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Of Victims, Perpetrators and  
Implicated Subjects: Mapping  
Trauma and Sexist/Racist  
Violence in  
US Ethnic Women's Fiction of the  
2010s

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OF VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS AND IMPLICATED  
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SEXIST/RACIST VIOLENCE IN  
US ETHNIC WOMEN'S FICTION OF THE 2010S

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## TESIS DOCTORAL/ PhD THESIS

### Of Victims, Perpetrators and Implicated Subjects: Mapping Trauma and Sexist/Racist Violence in US Ethnic Women's Fiction of the 2010s

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# INTRODUCTION

## TRANSMODERN NARRATIVES OF ETHNIC RESISTANCE

Texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.

—Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*

Since the origins of human civilisation, oral and written literature have always reflected on reality, both in the sense of mirroring or representing the world and in the sense of providing commentary on it, often opening it up for debate and improvement. Not surprisingly, then, in the last decades, writers have been reacting to the end of the so-called “postmodern condition” (Lyotard 1979), brought on by the socio-political, economic and philosophical changes that have occurred from the late 1980s onwards (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017). These social and cultural transformations have given way to the emergence of a new cultural paradigm—lately accounted for by scholars around the world (Rodríguez Magda 2004, 2011; Dussel 2002; Moraru 2011; Ateljevic 2013; Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017)—which has found a significant reflection in literature.

In 1989 Spanish philosopher María Rodríguez Magda coined the term “Transmodernity” to define the new *zeitgeist* derived from a developing “globalised, rhizomatic, technological society” (2004, 3, my translation), which, according to this thinker, originated around the fall of Berlin Wall and was confirmed—and also transformed—after the 9/11 attacks (2011, 2-4). Rodríguez Magda calls the new shift Transmodernity because to her, the prefix “trans-” ultimately holds the defining characteristics of our contemporary society such as constant *transformation*, the *transmissibility* of information in real time, *transgenic* experimentation,

*transculturalism* as well as *transnational* occurrences and immigration (6). Likewise, this prefix clearly encapsulates this thinker's contention that Transmodernity is not a rupture with preceding paradigms (Modernity and Postmodernity) but a continuation and transcendence of their premises (2004, 8).

Besides Rodríguez Magda, other scholars like Enrique Dussel (2002) regard the emerging zeitgeist as an opportunity to recuperate Third World (hi)stories through the dismantling of the centre/periphery binary promoted by Western Modernity and Postmodernity. As we can notice, the paradigm shift was initially seen as a ray of hope, heralding the end of totalising Grand Narratives and of our capitalist culture's selfishness and individualism or even claiming the change from a culture of egology and self-centredness to a culture of ecology and ethical interconnectedness (Moraru 2011). Nevertheless, Rodríguez Magda has recently warned about the risks of understanding Transmodernity as a utopian paradigm (2019, 25). As the new millennium has demonstrated, globalisation has brought in its wake many positive aspects like transculturalism and interconnectedness, but it has also initiated shameful ones like the rise of nationalisms and "geopolitical blocks" all over the world (26), as well as the global financial crisis fomented by a ruthless neoliberal system whose effects have provoked more inequality and egotism (31). This philosopher thus argues that the current paradigm shift should not only serve to describe our period; it must also "transcend" former faults and fight the negative consequences of globalisation (27). Accordingly, she claims for the creation of "narratives of the limit" or "of resistance" which, in lieu of celebrating "the festive aspect of our globalised and techno-euphoric society" (25), explore our new reality in a rigorous manner (21).

One of the key defining issues of our current reality—made visible in the numerous global protests and social movements around it—is the persistence of sexism

and the sustained attacks against women, especially those of colour. Sadly, one out of three women in the world suffers physical or sexual violence today (UN Women 2021; WHO 2021) and, in the United States, every nine out of ten victims of sexual assault and rape are women (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network 2021). If this were not bad enough, the information becomes even more shocking when one observes data about physical and sexual violence perpetrated against racialised women in this country. It is a proven fact that women of colour are more likely to be raped than white women and, what is more, they are less prone to inform about the aggression (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). This renders violence against women of colour largely invisible.

According to Waqar Azmi—former European Union ambassador for intercultural dialogue—“the root of these crimes is the dehumanisation of others—the belief that the perpetrator is superior by reason of sex, race or nationality, and has the right to control, humiliate or hurt their victim” (2017, n.p.). Azmi coincides with Susan Schechter, author of *Women and Male Violence*, who remarks that violence against women is rooted in the ideology of male supremacy and domination which manifests in the family and is reinforced by the political and economic institutions as well as the sexist division of labour in our capitalist society (1982, 209). Thus, as Azmi and Schechter seem to suggest notwithstanding the time span between their publications, the violence suffered by women is not founded on the gender factor only; it is provoked by an intersectional oppression where gender, social, economic, cultural and political factors coincide.

The intersectional nature of this violence becomes all the more evident when one analyses the aggressions suffered by women of colour. As black feminist scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw has theorised (1989, 1991), the oppression experienced by racialised women cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, for different variables work simultaneously producing “various forms of inequality” that “often operate



together and exacerbate each other” (2020, n.p.). After all, as bell hooks defends in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, the brutality suffered by women is inextricably related to the violence inherent in every context of power relations. In fact, hooks points to the “Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority” as the cause of male violence against women and any other form of aggression between the dominant and the dominated (1984, 118). This implies, hooks explains, that in our society individuals in general accept and perpetuate the use of force to exert or maintain their power over others and they will continue to do so until the elimination of such a thought system enables the end of any oppressive ideology (118).

In the literary field, writers are responding to the ongoing scourge of sexist and racist violence as well as to other challenges of the new era like the unequal effects of globalisation or twenty-first-century forced migration. As Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau note in *Transcending the Postmodern: The Singular Response of Literature to the Transmodern Paradigm*, authors are reacting to the current paradigm shift by generating new literary forms. These texts are sometimes difficult to categorise with a single label owing to their employment of “new stylistic, generic and/or modal forms” that result from the relational “accumulation and intermingling” of earlier cultural paradigms—Modernity and Postmodernity—with the current globalised, transnational and interconnected reality (2020, 13). Indeed, such a generic experimentation and hybridity provides a good illustration of the current “fluid, interconnected, unstable reality of selves and worlds” (15).

Moreover, in order to respond to today’s rapidly changing reality and its challenges, many contemporary writers are abandoning or renewing their formerly postmodern style and strategies. Instead, they are employing modernist techniques or even turning to more realist forms (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2017, 11) that shine

out in this post-truth era. Notwithstanding the traditional association of realism to the colonial project, this “realist impulse” is also visible in a good range of contemporary postcolonial authors, from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria) to Chetan Bhagat (India), who want to urgently represent the current conditions of their communities (Anjaria 2016, 278).<sup>1</sup>

This turn to realism is particularly illuminating to approach a current tendency in some US ethnic women writers who, as I will argue, are penning traditionally realist narratives to denounce the sexist and racial violence experienced in their communities. This is the case of contemporary writers Louise Erdrich (Native American), Roxane Gay (Haitian American) and Toni Morrison (African American), who in the early and mid-2010s published very successful realist narratives with the aim of exposing how the violence suffered by contemporary women from their ethnic groups is related to the historical, cultural and collective suffering of their peoples. The novels I am referring to are Erdrich’s *The Round House* (2012a), Gay’s *An Untamed State* (2014b) and Morrison’s *God Help the Child* (2015a). The main purpose of this PhD dissertation is precisely to offer a close reading of these three texts to show how they constitute a new trend in the representation of the intersecting causes and consequences of sexist and racist violence against US ethnic women. This trend is emblematic of the transmodern paradigm insofar as it articulates narratives of resistance while looking for the most appropriate literary forms to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “postcolonial” following John McLeod’s theorisations about the meaning of this label. This scholar warns us not to confuse *postcolonialism* with *post-colonialism*, that is, “after colonialism,” and think that the unhyphenated term defines “a radically new historical era [...] where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured” (2000, 33). Far from this idea, as McLeod suggests, “the postcolonial” should refer to the never harmonious relationship “between, on the one hand, the geographical and historical factuality of the world during and after the decline of European colonial settlement, and, on the other hand, the new knowledges that have merged from the imaginative and intellectual opposition to colonialist discourses across time and place, and which enable us to regard differently, and critically, the world at large” (2007, 10).

Although some academic publications have focused on the physical, psychic and socio-cultural aggressions suffered by the female characters of *The Round House* and *God Help the Child*—this is not the case of *An Untamed State*—no scholarly work has yet explored the full extent of the complexity of victims and victimisers representation in these novels. The three authors escape essentialist notions by including not only white perpetrators but also perpetrators from within their respective ethnic groups. Their subsequent complication of the victim-perpetrator binary will be a very important part of my project insofar as it opens new lines of conversation about the effects of (settler) colonialism, racism and classism in diverse US ethnic communities.

Clearly, racialised individuals of the US are significantly more vulnerable than the white population, and they are generally regarded or treated as less human, less grievable. As Judith Butler offers in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, it is important to recognise the responsibility of *all* the agents of violence, which is more often than not conditioned and even “exacerbated under certain social and political situations” (2004, 29). Butler provides the example of how the violence of continuous oppression and of the “unequal hierarchy of grief” (32), which makes grievable whites senseless to the suffering of ungrievable non-whites, usually leaves on the latter group “a mark that is no mark” (39). This sort of non-visible scar, which could be interpreted as an internal injury or trauma, leads some of those individuals to exert violence on others since, as Butler argues, “the failure to heed the claim of precarious life only leads, again and again, to the dry grief of an endless political rage” (xix). Needless to say, some members of non-grievable/marginalised communities tend to channel that haunting sense of anger through violence against more vulnerable beings, especially women and girls. Hence, as I wish to demonstrate in this PhD dissertation, through the realistic representation of the intersecting conditions of oppression which

make their characters both vulnerable and prone to become perpetrators of same, the three narratives shed some light on Butler's question about why "violence [...] comes to appear as the only viable option for some [oppressed individuals]" (16). The representation of victims and perpetrators provided by Erdrich, Gay and Morrison in these novels thus reminds us of the importance of attending to the responsibility of the oppressive context faced by ethnic groups in the US.

One of the main challenges of this kind of project is to reach a necessary balance between its wide scope and the careful attention that we need to pay to each writer's ethnic particularities. I am well aware that, because of the different cultural backgrounds of Erdrich, Gay and Morrison, a comparative analysis could be perceived as problematic. In truth, these works are different enough to call for a culture-specific approach which can properly delve in their complexity. This approach is still necessary, especially in the case of Gay's narrative, about which not many essays have been published to date. However, a comparative analysis like the one I am offering here is illuminating inasmuch as it provides a broader view on the functioning of violence—and the literary responses to it—across ethnic groups and promotes promising intercultural dialogues. In this sense, my choice responds to the need of what Begoña Simal calls a *transethnic* comparative study of the literatures produced in the US.

According to Simal, in order to move away from the misconceptions provided by the mainstream—i.e. Westerncentric—framework "that has plagued criticism of American literary texts for centuries" as well as from the unfair "hierarchical conception of US literatures" which tend to occupy what she defines as an "implicit or explicit" marginality, a transethnic approach is necessary insofar as it enriches "the crosscultural understanding of the different literary traditions" in the US (2011b, 10). By transethnic, this literary critic understands a framework of analysis which, in opposition to the

“statistically dominant [...] ‘intraethnic’ [scope],” allows literary criticism to cross “ethnic boundaries and/or ‘color lines’” (2011a, 34) so as to focus not on cultural differences, but rather, on the “literary commonalities (and disparities)” of the fiction penned by US ethnic authors (35). Hence, without in any case undervaluing intraethnic studies of non-white authors in US literature—which, as argued above, are still necessary and most welcome—the aim of this PhD Thesis is to enrich our understanding of Native American, Haitian American and African American fiction and their respective representation of violence and grief by setting the texts by Erdrich, Gay and Morrison in dialogue with one another.

