International Journal of Education and Humanities
ISSN: 2770-6702 | Vol. 25, No. 2, 2026

Liminal Spaces and the Search for Identity in *Washington Black*

Qingjie Zeng[a]

Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, China
[a]waddles0109@163.com

Abstract: Canadian writer Esi Edugyan's Washington Black traces the ourney of Washington Black, an enslaved black boy, and depicts the fluidity of his identity and his psychological trauma within liminal spaces. Drawing on Victor Turner's theory of rites of passage, this article examines three dimensions: the confinement of the enslaved identity in the separation stage, the struggle of the marginal figure in the liminal stage, and the failure of social incorporation and the resulting uncertainty about identity in the absence of the aggregation stage. It argues that slavery and racism systematically undermine black identity formation and leave individuals under structural oppression in a condition of perpetual displacement.

Keywords: Washington Black, Esi Edugyan, Liminal Space, Rites of Passage.

1. Introduction

Washington Black, a distinguished novel by Canadian writer Esi Edugyan, won the 2018 Scotiabank Giller Prize and was shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker Prize. Edugyan, a Canadian novelist of Ghanaian descent, has long centered the experiences of black diasporic subjects in her work, exploring themes of belonging, displacement, and historical memory across her fiction. As her third novel, *Washington Black* achieved widespread critical acclaim and has since become a key text in contemporary studies of black Atlantic literature. The novel tells, from an unusual first-person retrospective perspective, the story of Washington Black's flight from a sugar plantation in Barbados and his subsequent peripatetic journey of escape and self-discovery across the Americas, the Arctic, and Europe, presenting a deeply moving narrative of survival, creativity, and struggle against structural oppression. While existing scholarship on *Washington Black* has largely focused on its engagement with the history of slavery, its narrative form as a neo-slave narrative, and its exploration of scientific imagination, few studies have systematically examined the novel's spatial politics through the anthropological framework of rites of passage. This article approaches *Washington Black* through Victor Turner's influential theory of rites of passage and explores how its representation of liminal spaces shapes the protagonist's fractured search for identity.

The concept of liminality was first systematically introduced by French folklorist Arnold van Gennep in his foundational work *The Rites of Passage*, where he analyzed the symbolic structure of rituals that mark individual transitions between social statuses. According to van Gennep, every complete rite of passage consists of three successive phases: separation, liminality, and aggregation, each corresponding to a particular symbolic relationship to the existing social order. Victor Turner, a pioneering figure in 20th-century symbolic anthropology, later inherited and substantially developed this theory, placing particular emphasis on the cultural and psychological dynamics of the liminal period. In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner elaborates on the theory of rites of passage as a universal model of social transition. For Turner, a rite of passage is a process that indicates and constitutes transitions between states [1]. The separation stage is the first phase, in which the ritual subject is detached from an existing social role or status, symbolizing a rupture with the previous identity. The subject leaves behind the role and obligations associated with the former group and prepares to enter a new social position or stage. Liminality is the second, and for Turner most consequential, phase. He describes it as an interstructural situation: the subject is caught between two states, having lost the old identity without yet acquiring a new one, and therefore occupies an ambiguous, paradoxical position outside of normal social hierarchies. Aggregation is the third and final phase, marking the completion of the rite of passage. The subject is formally incorporated into a new social status or group. It's in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-a-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type [2].

In *Washington Black*, however, the protagonist's life trajectory systematically subverts this three-phase ritual structure. He experiences violent separation from the enslaved social order and endures an extended period of liminal wandering, but never reaches full aggregation into a new, stable social identity; the absence of a meaningful aggregation stage leaves him in a prolonged, seemingly permanent liminal condition. He escapes from a plantation defined by the dehumanizing oppression of slavery and embarks on an uncertain journey across continents, undergoing repeated, forced transformations of identity across different social spaces. From an enslaved person confined and objectified by plantation society to a mobile, precarious marginal figure, he continually attempts to locate himself within new social worlds, only to encounter repeated setbacks and exclusions under the inescapable shadow of white racism. His struggle and search within liminality are not merely an account of Washington's individual fate; they also reveal the broader predicament of black people under chattel slavery and the profound, lasting distortion of individual identity caused by systemic racism. By tracing Washington's failed rite of passage, the novel demonstrates that for black subjects in a white-dominated society, the transition from enslavement to freedom is never a linear ritual with a clear

endpoint, but an ongoing, unfinished struggle against structural exclusion.

