborate on this, but I'm sure all of you are familiar with both of these stories, which could actually be read as two radically opposing cultural narratives about the objectification of the body, the white male European body, and the black female African body, but I think we have heard really insightful comments on this today, so I will just jump to my conclusion.

This is one more slide about this parallel. Maybe just one thing from this slide, you know, in the field of disability studies, they make a distinction between two ways of looking at a body, which is other: the gaze and the stare. And, you know, the gaze is more of a desirous look, and the stare is more like a look we use when we are seeing something disturbing or something bizarre. And I think Angelo Soliman's body in the book is actually a body, which invites both desire and fear at the same time. And this is why we can ultimately read his body as an example of Enlightenment-era scientific racism and objectification, instrumentalization and barbarization. And the literary piece, in the case of the novel, it can be read as a story about the writing of history itself offering the critique to the writing of history itself.

And this is really my last point. I find Pagé's (?) theory quite interesting here. He mentions three attitudes towards the stranger in literature: Mania, when we find a stranger to be superior. Phobia, when we find them inferior. And Philia, when we see them as our equals. And I think these are actually all present in the case of Angelo Soliman and this is why we can also see his story as an inspiration for the history of human rights in European culture.

And on my final slide, you can see one image from this Vienna exhibition from 2011, which in a way, tried to finally show proper respect to Angelo Soliman and his body and his story. And why does this story, matter, especially in Hungary today? Let me really, this is my final sentence, I promise, a sentence from the author Gergely Peterfy: The fact that an anti-enlightenment, anti-rationalist, obscurantist, esoteric, social and political idea has prevailed in Hungary today is hopefully only a bizarre detour that will soon come to an end.

This is why this novel also speaks, I think, to our present day reality in Hungary. Thank you for your patience and your attention.

PRIVACY AND DEATH was organized by Felicia Fricke and Natacha Klein Käfer with the support of the Centre for Privacy Studies and the Conference Grant of the Carlsberg Foundation.

The Privacy Studies Podcast is produced with the support of the Centre for Privacy Studies at the University of Copenhagen funded by the Danish National Research Foundation. This podcast is released under creative license attribution non-commercial share alike.

Thank you so much for listening.