Interestingly, this comparative reading brings to light several similarities shared by the three novels that confirm the idea that they are part of a trend. One of the elements that the three texts have in common is the fact that, as novels written in the midst of the new paradigm shift, on the one hand, they are hybrid narratives that mix different literary genres and forms in the transmodern fashion noted by Onega and Ganteau and, on the other, they evidence the current turn to traditional realism in contemporary fiction writing. Precisely, this resorting to realism marks a deliberate decision on the part of the three authors which I interpret as a way to make their criticism against the violence suffered by their fellow ethnic women available for all reading publics.

Another important similarity is that they were published to denounce the scourge of sexist and racist violence in the agitated and highly activist decade of the 2010s, a time when important movements against this kind of violence, most especially the #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (#MMIWG) movements, were starting to arise. Significantly enough, neither of them portrays their victimised female characters as eternal sufferers. Instead, they show that

resilience and healing are possible for these women as they belong to communities who have historically resisted and fought back thanks to powerful and empowering relations and kinship. In this sense, as my analysis attempts to show, the three texts are realist *narratives of resistance* (narratives which, according to Rodríguez Magda, the new era requires) that work as political artefacts of denunciation and activism for equal rights in our current times. Accordingly, these novels seem to recuperate Albert Camus's idea that art "should be the enemy marked out by every form of oppression" (1995, 269) and that the artist has the responsibility of "speak[ing] up [...] for those who cannot" (267).

Another relevant aspect shared by the three selected works is that they all deal with different sorts of trauma, from psychic and individual ones derived from an unexpected violent event (e.g. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) to more societal, collective and cultural variants that can be transmitted across generations. As I aim to demonstrate, the three texts revolve around the traumatic effects that sexism and racist violence have on the main characters and the healing journey on which they must embark in order to accomplish their post-traumatic growth. In this sense, not only do these narratives offer a wide array of experiences and reactions to trauma, but they also show that, despite the postulations of trauma theory until the mid-2000s, post-traumatic recovery is possible. Likewise, as I will prove, these novels invite us to bear in mind that, so as to understand the relationship between some racialised individuals' use of violence as an illusionary solution to systemic injustice and the chronic trauma that derives from it, the context from which this internal injury arises should always be considered.

Turning now to the structure of this dissertation, I should note that this presents a general theoretical chapter, an analytical body devoted to the study of the literary corpus and a conclusive section. **Chapter 1** focuses on the key role of trauma theory in cultural

and literary studies and its gradual evolution from a restrictive Westerncentric framework to an inclusive and decolonial one which becomes handy and more than necessary in the study of *ethnic trauma* narratives.<sup>2</sup> Besides, this section includes the new trends in trauma studies related to the transgenerational transmission of repressed phantoms and how unhealed traumas—whether inherited or not—can affect a person’s or community’s individual or collective psyche to the extent of leading them to victimise other individuals or collectivities. Given the diverse contexts of the selected authors and with the aim to avoid a myopic analysis of the historical and social factors behind the suffering of their ethnic communities, the second half of this chapter carefully examines the particularities of these groups’ cultural traumas.

Following this theoretical section, the dissertation includes three chapters devoted to the analysis of each novel that have been arranged in the chronological order in which these works were published. Borrowing Rosi Braidotti’s conception of cartographies as an epistemological tool, “a sort of intellectual landscape gardening” (1994, 16), I seek to draw a map of violence against Native American, Hatian American and African American women by means of these analytic sections. **Chapter 2** focuses on Erdrich’s *The Round House*, a narrative which entails an important stylistic change in this writer’s literary career on account of its realist prose. In this section I explore the traumatic effect that the rape of the male protagonist’s mother has on this woman, her family and her community. Specifically, I analyse the psychic and collective disorders that this event provokes in her son, the young protagonist, who must embark in a sudden journey towards maturation both as an adult and a Native American individual when he

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use the term *postcolonial trauma* to refer to the collective and cultural wound experienced by those world-wide communities who were and keep on being affected by colonialism and its aftermath including new forms of neocolonial oppression. Likewise, I call *ethnic trauma* the culturally-specific collective injuries suffered by the different US ethnic groups, including those who were and are still affected by colonialism in any of its forms like the Native American, African American and Haitian American ones.

learns that the effects of Native land dispossession and the labyrinthine jurisdiction over reservation territory impede the restoration of his mother's and people's well-being. The sense of helplessness as far as his mother and US politics are concerned leads the boy to take justice into his own hands and kill the white perpetrator. Yet, as I will prove, as a result of his atrocious act, he becomes haunted by feelings of guilt and shame that turn into a traumatic experience itself, a last blow that he overcomes by resorting to the community.

**Chapter 3** deals with Gay's *An Untamed State*, a hyperrealistic fairy-tale retelling about an upper-middle class Haitian American woman who is kidnapped and raped by a Haitian gang in Port-au-Prince. In this section I analyse how Gay denounces the sexism and sexual violence that women suffer in Haiti while she connects this issue with the collective unresolved Haitian (American) traumas of extreme poverty, forced migration and human trafficking. In order to do so, Gay explores the grey zone between the victims and perpetrators of this sort of violence from the protagonist herself to her family and her kidnappers. As I will demonstrate, this is especially observable in the relationship between the protagonist's father and the gang leader, whose antagonism, rooted in postcolonial revenge and the emasculating effects of poverty, is the source of the protagonist's suffering, including a post-traumatic emotional numbness from which she awakes thanks to female care and resilience.

**Chapter 4** focuses on Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child*, the author's most minimalist and realist work in her career. Although this narrative does not deal with sexual violence directly, it tackles another type of sexist violence—that behind the US beauty canon—which affects black girls and women more deeply due to their vulnerability in a society which praises beauty and fetishises the black female body. Particularly, this section explores how the emotional and physical detachment of a light-



skinned African American mother from her dark-skinned daughter—owing to the transgenerational trauma of the colour line that the former suffers—leads the girl to hurt others and even herself. I especially analyse how, in her adulthood, the repression of her childhood and race-related traumas pushes Morrison's protagonist to commodify her body so as to fit in white supremacist US society. Further, as I will prove, a series of events end up re-activating those traumas, which she overcomes on a road trip where the sense of community and the return to the roots play a key curative role.

As I hope my analysis will show, Erdrich, Gay and Morrison are politically-committed ethnic authors who denounce sexist and racist violence in the new millennium while they provoke a certain unsettlement on readers—at least partly through the disruption of their own expectations about the writers, their works and their ethnic groups—and direct them to question the conditions in which trauma and violence arise. In so doing, these writers remind us that literature is not only a cultural product, but also a social, ethical and political tool.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE COMPLEXITY OF TRAUMA IN THE TRANSMODERN ERA

In the last two decades, different critics have asseverated that we live in the age of trauma (N. Miller and Tougaw 2001; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Kurtz 2018). Trauma has actually become “our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, xi) since, in the past forty years, it has evolved “[f]rom the literal sense in which the term is used by psychiatrists (a psychological shock) to its metaphorical extension disseminated by the media (a tragic event)” (2). This shift, as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman argue in *The Empire of Trauma*, has come by the hand of a change in the conception of trauma from a “suspect condition” of doubtful legitimacy to a sort of suffering that is both medically and socially recognised (5).

The turn accounted for by these scholars appears to be related to the boom in Memory and Trauma Studies in the 1980s and 1990s (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Levy 2020). Sociologist Daniel Levy relates the rapid growth of the aforementioned areas with “a cultural response to the ontological insecurity that permeates the global age” (2020, 567), an era where rapidly-changing planetary threats have proved national institutions incapable of maintaining social and collective security on their own. Such worldwide uncertainty, as Ulrich Beck has famously postulated, started occurring when technological and social progress stopped being seen as a safeguard against risks and a source of control and of optimism about the future. This pivotal change, whose origin Beck identifies with the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986 (2009, 36), as he posits, has given rise to the collapse of the traditional “belief that modern society can control the dangers that it itself produces” (8). It is no surprise then that such an attitude towards the immediate present and future ran parallel with the emergence of Memory and Trauma Studies in the last decades of the twentieth century since, as Levy observes, the

“Trauma-Memory Complex” became “the perceived remedy” (2020, 566) to address contemporary anxieties in a time when national and religious authority could no longer fulfil this mission (568).

Following this line of thought, the first decades of the new millennium have borne witness to various crises and tragic events which, on account of their global exposure through the media, have challenged humanity’s ontological security to the extent that a perceived sense of crisis and trauma is now permanent. Tragic occurrences such as the terrorist attacks perpetrated against the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September 2001, Madrid’s trains in 2004 or the Parisian Bataclan Club in 2015; the European refugee crisis started in 2015; natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or Haiti’s 2010 earthquake; and accidents like Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 left thousands of people—including TV news viewers—scarred in physical and psychological terms. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, which many political leaders have equated with a global war against a virus, has been prognosticated as a new cultural trauma (Hirst 2020) and therefore, as yet another factor that aggravates the ontological insecurity inherent in the Transmodern era.

My focus on these events does not imply that there are more disasters or that subjects are more traumatised today than ever before. However, the increased visibility of the psychic injury in the last four decades—mainly caused by “the evolution of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, media coverage, and a shifting system of empathy and sympathy for the pain of the other” in a more and more interconnected planet (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 2)—has risen global citizenship’s awareness about their intrinsic vulnerability to the wound. All this has made trauma a key concept to characterise the Transmodern age.

## **1.1. From Classical to Decolonised Trauma Theory**

Although trauma theory is presently an established paradigm, it is important to note that since the new millennium, it has undergone a crucial evolution in a more holistic direction that seems to be leaving behind its main problematic postulations. Specifically, it is moving away from its former Westerncentrism, the narrow understanding of trauma as a mere individual condition, the neglect of the traumatising social process and structures affecting marginalised groups such as women and ethnic/racial minorities, and the excessive focus on victimhood, melancholia and the unspeakability of trauma. Perhaps for this reason, trauma has become a more socially-accepted concept which proves necessary for the understanding of the globalised world in which we live today.

### ***1.1.1. Westerncentric Trauma Theory***

Trauma gained official disease status in 1980, when it was included in the third edition of the authoritative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).<sup>3</sup> Although PTSD initially covered the experience of war veterans only, nowadays it includes those who suffered, witnessed or even perpetrated a single traumatic event or a concatenation of them (APA 2013). The particularity of this disease is not so much the traumatic occurrence itself but rather, the traumatic aftermath in which individuals often experience psychological and physiological responses such as

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<sup>3</sup> While the original meaning of the Greek term “trauma”—“wound” in English—referred to an injury inflicted on the body, only sixty years before trauma was officially registered as a mental illness, Sigmund Freud transposed the original notion to the field of psychology. As he explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trauma is a psychic wound provoked by the subject’s incapacity to react adequately to it, that is, by the repression of affects. Psychic trauma arises, according to Freud, when an external stimulus is so powerful that it causes an extensive breach in the ego’s protective shield and floods the mind with large amounts of stimuli which cannot be mastered ([1920] 1961, 21-23). Yet traumatic symptoms are not apparent after a given time which Freud calls “the period of latency” (1939, 129).

terror, loss of control, intense fear of annihilation, hypervigilance, sleep disorders, depression, emotional numbing or a sense of foreboding future (APA 1994, 427-29).