2. Separation: The Confinement and Trauma of the Enslaved Identity

Anthropologist Victor Turner defines the phase of separation as a symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both [2]. In traditional ritual contexts, separation is often marked by symbolic actions of death, purification, or removal from the community, as the subject sheds their old identity to prepare for transformation. In *Washington Black*, Washington enters a state of separation on both emotional and physical levels long before he physically flees the plantation: emotionally, he experiences the alienation and abandonment of Big Kit, the only person with whom he has enjoyed genuine intimacy; physically, he is subjected to the routine violence and dehumanizing abuse of the plantation regime, which systematically strips him of any sense of self-worth. The plantation itself functions as a space of enforced separation, cutting its enslaved inhabitants off from family, culture, and basic human agency, effectively trapping them in a permanent state of social death from which escape is the only possible form of separation.

The plantation's brutal living environment is an objective condition that forces Washington into the separation stage, shaping every aspect of his early identity. At the beginning of the novel, eleven-year-old Washington Black lives on Faith Plantation, a remote Barbadian sugar estate that resembles a dark, open-air prison saturated with the everyday violence of chattel slavery and serving as the primary source of his lifelong trauma. The novel depicts the plantation's oppression through unflinching scenes of bodily punishment, mutilation, and terror that structure the daily lives of the enslaved. Washington recalls seeing enslaved men limping into the fields with blood running down their legs from whippings, women with blood-soaked bandages around their ears from having them nailed to posts as punishment, and other enslaved people subjected to grotesque, arbitrary punishment for even the smallest infractions. Such experiences make the enslaved identity function like a heavy chain binding Washington's body and mind and inflicting profound damage on his developing sense of self. Under slavery, he is deprived of basic human rights--individual will and value are disregarded, and he is reduced to the status of property, known only by the name his enslaver has given him. As a quintessential space of slavery, the plantation bears witness to the suffering of countless Black people, and Washington is trapped within it while quietly longing to escape the violence that defines his existence. Even the natural landscape of the island, with its lush cane fields and tropical heat, is transformed into a space of exploitation and danger, as every part of the environment is organized around the extraction of enslaved labor.

Emotional estrangement from Big Kit is a catalyst for Washington's separation, deepening the psychological wounds of plantation life. Before he meets Titch, Big Kit is the only person who offers him warmth and protection in the harsh world of the plantation. A large, formidable enslaved woman with a reputation for toughness, she functions almost as a guardian of his childhood, shielding him from the bullying of other enslaved people and occupying the place of an absent mother. Washington remembers her sharing scraps of food with him, defending him from older boys who would torment him, and speaking to him in a soft, gentle voice no one else ever used. After Washington becomes an assistant to Titch-Christopher Wilde, the plantation owner Erasmus Wilde's eccentric scientific brother-in the construction of the Cloud-cutter, a prototype hot-air balloon, however, Big Kit no longer communicates with him, seemingly erasing him from her world entirely. She avoids his gaze when they pass each other in the yard, refuses to speak to him when he approaches, and acts as if he has become a stranger. Months later, Washington discovers that Big Kit's affection and care have shifted to another young enslaved boy, and the despair of abandonment overwhelms him, leaving him feeling utterly alone in the world. Her emotional neglect, together with the absence of stable parental roles under slavery-where enslaved children were routinely separated from their families and had no legal right to kinship-leaves a lasting attachment trauma in Washington that will shape all his future relationships. The brutal space in which he was born and raised has thus inflicted both physical and psychological wounds, severing his ties to the only community he has ever known and pushing him toward the threshold of separation.

Becoming the scapegoat for a white man's suicide is the immediate trigger for Washington's physical separation from the plantation, turning his psychological alienation into a matter of life and death. Philip, the melancholy and withdrawn cousin of Erasmus and Titch, has long struggled with depression and a sense of purposelessness, and he forms a quiet, tentative bond with Washington during his time on the plantation. Tragically, he shoots himself during a hunting expedition with Washington, far from the main house. Philip's death creates enormous danger for Washington because, regardless of the truth of what happened, when a white man dies in the presence of only one Black person, that Black person is almost inevitably blamed for the death. On Faith Plantation, where the power of white enslavers is absolute and Black life is considered worthless, Washington knows he will be tortured and executed if he returns. Faced with the threat to Washington's life, and fearing the scandal that will follow if Philip's suicide becomes known, Titch decides to flee the plantation with him aboard the Cloud-cutter. In a single, desperate night, Washington's journey of escape therefore begins, launching him out of the fixed structure of plantation slavery and into the uncertain, transitional world of liminality.

