“The Longest Memory and Black Diggers both show us that there are short-term and long-term ramification of racism.” Discuss

Conceptions of physical difference and cultural notions of humanity have always been at the core of racism and sought to create whites as superior and blacks as inferior. In an attempt to caution readers and encourage reflection about racism and how it infects societies, Tom Wright and Fred D’Augiar explore through their respective texts ‘Black Diggers’ and ‘The Longest Memory’, the immediate consequences of racism on individuals, as well as the effects of systemic racism on culture and society. Swiftly condemning racism, D’Augiar and Wright show that racism is cloaked by depictions intended, by some, to make it seem justified and respectable yet we are likely to condemn this and empathise with the obvious victim who is subject to the direct and chronic ramifications of the racial injustice.

D’Aguiar and Wright show that all types of racism are destined to cause ongoing trauma in both the short and the long terms. Whitechapel well understood the dishonour and degradation associated with enslavement and though he was able to hide his contempt for the people who enslaved him, he authoritatively declared that “there are two types of slaves.” Aware that he was stigmatized as inferior, uncivilized, and even bestial, Whitechapel knew how to operate in the systemic oppression he was born into. Given that the novel opens with the title “Remembering” and we are immediately taken into Whitechapel’s world, it is clear that the long-term ramifications of racism haunt him and it isn’t until his death that he is able to forget. In spite of the difference in time and location, Black Diggers also emphasises how racism proved divisive and unjust. Like Whitechapel, Bertie’s Mum and Grandad share in the wisdom of the elderly who have witnessed the systemic nature of racism and thus have come to the conclusion that the discrimination will continue for “a very long time.” Analogous to D’Augiar’s viewpoint, Wright highlights the constant limitations and boundaries placed in front of the Aboriginals as a result of the ongoing prejudice. In Bertie’s Mum’s recount of the Narrandera Show, Wright reveals through the indelible imagery of Bertie and his sister “lounging on the barbed wire like a pair of skinned rats”, that the segregation results in Aboriginal children being denied the adventures and experiences of childhood which other children receive. This exclusion is seen to continue on to the time of enlistment where we see the struggles of Ern, Bob and Norm who are “fenced out” from serving their country because they are not “substantially European”. The short term and long term consequences of racism prove to undermine black people’s rights to determine their own future on equal footing with the white community.

By displaying societies which perpetuate and institutionalise racism, Wright and D’Augiar explore the ramifications of inbred racist values on the society, and how racism creates division even among those of the same race. In The Longest Memory the majority of the Plantation Owners share The Virginian's viewpoint in that they see “no end to slavery”, and are rather predatory in their attitudes in an attempt to preserve their power and increase their wealth by means of racial injustice. By using the Bible as justification for their actions, the White supremacists are seen to institutionalise racism. However this institutionalisation of racism isolates those whose values differ from the general consensus. It is Mr Whitechapel’s view that a “happy slave” is a “more productive worker”. Torn between his own morals and those of his peers regarding how a plantation should be run, he faces their derision and mockery. His ironic feeling of
driving into a “lions’ den” rather than the Gentleman’s club is meant to showcase his isolation among “men [he] has known all [his] life.” Staging the flip side of such a situation in a similar manner, Black Diggers indicates through the scene with Harry and the Aggressive Private that a single person who holds a racist attitude among many who don’t can also be subject to isolation and mockery. As the other soldiers “pile on” the Aggressive Private and “beat him up”, he is the one who ends up being “shown what’s what”. Furthermore, we see characters being shunned for standing up against the discriminatory actions and for the rights of the oppressed. Lydia, in her letter to The Virginian, suggests that Virginia is not progressive in its beliefs “that slavery [is] a static and stable institution” and consequently she subtly pushes her agenda to bring an end to slavery. As a result she is condemned for her ideologies and ridiculed for exhibiting “a love for blacks.” Similarly in Black Diggers, Archie is told to spend a bit of time “off the property” by his own mates for “stirrin’ things up” when he tries to bring change by standing up for his own people. With their thoughts clouded by years of racialism, Archie’s mates are unable to see the possibilities of a prejudice free society and therefore dis disconnects themselves from a “changed” Archie. Therefore the institutionalised racism in societies serves to segregate those with diverging views resulting in their short-term exclusion and long-term isolation.

The long lasting effects of racism are most evident in the collective memory of a culture. In an effort to caution against tolerating racism, both Wright and D’Augiar explore the importance of ancestral memory and the trauma experienced by the Australian and American cultures as a result of discrimination. Individual traumatic memory is turned into collective memory in both the novel and the play leading to centuries of slavery in Virginia and a loss of personal and social identity for the diggers in Australia. Wright’s play is staged in a way such that, although each characters’ experiences of WWI are different, their stories at an individual level can be applied to a wider historical level reflecting the functioning of an entire society. Just as the in the monologue of the Old Soldier where Ern is forced to remember the “leftover bits of war” through the strong metaphor of the “iron harvest”, Whitechapel is also strained to remember and “resurrect” the pain caused by the trauma of slavery as his “mouth tastes death”. The iron harvest is symbolic of the torture and pain many of the returned Aboriginal servicemen would have undergone as a result of the prejudice in Australia which forced them to return to drudgery and oppression without any recognition of their sacrifices. However Ern views the harvest under a slight hint of positive light suggesting that these memories are now “out of” him. Furthermore, Ern’s presumption that his grandkids “probably lost” the “bits” of his iron harvest implies the lack of interest his family has in his service. What results is many tombs like that of the “Unknown Soldier”, where soldiers lay with their identities lost and their contributions unrecognized. Unlike Wright, who highlights the significance of remembering the service of the Aboriginal soldiers and keeping the memories alive, D’Augiar suggests through Whitechapel’s attempt of retrieving repressed memories that the traumatic memory need to be inhibited. However it is only through death that Whitechapel is able to forget the trauma caused by the long-term ramifications of racism. This along with the title of the novel, The Longest Memory, explains the ancestral memory of slavery and discrimination as it is continued throughout the generations. Furthermore, Whitechapel’s isolation from his
own family after Chapel's death highlights how the harsh and discriminatory Plantation can drastically impact family relations. Emphasizing the struggles of forgetting the indelible stains left by racism, the great granddaughter of Whitechapel regrets “doing nothing” to support him during Chapel's whipping death. The changing of the title of this chapter from Great Granddaughter in the contents page to Great Grandmother in the chapter could be considered as a symbol of the long lasting feelings of guilt and memories caused by the trauma from racism. Therefore, both authors convey through their texts that the trauma which results from discrimination leaves relatively permanent stains on the cultures and relations.

Ultimately, both texts demonstrate that the effects of racism are not only momentary but can also be everlasting. It becomes clear that racism infects the lives of all individuals in the community and while it tended to be the Blacks who were the obvious victim, so too, were White people trapped by the inbred cultural values. Cautioning readers against the tolerance of racism, both Wright and D'Augiar encourage reflection about racism and a lesson to be learned from history.