The categorisation of trauma or PTSD as a mental disease in the 1980s was a meaningful achievement after almost a century of multifarious and restrictive theories about trauma like Sigmund Freud's postulations on hysteria in the 1890s. However, the concept of trauma became widely known in fields other than the scientific one in the 1990s, when, drawing on Freud's work, Cathy Caruth—one of the experts from Yale University who formulated what would become the dominant model of cultural trauma studies—proposed her renowned definition of trauma. According to Caruth, trauma is “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” caused by a traumatic event which “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly” (1996, 3-4) and cannot be “assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (1995, 4). Such belatedness, according to the Freudian theory on which Caruth bases her definition, is related to the moment when a second event triggers the force of a former traumatic event (Freud 1939, 124).

In this “two-stage development,” as Roger Luckhurst calls it in *The Trauma Question*, the return of the first trauma takes place in the form of incomprehensible nightmares, hallucinations, affective numbing and other forms of psychic disturbances which make the sufferer persistently re-experience the event in the phase of acting out (2008, 1). Hence, it can be said that, as Caruth puts it, “[t]o be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (1995, 5). Besides, drawing on Freud's conceptualisation of acting out, historian Dominick LaCapra refers to the symptomatic compulsive-repetitive imagery as “scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop” (21).<sup>4</sup> After this

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<sup>4</sup> Trauma critics such as Caruth, LaCapra and Luckhurst have based their ideas about the haunting presence of trauma on Freud's theories ([1914] 1958) on the phase of acting out, a stage in which the

phase of repetition-compulsion or “acting out” (66), a new one—referred to as the phase of “working through” by Freud ([1914] 1958, 154-55)—follows. At this stage, traumatised subjects seek to put the traumatic event into words by transforming their traumatic memories into narrative memories (Breuer and Freud [1983] 2000, 17).

As a result of the haunting nature of trauma and the individual’s “absolute inability to know” or understand it (Caruth 1996, 92), Caruth and her Yale colleagues posited the unspeakability of trauma. In contrast to this dictum, in her influential book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman regarded narrative as a powerful and empowering therapeutic method which allows for the integration of the traumatic experience and therefore triggers the healing process. As this psychiatrist explains, narratives of trauma, as an “organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content,” help in the healing and recovery process (2015, 177). Similarly, in his work *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra contends that the memory work entailed in the narrativisation of traumatic memories allows the subject to distinguish between the traumatic past and the present and thus, to work through his or her trauma (2001, 66).

The different postulations about trauma that have been offered in the last decades and especially the importance of narrativisation for the overcoming of this condition have contributed to the development of what is known as “trauma fiction.” This genre, as Laurie Vickroy notes, has become greatly popular because it provides “personalized responses to the late twentieth century’s and early twenty-first century’s coalescing awareness of the catastrophic effects on the individual psyche of wars, sexual and physical assaults, poverty, and colonization (2015, 1). This literary critic also praises trauma narratives for their frequent concern with “human-made traumatic situations” and their examination and “implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political

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subject, rather than remember, repeats the repressed recollections of the traumatic event through certain actions which effectively re-enact it.

structures can create and perpetuate trauma” (2002, 4). In so doing, Vickroy argues, these texts create alternative historiographies to the institutionalised ones which can help open readers’ eyes to the “oppressive cultural institutions and practices against communities and entire cultures” (4).

As for the narrative techniques to represent trauma, at the beginning of the 2000s, Vickroy and Anne Whitehead noted in their respective studies of trauma fiction—especially Western texts—authors’ deployment of a set of experimental narrative strategies derived from postmodernist fiction so as to convey “the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties” of the acting-out phase (Vickroy 2002, xiv). Common techniques, according to these literary critics, include “textual gaps [...], repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, [...] a focus on visual images and affective states” (29) plus “intertextuality [...] and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice” (Whitehead 2004, 84). For more than a decade, a wide range of critics defined trauma fiction drawing on the aforementioned features and a theoretical framework based on Freudian psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, this generalisation has led to inadequate analyses of texts which dealt with trauma from less experimental perspectives or which were written by non-Western authors. Fortunately, as further explored in the following subsection, this problematic has been fruitfully addressed in the last decade.

### ***1.1.2. The Turn towards a More Inclusive Trauma Theory***

Whereas it is undeniable that trauma theory has had an enormous impact in the literary field and academia, in the last few years, critics like Michael Rothberg (2008), Stef Craps (2012, 2014), Irene Visser (2011, 2014, 2015, 2018), Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga (2012) have solidly questioned some of the maxims established by the founders of the discipline, especially its specific and limited scope. Particularly, in

relation to postcolonial or non-mainstream contexts, there has been controversy in the way texts are analysed through the formulations of traditional trauma theory. In 2008, Rothberg questioned in an article with the promising title “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response,” whether classical trauma theory provided “the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world” (2008, 226). This led him to vindicate the redirection of trauma theory towards its decolonisation and the achievement of a more global and responsible paradigm. More specifically, trauma theory as conceptualised by Caruth and other trauma theorists such as LaCapra, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, is, according to Rothberg, tied to a narrow “‘Eurocentric’ conceptual and historical framework” which distorts histories and “threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism [...] behind those histories” (225-27).

Rothberg supports his idea on the fact that many intellectuals and writers, following the dictates of canonical trauma theory, “have been seeking to articulate traumas within Europe [the Holocaust] with traumas in colonial and postcolonial space” (225). Another important factor of trauma theory’s Eurocentrism or Westerncentrism is the fact that this model of trauma is based on a single historical event such as the Holocaust, “with a clear definable period of history and a clear historical sense of victims” (Visser 2015, 252). Thus, under these terms, trauma theory does not take into account “the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism” which are not relegated to the past, but rather, still persist into the present (252). By the same token, the impossibility to understand or fully verbalise trauma as defined by Caruth and her colleagues can also be considered another Westerncentric characteristic of canonical trauma theory, for it does not adjust to non-Western contexts where other coping mechanisms and methods of healing like oral storytelling are used. In contrast to the melancholic position of the Caruthian trauma model, Visser argues that more often than



not, postcolonial trauma narratives “demonstrate that resilience and growth is also possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding” (255).

Early trauma theory shows further traces of Westerncentrism in its axiomatic use of (post)modernist textual strategies derived from Holocaust-trauma fiction as a way of rendering the psychic and physical disruption which trauma provokes in the individual. The emphasis on those strategies, as Silvia Martínez-Falquina explains, “has resulted in a prescriptive and narrow trauma paradigm that seeks to impose Western narrative criteria in order to assess the representational value of texts that deal with trauma” (2015, 835). Precisely, in his book *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, Craps criticises traditional trauma’s “necessary relation between aesthetic form and political or ethical effectiveness” (2012, 143). Instead, he suggests that trauma theory should pay attention to “the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate” (43).

It is true that Caruth put forward the idea that speaking and listening to traumatic histories can provide “[a] link between cultures” (1995, 11). However, owing to classical trauma theory’s disregard of non-Western contexts and literature, it could be argued that, far from promoting cross-culture solidarity, the one-sided focus of the trauma model as formulated by Caruth and her colleagues risks producing the opposite effect. After all, as Craps and Gert Buelens claim, “by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world (2008, 2). Hence, in an attempt to change the biased direction towards which canonical trauma theory was moving, in 2008 Rothberg started a necessary project which he referred to as “the

decolonization of trauma studies” (2008, 226). Through it, he posited the need to detach ourselves from traditional literary trauma theory and develop the tools required “in the simultaneously intellectual, ethical, and political task of standing against ongoing forms of racial and colonial violence” (232).

More recently, an increasing number of scholars and critics such as Craps, Visser or Martínez-Falquina have remarked the importance of a continuing postcolonial criticism of historical and political processes as the origin of trauma for marginalised communities in contraposition with the previous critical tendencies which ignored and even omitted those processes. This opinion goes in line with the claims already made by feminist psychotherapists Laura S. Brown and Maria P. Root in the 1990s, when they highlighted the need to expand our understanding of trauma as formulated by Freud, Caruth and other scholars—what Root calls “direct trauma”—and incorporate the study of “insidious trauma” (1992, 239). This sort of trauma is a condition which derives from “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 1995, 107). Insidious trauma particularly affects individuals who are “devalued” because their identity characteristics do not coincide with “what is valued by those in power” like colour, gender or sexual orientation (Root 1992, 240). This is the case of minorities and women who have been historically oppressed by our systematically racist and patriarchal societies.

As a result, since 2008, postcolonial literary critics have increasingly moved away from Freudian psychoanalysis and the deconstruction approaches which characterised the foundation of classical trauma theory and have started to embrace less prescriptive theories from other fields, including sociology and anthropology. For instance, in *The Splintered Glass: Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond*, Dolores Herrero

and Sonia Baelo-Allué claim for a change in postcolonial trauma studies towards a more sociological orientation. These Spanish critics contend that mainstream trauma theory's "focus on an individual/psychological perspective may pose the danger of separating facts from their causes, thus blurring the importance of the historical and social context, which is particularly relevant in postcolonial trauma narratives" (2011, xi). Hence, firstly because "in postcolonial literature, the personal and the social are inextricably linked, and secondly because trauma should be studied in a specific context," Herrero and Baelo-Allué recommend the use of a sociological framework in trauma theory (xi).

Visser also advocates a change of focus in trauma theory which allows scholars to pay attention to the "historical, political and socio-economic factors in processes of colonization and decolonization" which are "intrinsic to postcolonialism's cultural and political research agenda" (2011, 270, 275). In fact, like Herrero and Baelo-Allué, she pertinently refers to some sociologists including Kai Erikson, who, in contrast to traditional trauma theory scholars, has theorised trauma as collective and defined it as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (1994, 187). Moreover, similarly to the aforementioned critics and Craps, Visser usefully resorts to Jeffrey C. Alexander and his acknowledgment of cultural trauma, which occurs "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event" that marks their group consciousness, memories and identity "in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2004, 1).

These new ways of understanding trauma from a sociological perspective seem to respond to what Craps and Buelens suggest in their article: that as a collective experience, colonial trauma—and I would also add postcolonial trauma to the equation—can only be accurately recognised if the object of trauma research shifts from "individual to larger social entities, such as communities or nations" (2008, 4). If

trauma is studied from this collective-oriented perspective, Caruth's view of trauma as a link between cultures may finally materialise. Therefore, it can be argued that the questioning of canonical trauma theory from multiple angles has fostered its decolonisation, which in turn, has meant an advance in postcolonial trauma studies. This achievement has materialised firstly, in its rethinking of trauma as "collective, spatial and material" rather than "individual, temporal and linguistic" (Rothberg 2008, 228); and secondly, in its eventual recognition of resilience and recovery as identifying traits of the postcolonial communities. In other words, the recent decolonisation of trauma studies has allowed critics to carry out a more ethical and inclusive approach to trauma which takes into account the historical and socio-political situation of subaltern racialised communities that classical trauma theory had silenced in the past.

## **1.2. New Trends in Trauma Theory: The Legacies of Unresolved Trauma**

As will be discussed in this section, the recent broadening of trauma theory offers a more inclusive lens for the exploration of how contemporary generations from ethnic groups like those portrayed in the novels under analysis are affected by the unresolved collective and cultural traumas suffered by their forbearers. Of significant importance for this more holistic approach is the recent focus on two key concepts related to trauma: its transgenerational transmission as well as its impact on victimisers, collaborators and passive bystanders implicated in traumatic events.

### ***1.2.1. The Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma***

The transgenerational transmission of trauma is a phenomenon which takes place when the consequences of traumatic occurrences are not only suffered by the individuals

“immediately exposed to the event” but also by “significant others in their environment such as family, friends, and caregivers” (Dekel and Goldblatt 2008, 281). Notwithstanding this pertinent definition, in order to better comprehend the intricacies of this facet of trauma, it is necessary to take into consideration the crucial concept of “collective memory” developed by the field of memory studies.