3. Liminality: The Wandering and Struggle of the Marginal Figure

The liminality is the transitional condition between separation and aggregation and constitutes the core of the rite of passage. During liminal period, the ritual subject is detached from ordinary social structures and norms and enters an ambiguous, dual condition: transitional beings are neither one thing nor another; or may be both [1]. In traditional ritual contexts, this ambiguous state is temporary, contained within a specific ritual space and time, and it carries with it a certain transformative power. The liminal person is characterized by ambiguous and indeterminate attributes and becomes structurally invisible: neither retaining the former identity nor possessing a new one [2]. After Washington leaves the plantation aboard Titch's Cloud-cutter, he travels through Virginia, the Arctic wilderness, and Nova Scotia, entering precisely such a transitional state. In these open, unbounded geographical spaces, he experiences fleeting moments of

freedom and self-realization while remaining unable to escape the pervasive shadow of white racism that reimposes racial hierarchy at every turn. His journey through these liminal spaces is defined by a fundamental contradiction: the more his physical world expands, the more acutely he feels the social closure that excludes him from full personhood.

Throughout Washington's wandering, the contradiction between open geographical space and closed social space forces him to struggle with the duality of liminality. On the one hand, compared with the plantation-a closed, carceral space saturated with cruelty and hardship-the open spaces through which Washington travels symbolize possibility and freedom. Although he has not yet found a secure place for himself in the world, he is temporarily removed from the direct, constant violence of plantation slavery. Titch presents Washington as a scientific draftsman, and this transformation of status appears to free him from the shackles of his former enslaved identity, at least on the surface. He escapes the backbreaking plantation labor and constant surveillance and is able to walk freely, observe the natural world, draw what he sees, regulate his own work, and control his periods of rest. For the first time in his life, he is treated as a person with skills and intelligence, not as a piece of property. In this sense, sketching allows him to imagine himself as part of a new world, to construct a new identity based on creativity rather than enslavement. As he reflected, these months with Titch had schooled him to believe he could leave all misery behind, he could cast off all violence, outrun a vicious death [3]. The vast, empty landscapes of the Arctic, in particular, represent a radical break from the enclosed world of the plantation: the endless ice and snow have no human laws, no racial hierarchies, no masters and slaves. For a brief time, Washington is able to forget his racial identity and simply exist as a human being exploring the natural world.

On the other hand, white supremacy and discrimination against Black people remain deeply embedded in every social space Washington enters, no matter how geographically remote. The closed social structure of white dominance excludes him at every turn and turns him into a permanent outsider, even when he is standing in the middle of an open landscape. Even when Titch introduces him as a scientific draftsman, Washington is repeatedly subjected to racial slurs and to hostility expressed through white people's language, gazes, and acts of violence. Strangers stare at him in the street, innkeepers refuse to serve him, and men on the street threaten him with violence simply for being Black. Even Titch and his father, Mr. Wilde, who oppose slavery and consider themselves enlightened men, sometimes reproduce a taken-for-granted sense of white superiority that reveals how deeply racial ideology is ingrained. As Henri Lefebvre argues, it is in the most trivial matters that the dominant statements and the archetypes of those statements stand out [4]. Casual exchanges can therefore reveal the racial ideology that Titch and Mr. Wilde struggle to transcend, often without even realizing it. When Titch condemns slavery, he says, "Slavery is a moral stain against us. If anything will keep white men from their heaven, it is this" [3]. This wording can be read as revealing a concern with white moral redemption rather than the lives and dignity of the enslaved. While Washington was drawing a specimen, Mr. Wilde expressed astonishment at his drawing skill: "There is talent there," a remark that "sounding both surprised and unimpressed" Washington "felt both his intense awe and his mockery, as if he were watching some insensible creature perform an unnatural act, as if a hothouse plant had learned to speak" [3]. These small, everyday moments expose the complex emotional and epistemic effects of racial prejudice, showing that even well-meaning white people cannot fully escape the ideological structures of white supremacy.

The ghost of racism also haunts the space of freedom Washington most desires: Nova Scotia, the British colony that many enslaved people flee to in search of emancipation. When Washington arrives in Nova Scotia hoping that reaching Canada will make him a free man, his imagined life of freedom and dignity is quickly shattered. Nova Scotia is also marked by pervasive racial hostility, and white aggression toward Black people is woven into the fabric of everyday life. While struggling to earn a living doing odd jobs, Washington must also avoid white violence, learning which streets to avoid and which neighborhoods are dangerous for Black people. He gradually abandons drawing-effectively giving up part of his ideal self and his most cherished form of self-expression-because he cannot afford paper and ink, and because white people mock his work and tell him that a Black man has no business being an artist. This corresponds to the characteristics Turner associates with liminal persons, who are represented as possessing nothing and have no status, property, insignia,secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system [2]. Washington has left behind the status of "slave", but he has not gained any new, recognized social status; he is nobody, with no rights, no security, and no place in the social order.

