‘The hardest element to overcome in combating racism is the entrenched ideas that have justified it.’

Compare how the two text portray the entrenched ideas that are used to justify racism and unequal treatment

The Age of European Imperialism brought forth with it silenced brutality, its oppressive narrative prevailing through the generations of those trapped by racial exploitation. The novella ‘The Longest Memory’, written by author Fred D’Aguiar, and play ‘Black Diggers’, by playwright Tom Wright, replies to the entrenched “residue” of neglect and violence towards the Indigenous and American slave minorities. Whilst there were many influencing factors that contributed to the justification of racism, the novella and play both highlight the literal and metaphorical shackles of oppression as a direct result of deeply entrenched ‘White Man’ values stemming from colonial expansion. Whilst given the choice to either be silent or fight, ultimately, unjust treatment and racism could not be overcome with the imbalance of power in the system. Thus, both texts reveal the importance of uncovering forgotten stories, to challenge the cultural caricature of the ANZAC digger and African-American slave.

Both D’Aguiar and Wright blame the Western attitude that coloured peoples were uncivilised and subhuman, that perpetuated racism and unequal treatment. The promotion of the “white Christian brother” over others, allowed authorities like ‘The Virginian’ to give instruction on how slaves should be managed as a “business”. In compliance, The Virginian’s economic grounds were continuously defended and perpetuated by slave trade owners who think of what “best serves [their] investment”, revealing a lack of collective responsibility. Unlike D’Aguiar who largely places blame on bystanders motivated by private economic dealings, Wright argues that entrenched oppression of new peoples in order to raise them from ‘barbarism’, has lead to the subjugation of Indigenous Australians. From the outset of the play, the taxidermist believes he has saved Nigel “back from the dead”, however Wright uses this to highlight how British colonialists wrongly thought that it was impossible for Aboriginals to achieve civility without white assistance and control. Likewise, this controlled racial exclusion excluded Indigenous men within the British ideal of an “extraordinary specimen”. Unlike the Virginian, the wireless message neglects to mention black minorities in order to exonerate racial exclusion, as exemplified in Grandad’s words to Bertie: “Australia. Never heard of it...Must be a magic fairyland somewhere”. As such, both D’Aguiar and Wright pinpoint the white man’s intentions to control and subjugate, as a cause of the lasting racism and unjust treatment.

D’Aguiar and Wright expose the convenient personal truths, which has allowed the fight to overcome racism be buried. D’Aguiar depicts the plantation owners using racism as a means to control and subjugate their slaves, and thus “split in two...by contrary reasonings”, Mr Whitechapel struggles between his Christian values and the societal expectations from his peers. Whilst Mr Whitechapel treats his slaves with “civility, fairness and even kindness” his actions do not fight for individual rights and even perpetuates the ideal of “a good slave” that is practiced by Whitechapel. In opposite extremes, “sit down grandfather” bears a meaningless load of servitude, while his son Chapel is symbolic of the shifting hope and “paradise” freedom offers. Whitechapel’s resignation and sorrow has physically manifested on his face where he has become too numb to wipe away the “trickle of saliva” down his chin. Similar to D’Aguiar, Wright exposes an equally ingrained concept of white superiority where Indigenous Australian’s small moments of resistance did not change the unjust system. Bob, Ern and Norm’s recruitment highlight not only the mocking of authority but also the seemingly innocent hope possessed by the young Indigenous men. Mirroring Chapel’s emerging hope in The Longest Memory, the youth’s use of humour and mockery achieves a small resistance in defying being “substantially European”. Whereas Bertie’s
mum, like Whitechapel, represents the older generation whom have resigned to the fact that they “won’t be allowed through the wire”, as crafted in Wright’s analogy encompassing the segregation of the Indigenous peoples. Both D’Aguiar and Wright show how contorted lies have blossomed in the “retreat of the shadows”, at the expense of fighting racism.

Shown through a polyphonic storyline, the fabricated and entrenched racism has lead to lasting psychological and physical trauma. D’Aguiar establishes that resistance was futile as the system’s oppression and drudgery could only lead to tragedy. Ironically, it is Sanders Junior, like his father who brought so much pain and disquiet, who ends up “killing [his] half brother”, thus showing that buried lies and stories manifest into tragic actions. D’Aguiar perpetuates the idea that it is not only slaves who are oppressed through the generations, but punishment and cruelty also transpires from overseer to overseer. Furthermore, upon his death Whitechapel’s principle for a slave which occasioned him to be termed “a slaver’s dream” have in reality simply been a recipe for misery, parallel to the slave who has “licked out all the pots in Sorrow’s kitchen”. As a consequence of the entrenched values, Whitechapel ultimately discovers that he has solidified the servitude of his people. Whilst having higher expectations that things “will be different” than D’Aguiar’s slaves, Wright also depicts Indigenous war veterans as being equally powerless to enact widespread social change. The “fragments of story” mixed with emotional responses represent the disorienting and shellshocked psychological trauma which Indigenous Australians experienced. Despite this they returned to a country which refused to bestow the same respect and gratitude that their “white colleagues expect as a matter of course”. Indeed, the Discharged Soldier’s Settlement Act of 1917, neglected Indigenous soldiers and took away Aboriginal land. Mick, the embodiment of the forlorn struggle of Indigenous Australians for justice, has realised that “the war...it’s never going to end”, for Indigenous Australians. It is through “short sharp scenes” that Wright and D’Aguiar emphasise the silenced voices and tragic resignation from racist and superior attitudes.

With the hope of never repeating the atrocities of the past, D’Aguiar’s and Wright’s texts speak volumes about the importance of remembering forgotten narratives and in doing so, return American slave’s and Indigenous Australian’s dignity. Recognising the cruel “residue”, of slavery present even today, D’Aguiar prompts his readers to critically “recognise the true” scar covering America’s history. Through symbols of intellect and compassion, like Chapel, D’Aguiar assures that racism is a fabricated concept that has resulted in divisions based on skin colour. D’Aguiar also scrutinises modern American society, and poses the question of how far America has really come in acknowledging their slave past. Much like The Longest Memory, Black Diggers places a mirror in front of contemporary Australia and challenges us to find the “black faces” reflected in our history. Black Diggers provides Australians a “prism” to put together a “bigger truth” to change the homogenous views of who we were and who our soldiers were in World War 1. Both Enoch and Wright tell the Indigenous narrative in order to further the reconciliation movement and, much like D’Aguiar, shows far we have left to go to acknowledge our Indigenous brothers in postcolonial Australia. Choosing to tell the narratives of forgotten minorities, D’Aguiar’s and Wright’s lyric exploration of Indigenous diggers and slaves, depicts how the entrenched attitudes of the ‘White Man’ prevented racism from being overcome. Highlighting two crucial attributes of human status: a name and a memory, both authors seek to implant place these forgotten stories into knowledge of their readers.