In his influential work *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs posits that memory goes beyond the individual, for autobiographical mnemonic images are always apprehended in relation to a geographical, political, ideological or generational group. This psychologist and sociologist goes even further and claims that memory is always “part or an aspect of group memory” ([1952] 1992, 53) because firstly, individuals are always embedded in a social *milieu* and secondly, a group’s identity and awareness of itself is based on the recollection and reflection upon the memories shared by its members which so distinguish the group from others. Hence, as Ron Eyerman puts it, given that “[i]ndividual identity is said to be negotiated within this collectively shared past,” even though “there is always a unique, biographical memory to draw upon, it is described as always rooted in a collective history” (2001, 6). In the same vein, Wulf Kansteiner defines collective memories as those which “originate from shared communications about the meaning of the past” and are firmly based on “the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective” (2002, 188). For this reason, Kansteiner comes to the conclusion that “collective memories are based in a society and its inventory of signs and symbols” (188).

Similarly to the development of trauma studies, the aforementioned turn in memory studies to a more sociological viewpoint at the end of the twentieth century has allowed psychologists to make more holistic diagnoses and to understand that memories are “not only the simple act of recall but social, cultural, and political action at its

broadest level” (Zelizer 1998, 3).<sup>5</sup> Eyerman highlights the fruitfulness that this shift of memory studies has meant in the Humanities, particularly in the field of literature where, as he puts it, “more attention is being paid to the importance of collective memory in the formation of ethnic identity, and the role of literary works in this reflective process” (2001, 6). Thus, if as proved by theorists, individuals can be affected by collective memory and trauma, the ensuing question is: can descendants of trauma victims who suffered massive violent acts such as the Holocaust, slavery or colonisation be haunted by their predecessors’ traumas despite the passing of time?

The phenomenon of the transmission of trauma to second generations has long been examined, especially in relation to the Holocaust. Already in 1942, Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham became pioneers in the study of mothers’ unconscious transmission of affective “messages” to their offspring during the German bombing of London in World War II. Decades later and more particularly since the end of the twentieth century, psychoanalysts like Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok, Vamik Volkan and Marianne Hirsch have put forward theories which, in spite of the use of Holocaust examples to support their arguments, are applicable to the transmission of direct or insidious traumas to the subsequent generations.<sup>6</sup>

Volkan acknowledges the possibility of a transgenerational transmission of trauma which takes place “when an older person unconsciously externalizes his traumatized self onto a developing child’s personality” and the child becomes “a

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Future of Memory*, Dan Stone notes that collective memory is “an important source of understanding of the world around us,” for it has helped bring to light “how ruling elites use it as a tool to perpetuate their dominance,” as research on “historically excluded groups” such as Native Americans, African Americans, Australian Aborigines and Romani gypsies has demonstrated (2010, 26).

<sup>6</sup> Jill Salberg maintains that psychoanalysis is living a paradigm shift which she refers to as a “transgenerational turn” (2017, 80). She supports her statement by pointing out how psychoanalysis has moved away from “intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships,” from its selective attention to certain historical wounds and from ideas often “split off from [...] the world of culture, political, historical and trauma studies” (80). As this scholar puts it, psychoanalysis is increasingly focusing on the transmission of transgenerational traumas “formed through epochs of great wars, famine, dislocation, the Shoa and other genocides, slavery, immigration and now climate catastrophes” (80).

reservoir for the unwanted, troublesome parts” of the older generation (1997, 43). But he goes even further and states that such transmission eventually makes “the traumatized self-images passed down by members of the group [...] become part of the group identity” (43). This view of transgenerational trauma aligns with (and probably draws on) Abraham and Torok’s tenets put together in *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994). These scholars point out the inability to work through and integrate trauma when the traumatic haunting is passed generation after generation. In order to prove the existence of this transgenerational transmission of trauma, they develop the concept of “the crypt” and “the phantom” (168). Abraham explains that if a child’s parents have secrets or silences derived from a failed mourning process which leads them to entomb their unresolved trauma in the crypt—the psychic space where unbearable experiences, memories or secrets are consigned to silence—“the child will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge [...] subjected to a form of ‘repression’” (1994, 140). This means that the secret or buried speech—the phantom—not only “returns from the unconscious to haunt its host,” but it can also persist and be passed on to future generations, determining “the fate of an entire family line” (140). According to these tenets, individuals can manifest symptoms not directly sprung from a traumatic event they never lived, but from an ancestor’s traumas, psychic conflicts or secrets. For Abraham, this transmission is possible due to “the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations” (166), a viewpoint which clearly links individual with collective memory, perhaps in a broader sense than Halbwachs’s postulations.

In the same line, Volkan holds that descendants of trauma victims are “caught up in a sort of time warp involving past traumatic events visited upon the large group to which they belong, but which they themselves never directly experienced” (1997, 4).

Similarly, Marianne Hirsch has posited that the transmission of traumatic memories—what she calls “postmemory”—from massive violence victims and perpetrators to their non-witness descendants occurs owing to the intergenerational inheritance of those hurtful memories through photographs, verbal and non-verbal language and even family silences (2008, 106-7).

In postcolonial and settler-colonial contexts,<sup>7</sup> the transmission of trauma across generations is a crucial factor that has shaped the identity of a large number of communities since their colonisation. For instance, some scholars like Ashraf Rushdy consider that the traumas and the silences or family secrets caused by the colonisation of North America and the institution of slavery in the US are this country’s “hidden phantom of a past that needs to be revised in order to be revered” (2001, 2). I contend that this necessity responds to the twofold problem which results from the keeping of such a national crypt. Firstly, it has led communities like the Native American, African American and Caribbean American ones to identify themselves with deeply rooted unresolved traumas which have not allowed preceding and contemporary generations either to work through or heal from those wounds. Secondly, if we never acknowledge and learn from the painful mistakes made by our societies in the past, we will most likely be doomed to repeat our history.<sup>8</sup> Although this statement may seem overused, it is undeniable that the US keeps repeating past mistakes, which evidences the country’s neglect and silencing of its darkest history.

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<sup>7</sup> Settler colonialism is a particular form of European imperialism. It is based on territoriality, that is, the gradual occupation of an indigenous land (e.g. America or Australia), the settlement of new cities and the creation of states on that territory in order to replace the indigenous populations with European ones (Wolfe 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Gabriele Schwab notes that the silencing of massive violent histories such as the Indigenous peoples’ genocide in the colonial and imperialist era in order to defend the “discourse of progressing civilization” opened the door to the haunting return of the same vicious arguments and practices, this time “in the heart of Europe” with Nazism and the Holocaust (2010, 47). This is what Aimé Césaire has called the “boomerang effect” of colonialism as the result of the neglect and even legitimization of genocide practices “applied on non-European peoples” ([1955] 2000, 36).



Some situations which show that the US has not exactly learned to face its history are the current violations of Native Americans' rights with (neo)colonialist practices affecting reservation lands; the ongoing police violence against African Americans; or the increase in the white supremacist discourses which provoke hate violence against racialised individuals like Latino and Caribbean immigrants, to mention but a few. Hence, in order to unearth the wounding secrets of our societies, it is fundamental to highlight, as Visser argues, that the current "transgenerational, psychohistorical, timeless model of trauma" is sustained by a kind of discourse which regards "the historical particularity that is intrinsic to postcolonialism's cultural and political research agenda" (2011, 275), that is, the specific socio-cultural, economic and political context where transgenerational traumas take place. In so doing, generalisations could be left behind and a more effective and decolonising reading of trauma affecting ethnic groups could be carried out. By the same token, it is essential that research in cultural groups affected by collective trauma by-product of oppression and racism considers each culture-specific context so that these communities become conscious of their inherited unresolved traumas and eventually start their own healing process.

For all these reasons, it becomes crucial that in the field of literature, while analysing ethnic characters within postcolonial and settler-colonial communities whose identity has been shaped by the aftermath of historical, cultural and collective traumas, critics examine how the legacies of those psychosocial wounds are passed on from one generation to the next attending to the specific context of those groups. In so doing, not only will our critical analyses be more rigorous but they will also make readers more aware of how the history of subjugation suffered by those ethnic groups affects their present and will affect their future if no action is taken to change their current oppressing contexts. Accordingly, so as to carry out a decolonial analysis of the

transgenerational trauma shaping the behaviour and actions of the characters included in the novels under analysis, in section 1.3 I will delve into the particular collective and cultural stressors which produce those traumas through the study of the historical, socio-economic, political and cultural contexts in which these texts are framed.

### ***1.2.2. From Victims to Perpetrators: The Side Effects of Unresolved Trauma***

As explained in the previous section, the ongoing perpetuation of unhealed traumas tends to materialise in the transgenerational transmission of those phantoms. As a result, these unclosed wounds might heavily shape the identity and behaviour of the subsequent generations. A second consequence of unresolved trauma—whether a direct or insidious one—is the likely turn of those affected individuals into violent perpetrators who victimise others, thereby becoming part of a never-ending cycle of violence. Since the 1990s Caruth and other scholars have defined and studied trauma bearing in mind the symptoms and experiences of the victims. Nevertheless, they paid little attention to the other side of the binary, that is, perpetrators.

According to Jenni Adams, the reason for the scarce research on perpetrators is scholars' concern about "the risk of obscuring or de-emphasising victim perspectives and experience," the identification with wrongdoers which involves the "legitimis[ation] or exonerat[ion]" of their viewpoints, as well as the fostering of "more sinister fascinations than that of clean-eyed critical enquiry" (2013, 2).<sup>9</sup> But, overall, analyses of the effects that violent histories have on victimisers—whether individuals or nations—are rare because scholars have often adopted an either/or vision of trauma

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<sup>9</sup> In connection to this point, LaCapra notes that testimonies of traumatic events raise the problem of sympathy turning into an unethical over-identification, and, accordingly, he draws a distinction between two types of text. On the one hand, he refers to those texts that promote identification, that is, the listener or reader's unethical act of taking the victim's place. On the other hand, he alludes to those that promote empathy, that is, an understanding of the traumatic events and its victims which does not entail the listener or reader's appropriation of their experience but rather, their "empathic unsettlement" (2001, 78).

theory. Clearly, there are perpetrators, the agents inflicting pain on others; and victims, who, together with their descendants or other witnesses, play the role of passive receivers of the perpetrator's violent action(s) or continuous oppression which, in turn, leads them to suffer from trauma. While logical, this understanding of the trauma paradigm can also be myopic due to the assimilation of the fallacious premise that all trauma sufferers are victims. As Anne Rothe observes, “[w]hile all victims suffer, not everyone who suffers is a victim, because some forms of suffering are not the result of victimization” (2011, 25) as is the case of traumatised soldiers or witnesses. Rothberg concurs with Rothe and contends that the disregard of this axiom—which, as he argues, has entailed the historical marginalisation and even denial of perpetrator trauma—is rooted in an erroneous mixture of concepts coming from different discourse areas (2009, 90). As he puts it, whereas “victim” and “perpetrator” belong to the legal and moral fields respectively, “trauma” is a concept from “the diagnostic realm which goes beyond guilt and innocence, good and evil” (90).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, it becomes obvious that in order for analyses on the dynamics of trauma to be reliable, the exploration of the ways in which this psychological condition affects the agents and receivers of violence alike is a necessary step in trauma theory, as some scholars have claimed lately.