During this period, Washington experiences a profound split in the self, a psychological duality that mirrors the spatial duality of his liminal existence. He tastes the sweetness of freedom in open geographical spaces while simultaneously recognizing the pervasive existence of racism in the closed social spaces surrounding him. His movement between these two spaces highlights his status as a social marginal: nowhere can he establish a stable position or a coherent sense of identity. He is no longer a slave, but he is not free either; he is talented and intelligent, but he cannot use his talents to build a life; he longs for connection, but he cannot trust anyone enough to form lasting bonds. Yet beneath this uncertainty and constant dislocation, he continues to hope that his circumstances can be improved and that his marginal condition can be overcome. This fragile hope is what keeps him moving forward, even when every new place he arrives at ultimately disappoints him.

4. The Absence of Aggregation: The Persistent Condition of Marginality

Aggregation is the stage in which the rite of passage is completed, and the subject returns to a stable position within the social structure. At this point, the ritual subject is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and "structural" type, and is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards [1]. For Washington, now older and determined to change his marginal condition, the possibility of aggregation seems to arrive when he reconnects with the world of science and art. He develops a more mature sense of self and seeks to exercise greater control over his own life. He therefore returns to his artistic talent, finds long-term employment as a laborer, slowly rebuilding his sense of purpose. His love of drawing restores a sense of calm and balance to his fractured life. More importantly, his artistic

ability brings major opportunities: the renowned marine biologist Goff invites him to illustrate a new book on marine life, and Goff's daughter Tanna develops genuine feelings for him, seeing him as an equal and a partner. Washington now possesses scientific knowledge and remarkable artistic skill and appears to have found love and friendship. He seems to have moved beyond his former identity as an enslaved Black boy and to have become a complete and free individual, on the verge of full incorporation into a new social world. Yet although he has escaped the plantation as a geographical space, he is never fully accepted by the closed social space of racial hierarchy. Racist ideology continues to exclude Black people from full citizenship and social recognition, making Washington's attempt at social incorporation destined to fail. The absence of aggregation prevents the transition from an old identity to a new one from being completed, leaving the subject permanently in an ambiguous condition.

In this intermediate condition, Washington's identity is suspended, leaving him without a definite place in the social structure: he no longer belongs to the old identity of enslaved property, but he cannot acquire a new identity as a free, respected member of society either. Having matured and educated himself through years of reading and observation, Washington appears to have escaped the limited identity of the enslaved person. Through his drawing talent, scientific knowledge, and the idea of exhibiting living marine specimens, he believes that he has entered the world of science and will be recognized for his contributions. Yet reality repeatedly destroys his hope for the future. Although the original idea for the marine exhibition is his and he helps make it possible through his illustrations and his deep knowledge of marine life, as an insignificant Black man his name will not remain in history. The public remembers Goff as the father of the public aquarium, while Washington Black's achievements as a scientist and innovator remain unknown, erased from the historical record. This erasure is not an accident; it is the logical outcome of a racial social order that refuses to recognize Black people as creators and thinkers.

The absence of aggregation also ruptures social relationships on every level: the relationships and role expectations associated with Washington's former identity cannot be restored, while new ones cannot be fully established. His relationships under slavery have already been broken through the abandonment by Big Kit and later by Titch, who left him for dead in the Arctic wilderness, while new relationships remain difficult to secure because of both external prejudice and internal trauma. Externally, although Mr. Goff respects Washington's abilities as an illustrator and scientist and values his work, he cannot accept Washington-a formerly enslaved man-as a member of his family when Washington's relationship with Tanna becomes intimate. He makes it clear that Washington can never marry Tanna, that he can never be part of their social circle, and that his place will always be that of an employee, not an equal. This rejection is a devastating blow to Washington's hope of social incorporation, as it means that even the people who admire his talents will never accept him as a full human being. Internally, Washington's earlier experiences of abandonment leave him with lasting attachment trauma that makes intimacy almost impossible. Although he desires deep connection with Tanna and loves her deeply, he fears a repetition of the abandonment he has suffered so many times before, and therefore repeatedly avoids close relationships, pushing Tanna away when their feelings grow too strong. The suspension of his social identity and rupture of his social relations once again reveal the negative condition of the liminal person, whom Turner describes as structurally invisible and placed at the margins of society.