For instance, Gabriele Schwab has stressed the need for trauma discourses which explore “the dynamic between victims and perpetrators” (2010, 72) to take into account their differences and responsibilities:

We have arrived at a place in history where we can no longer afford to deal with the histories of victims and perpetrators in isolation. The damages and cultural deformations of these violent histories of colonialism, imperialism, war, genocide, and slavery manifest themselves on both sides of the divide, and only if both sides

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Gibbs sees the blend of PTSD and Caruthian theory as the source of the ethical problems related to trauma. According to this literary critic, whereas the notion of PTSD was first studied in relation to perpetrators—US soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War and suffered haunting feelings of guilt and shame afterwards—in Holocaust studies, both scholars and survivors were reluctant to acknowledge perpetrators' traumatic experiences (2014, 18). Thus, for Gibbs, it is precisely the heavy influence of Holocaust Studies in trauma theory that has shunned “the experience of the perpetrator” for years (19).

work through the legacies of these histories can the vicious cycle of repetition be disrupted. (82)

Moreover, this scholar puts emphasis on the necessity that those histories of violent power relations are not turned into national secrets as far as victims and perpetrators are concerned because, otherwise, “they are bound to be re-enacted” (83).

Additionally, Craps et al. believe not only that the focus on perpetrators does not mean exculpation or downplaying the importance of victims’ voices, but also that the sole identification with victims makes us “effectively deny our own complicity in violent histories and our own capacity for evil” (2015, 916). Interestingly, in this statement one can hear echoes of the important conclusion at which Hannah Arendt arrived after witnessing “the banality of evil” in Adolf Eichmann’s trial: the frightening nature of genocide perpetrators like Eichmann results not from the “sadistic” atrocities they commit, but rather, from their being “terribly and terrifyingly normal” like the rest of us ([1963] 2006, 276). Arendt’s reflection enabled the concomitant understanding of perpetrators as real figures rather than monsters and the realisation about the complexity of evil in the human condition. Accordingly, it is not farfetched to suggest that, as McGlothin puts it, the refusal to examine perpetrators’ experiences runs the risk of perpetuating the pre-Arendt construction of these victimisers as “abstract, mythical figures whose actions cannot be accounted for” (2010, 214).

Notwithstanding the shortage of scholarly work on trauma and perpetrators, this research field is starting to become a promising one that is worth exploring. For instance, since the 2000s, some scholars have recognised and studied what has been called perpetrator trauma, that is, the idea that victimisers can be psychologically and morally injured by their own wrongs or crimes (Schwab 2010; Martínez-Alfaro 2011; Morag 2013; Litz et al. 2009; Jinkerson 2016). Of particular note is Rachel MacNair’s study of the ways in which the commission of violence can have traumatic

repercussions for perpetrators, a type of suffering which she denominated Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS). As she contends in her monographic volume, just as victims do, perpetrators are possessed by intrusive thoughts and images and try to avoid any situation which resembles the traumatic event (2002, 1-7). In other words, regardless of their differences, perpetrators can undergo a process of acting out and working through like victims do. And, in order to demonstrate the existence of PITS, McNair analyses the experiences of combat veterans, executioners, Nazis and even fictional characters like Macbeth in Shakespeare's homonymous play.

Another scholar who has acknowledged the existence of perpetrator trauma and the importance of its study is Saira Mohamed, who notes that perpetrators should be considered as a part of the victim/victimiser binary which needs to be focused on so as to better comprehend our history, human evil and trauma (2015, 1208). In turn, this approach could prevent future crimes from happening (Mohamed 2019, 271). Likewise, although giving voice to perpetrators in fiction can cause distress in the reader, in order for the context of trauma to be truly comprehended, it is necessary to understand victimisers' experiences and attitudes too. For so doing, as Vickroy rightly emphasises, "it would be valuable to see how someone becomes abusive, and even that a perpetrator might also be traumatized" (2015, 29-30). Last but not least, I would also contend that, in an era marked by polarisations and feuds, to give voice to perpetrators could be considered a relationally ethical act whereby the victim's Other is given back his or her own previously silenced voice as a way to prevent critics and readers' identification with him or her. In fact, following Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, writing a perpetrator trauma novel could be seen as an ethical exercise which allows readers to open to the Other in a face-to-face encounter ([1969] 1979, 76-79).

Despite the great ethical challenge posed to writers, readers and critics, some fiction writers have included perpetrators as the main characters of their novels and even portrayed them as sufferers of PITS. Although the most numerous group of authors dealing with such a delicate topic are Holocaust literature writers like Martin Amis, W. G. Sebald, Rachel Seiffert or Ian McEwan, we can also find a number of interesting novels which present traumatised perpetrator protagonists in postcolonial and ethnic fiction. This is the case of Australian writer Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004), as well as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *Home* (2012).

According to Steven K. Baum (2008), perpetrators can be classified in different typologies which are based on the victimiser's characteristics and motivations (e.g. economic gain, ideological commitment, sadism or fear). Particularly, M. R. Hilton and Gillian C. Mezey (1996) and Lucinda A. Rasmussen (2012) have observed how former victims of trauma, most especially children, can become victimisers with the passing of time, an aspect that has been rendered in literature and cinematic works such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and the film *Joker* (Phillips 2019).<sup>11</sup> Yet, besides individual victims turning into perpetrators, we can also find instances of victimised collectivities and nations going through the same transformation in our recent history. A good example is the US with its post-9/11 War on Terror in Afghanistan and the tortures against terrorism-related detainees and suspects alluded to in various poems of the anthology *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak* (Falkoff 2007).

In addition to the victim-victimiser subject, other researchers have theorised on the figure of the indirect collaborator or perpetrator. Of particular significance is Rothberg's ground-breaking concept of "the implicated subject," which serves to define

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<sup>11</sup> In Brontë's novel, Heathcliff, who is victimised as a child by Hindley Earnshaw, turns into a sadistic victimiser hungry for revenge years later. In *Joker*, the protagonist's mental health problems, childhood abuse, loneliness and failing career makes him lose his grip on sanity and end up victimising others.

those individuals and communities who “occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm” (2019, 1). As he explains, an implicated subject “is neither a victim nor a perpetrator but rather, a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator” (1) who needs to be scrutinised for the uncovering of “contexts of injustice that cannot be grasped immediately or directly” (8). Indeed, despite their lack of control on regimes of domination, these implicated individuals “contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from such regimes,” thereby propagating “the legacies of historical violence and prop[ping] up the structures of inequality that mar the present” (1). Perhaps the best examples of implicated subjects that can be encountered today are the privileged consumers in the Global North, who, although not exactly direct “perpetrators” of exploitation and inequality, are participants in and beneficiaries of a global capitalist system which systematically provokes socio-economic disparities as well as psychic and physical harm (12). Likewise, the figure of the implicated subject comes in handy for the acknowledgment of the US society as the conscious creator of a racial hierarchy system from which whites can benefit every single day (10).

Hence, because as evinced by real life, violence begets violence, I believe and intend to prove that the analysis of US ethnic novels dealing with white and racialised victims and perpetrators of sexist and racist violence like the ones comprising my literary corpus must explore the vicious and traumatic context in which these characters are framed in order to provide an accurate study of the causes and consequences of such brutality. As demonstrated in this chapter, the turn to the decolonisation of trauma theory and the recognition of the possibility that trauma functions as a given community’s collective and cultural wound has brought to the fore the transgenerational transmission of trauma and how its cumulative haunting can push former victims to turn

into perpetrators. Additionally, I would argue that the innovative theoretical framework of the implicated subject contributes to a more accurate analysis of the lingering effects of racist and sexist violence against ethnic subjects, for it addresses the individual act but also the historical and collective responsibility of the society where this violence takes place (e.g. the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and the history of black lynching in the US). In this sense, decolonised trauma theory, perpetrator studies and the implicated subject approach are crucial tools for the analysis of *The Round House*, *God Help the Child* and *An Untamed State*: this integrated framework enables the study of the authors' complication of the victim/perpetrator binary whereby they bring to light the complex relations between racism and sexism in their current ethnic contexts.

### **1.3. A Cartography of Ethnic Trauma in the US**

Although the new turn to the decolonisation of trauma studies has been enormously useful for the study of US ethnic communities and their literatures, an analysis of their specific traumatic contexts is necessary to better comprehend survivors' suffering as well as their post-traumatic growth. As I see it, a general focus on the trauma of US ethnicities as a homogenous group would not only be a myopic approach to the topic, but it would also become yet another inattentive analysis by the non-ethnic critical eye to the reality of those groups. Thus, because the contexts to which the three selected authors belong differ greatly from each other, this section provides a lens onto the specificities of Native American, African American and Haitian American cultural traumas. More particularly, I intend to explore the continuing oppression of these communities and how this more or less direct abuse can make some of their members turn into victimisers of inter/intra-racial and sexist violence.



I am aware that trauma theory has tended to re-victimise those who are haunted by past ghosts on account of a traumatic event or a cumulative traumatic situation. This is particularly the case of ethnic communities who are normally regarded as perpetual victims regardless of their historical resilience. Yet, as critics like Gerald Vizenor (2008) or Mengel and Borzaga (2012) have demonstrated, post-traumatic growth is possible by means of public memorials, ceremonies, recuperation of archives, the community and art. Particularly, post-traumatic growth has been portrayed in contemporary US literature by ethnic authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward or Edwidge Danticat. Hence, although this section deals with the seed of the collective and cultural trauma in the ethnic groups of the aforementioned authors and the transgenerational transmission of those very inner wounds, my intention is not to reinforce the all-too common Westerncentric victimising depiction of trauma survivors. Instead, I aim to offer a careful examination of the historical and social factors which can explain the current abuse against Native American, African American and Haitian American women by both white and non-white individuals and, in turn, make their resilience more visible.

### ***1.3.1. Native American Historical Unresolved Grief***

Trauma has accompanied Native peoples from the North, South, East and West of the American continent since the arrival of the white settlers.<sup>12</sup> In the last few years, many scholars have claimed for the need of exploring the historical traumas that affect many Native American individuals today. Critics like Nancy van Styvendale (2008), Jennifer

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<sup>12</sup> In order to demonstrate—and probably to prove Native American Holocaust deniers wrong—that American Indians have been the victims of genocide—a crime defined by the United Nations as the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such” (2008, 25)—in her book *Silent Victims*, Perry lists some of the actions perpetrated against Natives by European settlers for centuries such as “killing members of the group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part” and “imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group” (25).

Lemberg (2006) and Martínez-Falquina (2017b) advocate the study of Native Americans' trauma, yet they remark the importance of considering the limitations that traditional trauma theory has always shown in relation to the Native American context. After all, as Kimberly Blaeser rightly argues, the use of Western theories, which have so often been used to study the social, psychological or cultural meanings of Natives, may become yet another destructive weapon for their culture (1998, 265). This is because Western theory more often than not entails a critical re-colonisation of Native ways and ideas. For this reason, all these scholars claim for theories based on Indigenous people's epistemologies. Within the larger project of reaffirmation of Native American theories, I find the ideas of "soul wound" (B. Duran et al. 1998), "American Indian Historical Trauma" (AIHT) or "historical unresolved grief" (Brave Heart 1998) particularly pertinent for my study. As I see it, not only do these concepts prove useful to understand and explain trauma in Native communities as Martínez-Falquina points out (2017b, 210-11), but they also show an affinity to the general and necessary decolonisation of trauma studies.

In their article "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief," Lakota psychologists Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn expose how the blows that American Indians<sup>13</sup> have historically suffered since the European colonisation have resulted in "a long legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations" (1998, 60). These scholars define historical unresolved grief as a "social pathology" (60) affecting Native communities in various forms: high rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism and other social problems. This condition derives from "the loss of lives, land, and vital aspects of

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<sup>13</sup> Although I am aware that Indigenous Peoples of America generally prefer the use of their respective tribe/group names, for a matter of style and in order to avoid repetition, when referring to this ethnic community in a broader sense I will employ the terms "Native Americans," "Natives," "American Indians" and "Indigenous" indistinctively.

Native culture promulgated by the European conquest of the Americas” (60) and from the ongoing racism and oppression these communities still endure. In fact, these experts compare the historical unresolved grief suffered by Native American communities with the trauma that Holocaust survivors transferred to their descendants by affirming that the Native American genocide also had traumatic effects on surviving Indigenous peoples and their offspring. As a result, American Indian communities have passed across generations “a pervasive sense of pain from what happened to their ancestors and incomplete mourning of those losses” (68). Further, the present Indigenous generations also endure “repeated traumatic losses of relatives and community members through alcohol-related accidents, homicide, and suicide” (68) and other “destructive coping mechanisms” inextricably related to the community’s chronic “disenfranchised grief and historical trauma” (69). Hence, Native peoples’ trauma is arguably twofold.<sup>14</sup>

According to Bonnie Duran et al., the source of many social and health problems suffered by Native American communities today was the arrival of Europeans on the so-called New World because “the creation and expansion of America produced an inevitable disintegration of the rationality of everyday native American life” (1998, 62). Firstly, Indigenous peoples had to cope with the stress produced by the arrival of white foreigners (E. Duran et al. 1998, 343) and the death of many of them owing to European diseases to which they were not immune (Weave 2016a, 46). Besides, in addition to habitual racist attitudes, soon white settlers—who had previously recognised the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and used treaty-making in order to establish

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<sup>14</sup> Borrowing Kenneth J. Doka’s concept of “disenfranchised grief”—defined as “the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (1989, 4)—Brave Heart and DeBruyn explain that Natives’ suffering provoked by their incapacity to publicly mourn the traumatic losses of their families contributed to multigenerational unresolved grief. As these scholars note, Natives could not mourn in public for three reasons: firstly, because the stereotyping of Natives as stoic and savage people made whites believe they “had no capacity to mourn and therefore the right to grieve” (1998, 67); secondly, because it was forbidden for Natives to celebrate rituals which facilitated the mourning process; and thirdly, because “European American culture only legitimises grief for immediate nuclear family in the current generation” (67).

“legal and political relationships” with them (Deloria and Lytle 1983, 3)—started to trick them or break many of those agreements so as to deprive their communities from land sovereignty (E. Duran et al. 1998, 343). Hence, when colonisation efforts expanded, Natives came to be defined as “deviant others” and “subhuman savages” (Weaver 2016b, 157) not worthy of owning land and of any respect or basic human rights, an ethos which legitimated violence against them. In fact, as Hilary N. Weaver affirms, the nineteenth century can be regarded as the era of extermination, for it was especially in these years that the US government carried out campaigns of purposeful and violent annihilation of Native Americans in order to occupy tribal lands (2016b, 157).

Further, in this century Indigenous tribes were forcefully removed from their original territories to reservations so that these lands “could be opened for American settlement” (Weaver 2016a, 11). This provoked in many American Indians symptoms of “refugee syndrome” due to their displacement (B. Duran et al 1998, 63) as well as material and inner wounds owing to the loss of their ancestral lands which up to that moment had provided them with “sources of sustenance for both physical and spiritual needs” (63). Thus, the removal and relocation programme “disrupted traditional lifestyles” and turned former self-made communities dependant on colonial governments (Tamburro and Tamburro 2016, 47).

Later on, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the US government officially embraced policies aimed at forced assimilation like the removal of children from their families so that they could have an education focused on Christianity and vocational skills which forbade and even punished Indigenous spirituality and traditions (Weaver 2016a, 11-12). The 1924 Congressional Act entailed yet another psychological blow, for this law granted citizenship to all Native peoples “without consultation with the

tribes or consideration for the fact that many [...] still considered themselves citizens of their own nations” (12). Also, in the 1950s, many Native families were relocated from reservations into large metropolitan areas as a new intent to assimilate them into the “individualistic, mainstream American culture” (12). The main reason behind this policy, which ended up plunging relocated families into greater poverty and marginalisation, was the freeing up of reservation lands for American settlement (10).

All the aforementioned felonies against Native American peoples gave rise to a traumatic legacy which still affects the contemporary generations (Brave Heart and DeBryun 1998, 62). However, Native American trauma is still unresolved not only because these communities have never had any compensation for their suffering, but also because the dynamics of settler colonialism still linger in the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup> An example of the stressors Native groups have to face nowadays is the fact that many have seen themselves deprived of basic human rights, for Indigenous peoples in the US are still profoundly marginalised and poorly protected by contemporary legal codes. As a result of centuries of institutionalised discrimination and violence, most reservations present high rates of poverty and violence nowadays. Not too surprisingly, Native women are the sector of the US Indigenous population which suffers the most.

### *1.3.1.1. The Dispossession of the Indigenous Female Body as Traumatic Stressor for Contemporary Native American Women*

Since 1999 a good range of studies and reports have brought to the fore the scourge of sexual violence against American Indian women in the US by revealing that they suffer the highest rate of per capita rape in this country (Deer 2015, 3) and that most

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<sup>15</sup> Drawing on a report by Echo Hawk Consulting and First Nations Development Institute, Rebecca Nagle points to the ubiquitous invisibility with which Native Americans have lived for years as a modern form of racism against the Native communities. Following Nagle, this lack of visibility and relevance in modern culture which stems from the systemic erasure of Native peoples from basic education, pop culture and mainstream news, not only dehumanises them but also undermines public support for their rights and creates “a deep and stubborn unconscious bias in the non-Native mind” (2018, n.p.).

especially, they are victimised by non-Native assailants (6). The problem is that these figures continue increasing because rapists are not legally prosecuted due to jurisdictional loopholes on reservations of which these men take advantage. Such is the impunity against non-Native perpetrators that, as Creek lawyer and professor Sarah Deer points out, in some tribes, Native women know they are likely to be sexually abused “at some point in their lives, and preparing for this inevitable violence resembles a full-time job” (5).<sup>16</sup>

Despite recent data, rape is not a novelty in the lives of American Indian women. Rather, as some scholars like Deer (2015), Andrea Smith (2015) or Jacqueline Agtuca (2008) argue, it responds to the long history of violence related to the colonisation of Indigenous peoples in America since the end of the fifteenth century. Deer puts forward that rape epitomises the most negative side of colonisation “in its attack on the body, disrespect for physical boundaries, and disregard for humanity,” which may make rape survivors experience “many of the same ‘symptoms’—shame, fear, self-hatred, depression—that survivors of colonization experience” (2015, 51). Owing to these links and to the fact that non-Native rapists are infrequently prosecuted for their crimes, many Native women and the Native community as a whole cannot help but to associate their sexual abuse with a history of colonial victimisation. After all, as Smith argues, when dealing with violence against Native American women “the issues of colonial, race, and gender oppression cannot be separated” (2015, 8), for these are attacks not only against their identity as female individuals but also against their Native American identity and what this Indigenesness represents.

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<sup>16</sup> Native women in the US and Canada have also been victims of mass sterilisation in surgeries practiced under coercion, trickery or anaesthesia effects. Even though this forced sterilisation was officially stopped in the 1970s, it has recently been discovered that many Indigenous women Canada have been sterilised without consent in the last years (see Kusmer 2018; Porras Ferreyra 2018). The reason behind this inhumane practice has to do with Native women’s “potential through childbirth to assure the continuance of the [Native] people” (Hernández-Avila 1993, 386), and a deliberate reduction of the Indigenous communities in order to expand and, on some occasions, start certain economic activities like agribusiness, mining, fracking and industry on their lands.

Written accounts of the early years of colonisation reveal that in many tribes, Native women possessed authority over the production of goods, the home and trading practices. Due to their esteemed status in the tribe, violent sexist actions towards them were almost inexistent (Agtuca 2008, 5).<sup>17</sup> This behaviour clearly demonstrates that, contrary to women in the Old World, who had a secondary role in their society, American Indian women were highly valued and considered (6). Thus, because Indigenous women's freedom and high status in their societies jeopardised the values of the European patriarchal order, much effort was put into representing them as uncivilised and dangerous (8). This kind of discourse turned Native women into the main target for colonisers in their quest to conquer and assimilate the American Indian communities they encountered.

As a way to subdue Native women to the patriarchal society which settlers had taken with them to the New World, their high status was soon undermined and sexual violence against them became a common tool of domination. Hence, because women were "the backbone" of the tribal communities due to their cultural, spiritual and economic prominence (Deer 2015, 13), rape affected the assaulted women individually and also had an appalling effect on their communities. In this sense, as Smith suggests, rape against Indigenous females at the time can be regarded as part of a larger policy meant to disempower and ultimately smash Native communities through the imposition of "the value of hierarchy, the role of physical abuse in maintaining that hierarchy, and the importance of women remaining submissive to their men" (2015, 23). What is truly outstanding though is the fact that, while colonisers sexually abused Native women in

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<sup>17</sup> Although prior to colonial contact not all Native American societies were matrilineal, as Deer explains, in all of them, "Native women had spiritual, political and economic power that European women did not enjoy" (2015, 18) and, unlike in Europe and the forthcoming colonies, women's and men's labour enjoyed equal status (19). Likewise, in contrast to white women, Native ones had autonomy and "expressed and celebrated their sexuality" freely (20), which yet again posed a threat to the patriarchal European order.

colonial North America, they simultaneously created the (hi)story of the barbaric, lustful and rapist Indian, especially through the popular genre of captivity narratives. Originally, these works were first-person accounts of white women who were kidnapped by “savages” and, according to them, underwent dismal experiences during their captivity as a result of Indians’ savagery (A. Smith 2015, 21). With the passing of time, the captivity motif was incorporated to American fiction at large, particularly in the nineteenth century. However, regardless of the flourishing of this literary genre and the image of the rapist Indian in US literature since colonial times, there is no evidence of white women being molested by Native Americans back then (Deer 2015, 21).

It could be thought that, after more than five centuries since the arrival of European settlers to America and thanks to the creation of the International Human Rights Law which forbade sexual abuse as a war weapon in the twentieth century, rape should no longer be used as a colonising tool over the bodies and psyches of Native American women. Unfortunately, today the historical context of rape, racism and colonialism still continues striking Indigenous women in the US as the rate of sexual attacks on reservations, the percentage of unprosecuted white rapists and the lack of legal protection for these women demonstrate. Particularly, scholars like Deer (2015), Smith (2015), Owens (2012) and Agtuca (2008) see a modern sort of oppression against American Indian communities in the lack of a clear jurisdiction in Indian Territory that allows for the prosecution of non-Native rapists. The reason behind the US government’s apparent indifference to these crimes dates from the time when Native peoples were deprived of their sovereignty over their lands through the approval of certain acts, which, in turn, brought a history of confusion among tribal, state and federal jurisdiction, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.



When Native American groups were relocated on reservation lands, the US promised to protect their sovereignty through different treaties which retained their inherent right of self-government and, therefore, the right to punish tribal and non-tribal offenders as well as to regulate domestic relations among the tribe members (Agtuca 2008, 12-13). However, the US government's responsibility to promote tribes' welfare on reservations and safeguard Native women's physical integrity from violence did not last long as tribes' jurisdictional authority was gradually restricted by Congress and the Supreme Court. Thus, the systematic displacement of Indigenous peoples from their land base—which was both their economic source of livelihood and their spiritual foundation—set up conditions for a “jurisdictional maze” (J. Owens 2012, 509) which has enabled white men to rape and murder Native women on reservations with impunity for decades. It is true that under President Obama's administration, he and the US Congress were interested in reforming federal Indian policy so as to ensure safety for the American Indian population. In 2010, President Obama signed two legislative measures, the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010 and the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 in order to address the problematic jurisdiction and the lack of fiscal support and services for rape victims living on reservations. But although tribal leaders, Native women and the administration praised the law, they maintained that “it still [fell] short of protecting all Indian women from the epidemic of violence they face on tribal lands” (Horwitz 2014, n.p), as it did not cover sexual assault or rape committed by non-Native strangers and the law was not applicable in Alaska.