As a liminal figure within social space, Washington experiences, on the one hand, the marginality, in-betweenness, and uncertainty produced by exclusion [5]; on the other hand, the liminal stage's critical and heterogeneous character makes stability difficult, producing a sense of having nowhere to belong and gradually transforming identity's in-betweenness into psychological hybridity, heterogeneity, and contradiction [5]. The absence of aggregation therefore condemns Washington to the dual suffering of identity marginalization and psychological hybridity, leaving him perpetually in an unfinished state. After repeated failures to enter the social structure and build a future, Washington begins to seek belonging by returning to the past, hoping that uncovering the truth about his origins will give him a sense of identity. Yet his former relationships have already been severed by the violence of slavery, so this search only reinforces his sense of homelessness and purposelessness. His anxiety and rootlessness make any kind of stable life impossible. Like a bird without feet, he moves continually among towns and countries in search of the truth about his past. He returns to the Barbadian plantation and discovers that Big Kit is his biological mother, who gave him up to protect him from the worst horrors of slavery and who never stopped loving him. He also finds Titch, living in seclusion, and confronts him about why he was abandoned in the Arctic. Yet these journeys of return ultimately prove futile. Learning the truth about his past does not heal Washington's trauma or give him a place in the world; it only confirms that the roots of his identity are buried in the violence of slavery, which cannot be undone.

He cannot escape the ghosts of the past and remains a marginal figure in the world, unable to go back and unable to move forward. At the end of the novel, he crosses a threshold and walks into a vast, swirling sandstorm. Even when Tanna calls after him, begging him to come back, he does not turn back. The ending suggests that Washington ultimately cannot be fully incorporated into white-dominated society and remains an outsider whose existence is fundamentally at odds with the social order. The sandstorm, as a final liminal space, represents both the uncertainty of his future and his refusal to accept the limited identity that society has assigned him.

5. Conclusion

Washington Black tells the story of an enslaved Black boy, Washington Black, who leaves a sugar plantation in Barbados, undergoes a series of extraordinary adventures across continents, and searches tirelessly for freedom and a coherent sense of identity. Organized around Washington's physical and psychological journey, the novel traces his difficult transformation from an enslaved person to a mobile marginal figure and finally to a person trapped in an inescapable condition of permanent marginality. This trajectory not only represents the protagonist's individual growth and struggle but also embodies an incomplete rite of passage, structured by the violent logic of slavery and racism.

During the separation stage on the plantation, violence under slavery and the absence of stable familial attachment become heavy chains that constrain Washington's identity, reducing him to property and cutting him off from human connection. Philip's suicide serves as the catalyst that begins

his difficult journey toward transformation, launching him out of the fixed structure of plantation life. During the years of liminality that follow, the openness of geographical space contrasts sharply with the closure of racialized social space. The promise of freedom offered by Washington's new identity as a scientific draftsman is repeatedly overwhelmed by everyday racism and exclusion, leaving him suspended between freedom and discrimination and deeply uncertain about who he is. The absence of aggregation becomes the decisive obstacle to his incorporation into society, as white supremacy systematically denies him the social recognition that would allow a stable new identity. Although his artistic talent and scientific intelligence bring him opportunities and love, racism relentlessly excludes him from full membership in society. The suspension of his social identity and the rupture of his social relationships leave him unable to find a place of psychological belonging as he oscillates between returning to the past and attempting to embrace the future. He ultimately moves forward alone into the sandstorm, becoming a perpetual wanderer at the margins of society.

The novel thus offers a profound literary representation of the enduring trauma inflicted by slavery upon Black people and of the long-term distortion and obstruction of Black identity by systemic racism, turning historical suffering into a lasting literary imprint. By framing Washington's struggle through the structure of a failed rite of passage, Edugyan demonstrates that emancipation is not a single event or a clear ritual transition, but an ongoing, unfinished process. For black people living under white supremacy, the liminal state is not a temporary phase on the way to a new stable identity; it can become a permanent condition, a life lived in the space between exclusion and belonging. In this way, *Washington Black* does not just tell the story of one man's life; it bears witness to the structural violence that continues to shape Black diasporic identities, inviting readers to confront the long afterlives of slavery in the modern world.

References

[1] Turner, V. W. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Cornell University Press.

[2] Turner, V. W. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine Publishing.

[3] Edugyan, E. (2018). *Washington Black*. Knopf.

[4] Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Basil Blackwell.

[5] Wang, W. (2016). Understanding Homi K. Bhabha's idea of liminal space. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 37(2), 122–130. https://doi.org/10.16078/j.tribeton.2016.02.014