In sum, it is undeniable that the persisting jurisdictional maze entails yet another cause for historical trauma and historical unresolved grief. And to this scourge we must add the high rate of domestic violence against Indigenous women by their Native partners or spouses, which evinces that “the status of women within [...] tribes has

suffered a grievous decline since contact” (Allen 1992b, 191). In fact, Victoria Ybanez considers that the historical violent oppression suffered by Native peoples in the form of forced removals, boarding schools and rape have been internalised by many present-day Native men (2008, 57), who, by subjugating their female partners with a similar violence than that used by colonisers, have sometimes become perpetrators themselves.

As will be analysed in Chapter 2, Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House* denounces the unfair situation of Native women owing to the lack of jurisdictional protection and the lingering of a patriarchal order. Also, my study of the novel brings to the fore that, through this text, Erdrich wants to underscore an ongoing process of neocolonisation in the States which goes hand in hand with the sexual colonisation of the Indigenous female body and, therefore, perpetuates Native American women’s historical unresolved grief. Lastly, as I shall show, this novel deals with another stressor for these women, namely, the violence perpetrated by their Native partners against them as an exteriorisation of the Euro-American values these men have historically assimilated.

### ***1.3.2. African American Post-Slavery Traumatic Syndrome***

It is not surprising that in the history of the US, slavery and segregation turned into a collective cultural trauma for African Americans. As Ron Eyerman explains in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, the trauma of slavery, racial segregation and violence not only affected those who suffered these traumatic experiences first-hand, but also black individuals who did not experience them directly. This is so, Eyerman argues, because “slavery and segregation have become central to [African Americans’] attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance” (2001, 1). Likewise, historians like Ashraf Rushdy have noted that slavery is the “family secret” of the country, which albeit repressed or partially hidden,

is a “phantom that continues to haunt [its] national imagination” (2001, 2). The rationale behind the silence around US darkest past, as Kirkland Vaughans states, is the fact that slavery “remains the national paradox” of a country which, although founded under the ideals of freedom, liberty and justice, was erected, especially in economic terms, on the backs of black slaves (2017, 227-28).

But how can such a distant historical event like slavery affect generation after generation in the African American community? Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, about eleven million Africans were forcibly shipped to North America across the Atlantic in the violent, inhuman and uprooting transatlantic journey known as the Middle Passage (Berlin 2010, 14). Such forced displacement of millions of Africans who were transported to the New World and sold as slaves constituted a journey of no return towards the dehumanisation of black individuals whose consequences still persist today. In fact, in the last decade, scholars like Eyerman (2001) and Frank Wilker (2017) have regarded the Middle Passage and slavery not only as the source of the communal trauma experienced by generations of black slaves used and abused in the States between 1619 and 1865, but also of a cultural trauma that affects present-day African Americans. According to Eyerman, “the notion African American is not itself a natural category” for it refers to a community originally composed by individuals from different regions and cultural backgrounds in Africa who did not share a common past and identity (2001, 16). Hence, because, as this scholar puts it, collective identity is created through “a process both historically rooted and rooted in history” (14), slavery became the shared traumatic past around which black people in the US created a common and cohesive identity, for instance through narrative and art.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As Patricia San José Rico explains, African Americans’ identity and cohesion were founded on the traumatic memory of slavery and “their resistance and their fight for political rights” has long been organised around it, too (2019, 3-4).

Further, as African American psychiatrist James Comer argues, the trauma of slavery was compounded by the fact that children born into this institution were “socialized and developed in ways that defined them as inferior” (1972, 154). When a free individual has his or her own culture snatched and later on is “enslave[d], exclude[d], degrade[d] and abuse[d],” this person’s “sense of worth, value and adequacy” is likely to be “destroyed, reduced or under constant and severe challenge” (165). In the case of African Americans, such degradation suffered during slavery continued well after the abolition of this inhumane institution and the Reconstruction period, for during the Jim Crow era, segregation, terror and lynching were used to assert white supremacy over the black population.

Nowadays, the ongoing oppression against African Americans in the US since colonial times perpetuates the aforementioned past traumas which so commonly haunt contemporary generations. Particularly, the legacy of racism lingers in current forms of institutional and legal violence against African Americans. Thus, as Luminita M. Dragulescu holds, provided that racist discourses and practices still define the US society, they will act “as a catalyst of trauma both through the re-enactment of the traumatic past and through the present experience of failed inter-racial rapports” (2018, 276). Moreover, the lack of recognition of African Americans’ oppressive experiences also “reproduces and often augments trauma” (272). In sum, because today, in spite of the achievement of civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, “[t]he racism that made slavery feasible” is “far from dead” (Bell 1992, ix), the early twenty-first century is arguably not a much better time for African Americans to heal their collective trauma.

Behind this continuous erosion of the civil rights gained by African Americans some decades ago (Bell 1992, 3) is, according to bell hooks, the current resurgence of white supremacist organisations and individuals whose rhetoric and beliefs “surface as part of accepted discourse in every aspect of daily life in the United States” (1995b, 3).

As she puts it, this reality is so terrifying and painful that “it is enough to throw one back into silence” (3). Interestingly enough, hooks wrote these lines eleven years before the #BlackLivesMatter movement started as a public response to the ongoing racist system which greets blacks’ physical presence with violence before they can present a verbal account. Yet, despite the social turmoil achieved through this movement that denounces the assault and murder of African Americans by white police officers and vigilantes, numerous killings, supremacist rallies as well as xenophobic and racist discourses against blacks have occurred in the new millennium. The incessant cases of race violence like the aforementioned aggressions make it clear then, that the social construct of racism is still a serious scourge in present-day US, a context in which the African American community remains tremendously vulnerable as evinced by the fact that “the vast majority of Blacks are either directly affected by racial discrimination or know someone who is or has been affected” by it (Collins 2004, 47).

As explained above, the multifarious historical discriminations since the Middle Passage have affected the health and stability of African American individuals and communities throughout the centuries. Joy DeGruy defines the ongoing African American trauma or “Post-Traumatic Slavery Syndrome” (PTSS) as “a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today” (2017, 105). This form of inherited PTSD—which includes both the memory and representation of slavery and the ongoing racist subjugation suffered by the African American community even in our days—produces diverse symptoms which DeGruy succinctly classifies into three main categories: ever-present anger, vacant esteem and racist socialisation. Regarding ever-present anger, DeGruy explains that this symptom is provoked by the history of slavery, the racism that permeates US society and the failure of US institutions to successfully integrate African American people and allow them to

secure freedom, inclusion, equality and justice, factors that have undermined the dreams and hopes of the members of this community. This lasting rage is, then, “both a response to the frustration of blocked goals and the fear of failure” in the hostile society where they live (111).

The second symptom explored by DeGruy is vacant esteem, which she defines as “the state of believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of inferiority” and transmitted from one generation to the next through the family, community and society (108). Similarly, J. Brooks Bouson has contended that the collective and cultural trauma of slavery, segregation and racism have historically undermined the self-esteem and self-concept of African Americans to the extent that haunting feelings of shame, self-hatred and self-contempt have affected the African American community generation after generation (2000, 109-10). Bouson bases her statement on the ideas put forward by Cornel West in his book *Race Matters*, where this African American philosopher equates the centuries of slavery and “institutionalized terrorism in the form of segregation, lynchings, and second-class citizenship in America” to methods used to devalue and dominate black people (West [1993] 2017, 85). As West notes, “White supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them” (85). That control has indeed been achieved through fear and terror, but it is “best sustained by convincing [a people] that their bodies are ugly,” that they are intellectually and culturally inferior and that “their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples” (85). Hence, as West concludes, although it is true that the “white supremacist venture was [...] a relative failure,” all the dehumanising practices against African Americans throughout centuries left “psychic scars and personal wounds now inscribed in the souls of black folk” (85). This entails that African Americans carry with them a transgenerational racial shame rooted in the historical racism suffered by their community. Such

oppressive feelings of inferiority lead, as bell hooks observes, to some African Americans' negation of their blackness (1995b, 186, 158). Significantly enough, this self-colourism is a reaction related to the third PTSS symptom postulated by DeGruy—racist socialisation or the internalisation of the slave master's value system which regards whiteness as superior and blackness as inferior (2017, 116).

Although in the US colourism is inextricably related to racism—after all, it is a kind of discrimination based on racial identity—Angela P. Harris defines this practice as the prejudice based on a person's physiognomy regardless of their perceived racial identity (2008, 54). As she further explains, “the hierarchy employed in colorism [...] is usually the same one that governs racism: light skin is prized over dark skin, and European facial features and body shapes are prized over African features and body shapes” (54). Colourism stems from the origins of the skin-tone hierarchy used by slave owners on the plantation. This system allowed light-skinned ones born usually from raped slave women to enjoy additional privileges (Hunter 2007, 239) and especially from the Post-reconstruction era when “the amount of color in skin, not just skin colour became paramount for whites to maintain social and economic control” (Greenidge 2019, n.p.). In this latter period the commonly called “one-drop rule” became the way to define non-white people and segregate them due to their skin colour. Consequently, especially during the lynching decades in the twentieth century, many light-skinned blacks tried to pass for white so as to avoid rejection, violence and even death.

The problem is that this internalisation of the colourist white culture persists in the US nowadays to the extent that many contemporary African Americans have adopted white standards, including those of beauty and material success as well as violence and brutality. Significantly, some of those who have reached a high social and economic status have also denied the role of the Civil Rights movement in their success

or the importance of taking action against the ongoing discrimination against blacks. Hence, these individuals have become implicated subjects in the sense of Rothberg's definition, for they have "fully adopted the white version of the American dream" (DeGruy 2017, 116) while neglecting their less privileged peers.<sup>19</sup> Such behaviour reveals that colourism is not only practised by power structures like courts, businesses and schools, but also by many black people who find it hard to acknowledge their own internalisation of white supremacy as a physical and psychological survival strategy.

#### *1.3.2.1. The US Beauty Canon and Misogynoir as Traumatic Stressors for Contemporary African American Women*

Other than the African American historical and cultural trauma at large, a specific traumatic stressor for contemporary black females is sexist violence. As aforementioned, women of colour in the US suffer high rates of sexual violence perpetrated by white men. However, it is important to remark that these women are faced with yet another layer of oppression since many of them also suffer gender or sexist violence on the hands of their black peers. This violence is very much linked to the effects that slavery and PTSS have on the African American community. Given that the institution of slavery was based on the violent treatment of black peoples who were "forcibly captured, chained," raped and beaten, those living under such circumstances learnt their captors' way and passed it on through generations (DeGruy 2017, 114). Therefore, it is not surprising that, as DeGruy argues, so as to endure a shaming psychic emasculation and a "status of invisibility and impotence" provoked by PTSS and a

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<sup>19</sup> In her book *Killing Rage*, bell hooks explains how the negation of blackness and the adoption of white values is a tactic used by many African Americans to fit in the ongoing white supremacist society. As she puts it, "those black folks who are more willing to pretend that 'difference' does not exist, even as they self-consciously labor to be as much like their white peers as possible, will receive greater material rewards in white supremacist society" (1995b, 158). In this sense, "[w]hite supremacist logic is thus advanced" because instead of "using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, it seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only [they] are willing to negate the value of blackness" (158).



lingering white-patriarchal world, some African American men subdue their female peers through violent acts which make them experience a *faux* feeling of power like that held by the white master (135).

A second traumatic stressor affecting contemporary African American women is colourism and the dominance of a Caucasian-beauty canon. Globally, white and light-skinned people have always had many more advantages than people of colour, which has led a good deal of dark-skinned individuals to alter their bodies in order to approach white standards by straightening their hair, using colour contact lenses or bleaching their skin. But even though colourism affects both black men and women, it has been demonstrated that the latter group is much more influenced by it (Holtzman 1973; Neal and Wilson 1989). In a still largely patriarchal and Caucasian-centred society like the US, which concedes great importance to women's physical beauty and Anglo-facial traits, white or light-skinned female models are preferred to appear on TV, magazines or films. As a consequence, every African American woman in the US receives the message that "white is beautiful and successful," which entails a blow to many of these women's self-esteem as some literary writers have brought to the fore. Although not the only narrative dealing with this issue, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is one of the most well-known African American novels dealing with this sort of violence. In it, Morrison not only exposes the ways in which internalised white beauty standards deform the lives of black girls, but she also foregrounds how some blacks adults reproduce and pass on the message of white superiority to their children.

A third trauma stressor for contemporary African American women is the ongoing sexist commodification and abuse of their bodies. Since the times of colonisation, black women have been regarded through Westerncentric eyes as promiscuous, lustful as well as tempting. This stereotype of the black woman—also known as the Jezebel—has been

perpetuated through historical accounts by white men who, more often than not, had sexual intercourse with African women or their female descendants despite their alleged savagism. The commodification and abuse of black women's bodies by white colonisers started in Africa (Cooper 2015, 25) and continued in the auction blocks where naked African women were contemplated and examined for transactional purposes (Yancy 2017, 133; Collins 2004, 128). Likewise, firstly on the slave ships and later, on the New World plantations, these women were usually raped by European merchants and owners. A similar objectification and commercialisation of the black female body could also be observed in other venues as is the case of Sara Baartman's or the "Hottentot Venus." This South African slave woman was exhibited as an attraction in 1800s London and Paris for paying customers who wanted to contemplate her naked body-shape, breasts, genitalia and protuberant buttocks, considered amusing, overdeveloped, deviant and even animal-like back then (Willis 2010, 4).

Time has passed, yet sadly the exploitation and hyper-sexualisation of the black female body continues today, albeit in more subtle forms. For instance, hooks has condemned how, in the post-Civil rights movement era, the contemporary black female body is still regarded as what Stuart Hall (1997) called "the spectacle of the Other." Interestingly, hooks does not simply blame today's white men; she also criticizes some black women—especially those working in the show business—for imitating the white canon, exploiting their sexuality and physical aspect in order to fit in, catch the white eye and become more successful. The problem is, hooks states, that in our days, "reinscribed as spectacle" (2015a, 109), the black female body "gains attention [and acceptance] only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant" (117). So, whilst some scholars celebrate those African American celebrities repeating stereotypes about black women and female sexuality as a way of

contesting patriarchy and racism, other thinkers including hooks have criticised popular figures such as Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj for selling a highly sexualised image. As hooks holds, rather than being a liberatory behaviour, such demeanour reproduces the traditional objectification and exposure of the black female body (2014, n.p.) and therefore, it perpetuates centuries of *misogynoir*—the violence directed towards black women as a result of gender and race bias—against African American womanhood.<sup>20</sup>

The example of the aforementioned pop stars makes it clear that, since the turn of the century, the neoliberal ethos and discourses which promote extreme individuality alongside the so-called post-feminist wave have simultaneously contributed to the proliferation of female black celebrities who, perhaps unknowingly, repeat the denigration and exhibition suffered by black women in past centuries with their behaviour.<sup>21</sup> Hence, in a time when women of colour still suffer high levels of violence, the post-feminist self-objectification of the black female body could be regarded as a passing tool which not only reinforces the historical patriarchal treatment of the black woman, but also evidences how these women's social and self-acceptance is based on their willingness to follow white beauty standards and commodify their own bodies. In this sense, I would contend that the traumatic violence suffered by new-millennium African American women is twofold: on the one hand, it has to do with an ongoing white supremacist system and, on the other, with a patriarchal society heavily marked by a Caucasian beauty canon and the misleading post-feminist conception of hypersexuality and availability as liberating and equalising tools for all women. As will

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<sup>20</sup> African American feminist Moya Bailey has coined this term to describe “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (2021, 1).

<sup>21</sup> Post-feminism has been described as a sensibility influenced by neoliberalism which appeared in the 1980s and which takes for granted the goals and achievements of second-wave feminism by praising women's autonomy and economic, sexual and beauty choices—sometimes self-objectifying ones—as instances of their liberty (Goldman 1992, 132; Gill 2008, 442-43).

be analysed in Chapter 4, Morrison denounces this double violence against African American women in *God Help the Child*.

### ***1.3.3. Haitian American (Post-)Plantation and Diasporic Trauma***

Since the arrival of Christopher Columbus in Hispaniola—the island which today is made up of Haiti and the Dominican Republic—in 1492, the history of Haiti has been an agitated one. Throughout the centuries the Haitian community living both in Haiti and abroad has had to cope with traumatic stressors similar to those that affected the Native and African American communities in the US, but also with specific ones involving most of the Caribbean islands such as post-plantation social and racial inequalities, state violence and the psychological, social and cultural consequences of a double diaspora. This constant mobility across the Atlantic, based on a “migration to the Caribbean from elsewhere between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and from the Caribbean to other parts of the globe” in the following ones (Otto 2007, 96), is what most clearly differentiates the Haitian American community from the other two analysed in this dissertation.

While it is true that in colonial times the Spanish settlers regarded Hispaniola as a peaceful paradise rich in natural resources, soon the island became a symbol of hopelessness and despair due to the oppression of its people and the overexploitation of its raw materials by the vastly enriched conquerors from the Old World. With the Europeans’ arrival, a sugar-plantation economy was installed and the Indigenous population, the Taínos, was rapidly decimated as a result of overwork, diseases and executions. This demographic decrease led the Spanish and later the French—who acquired the western side of the island where the former capital, Santo Domingo, was located—to import African slaves as alternative labour force in the thriving plantations

(Randall 2009, 54). Yet, even though under French control Saint-Domingue was labelled “the Pearl of the Antilles” owing to its prosperous economy (Girard 2010, 9), both the black slaves and free mulattos continuously experienced the white population’s racism and rejection (Dubois 2004, 62). In this sense, because for almost three centuries the slave African population as well as their descendants were abused and mistreated by the European colonisers in similar terms than the African slaves in the US, it is evident that Haiti’s history has been strongly marked by the colour line.

Regardless of Haiti’s self-liberation of colonialism with the 1804 declaration of Independence, which demonstrated the Haitian population’s great strength and resistance (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2011, 4),<sup>22</sup> the ensuing period was not a bed of roses. The post-independence era was characterised by socio-economic problems provoked by a variety of factors. Firstly, the disappearance of the profitable plantation system; secondly, the country’s diplomatic and commercial isolation by France and many other slaveholding nations (Trouillot 1990, 50) alongside a one hundred and fifty million-franc indemnity for former planters (Hallward 2010, 12). Other determinants were the government’s corruption, the parasitic system established by the mulatto elite to the detriment of the masses (Girard 2010, 71) and the multifarious political crises, revolts and coups d’état (Laguerre 1998, 24).

In the twentieth century, Haiti was not able to recover from the traumatic legacies of colonialism, socio-economic inequality and foreign oppression. Particularly traumatic was the invasion of the island by the US marines from 1915 to 1934 which

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<sup>22</sup>To give shape to history implies, according to historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, deliberate “mentions or silences” (1995, 48). Haiti is a good example of historiography silencing for, as Trouillot argues, the general silence that Western historiography has produced around the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) has been caused by the fact that this event and its culmination in the emergence of the first Black State “challenged further the ontological order of the West and the global order of colonialism” (89). Consequently, with the passing of the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century, while Haiti deteriorated in terms of economy and politics, “the reality of the revolution seemed increasingly distant” to the extent that it became “a non-event” (98).

initiated the US involvement in Haitian political and economic affairs from then on. This intervention was aimed at occupying a strategic location during the debilitation of Europe in World War I (Trouillot 1990, 100) at the cost of Haitian peasants who, like in the colonial period, became cheap labour force in the service of foreign capitalism and the Haitian elite. Due to this subjugation and the US marines' racially-motivated violence, the occupation became a national nightmare (Girard 2010, 90-93).

Some decades after the US invasion of the island had come to an end, Haitians had to cope with another big blow, the murderous dictatorship installed by François Duvalier and his son Jean Claude Duvalier between 1957 and 1986. This authoritarian regime supported by the US government was characterised by the two dictators' use of a terror apparatus, that is, brutal forms of repression perpetrated by the *Tonton Macoutes*—a paramilitary force—in order to eliminate their enemies and inculcate a pervasive climate of fear which allowed them to achieve their political goals. Besides, this repressive regime was heavily marked by the leaders' and their supporters' corruption and by the disregard of the increasing urban poor population, which gave rise to endemic malnutrition, famine and infant mortality (M. Hall 2012, 90).

After the exile of Jean Claude Duvalier in 1986—which brought the end of the dictatorship and some years of turmoil and military coups—in the early 1990s, Haiti's socio-economic and political panorama changed towards a more democratic and progressive direction with the election of left-socialist president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Once in power, Aristide's reforms aimed at improving the lives of the Haitian poor and working classes incommoded Haiti's business and military elites alongside the International Monetary Fund and the US neoliberal and neo-colonial agenda of extraction in the island. This international and national pressure materialised in a temporary coup d'état in 1991 led by Haitian military Raoul Cédras and a second coup

which definitively forced Aristide into exile in 2004 (Hallward 2010, xxiv-xxxiv). Undoubtedly, Aristide's departure put an end to the glimmer of hope he had brought with him. Following the agitated post-coup years, Haiti went back to a democratic election and its socio-political stability allowed for the reception of economic assistance and new investments on the island, especially related to the tourist industry (Girard 2010, 213-14). However, several natural disasters—especially the dramatic 2010 earthquake—, corruption and recent political turmoil have plunged Haiti in a bigger crisis since the 2010s.

Considered the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere, not only has Haiti had to cope with the national and cultural trauma of (neo)colonisation, but it has also been deeply marked by systemic poverty along with a historical class conflict rooted in the colonial colour-caste society (Hallward 2010, 9) between the mass majority and the small ruling elite “which controls the state apparatus to enrich itself” (Fatton 2002, 36). Precisely, the traumatic factor of extreme poverty and the fact that the country is “a predatory republic” where the state “preys on its citizens without giving much in return” (27) have forced many Haitian people to migrate to nearby islands, France or the US.

Needless to say, Haitian émigrés are prone to suffer from another particular traumatic experience due to their diasporic status. Black Haitians who managed to enter the States since the nineteenth century suffered the consequences of the US racially-divided society owing to their race and national origins.<sup>23</sup> Like other Afro-Caribbean immigrants and refugees, in addition to poverty, violence, social alienation, racial and economic discrimination, many Haitian immigrants have experienced symptoms such as

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<sup>23</sup> The first migratory movements started in Haiti's post-revolution history and became more numerous during the US occupation, the Duvalierist era and Cédras' military coup, which spread terror in the entire country (Laguerre 1998, 22-4; Conway 2009, 379; Girard 2010, 133, 135). This latter diasporic movement was particularly dramatic because, due to George W. Bush's and Bill Clinton's restrictive immigration policies, most Haitian asylum-seekers fleeing on boats were intercepted in international waters by the US Coast Guard and subsequently returned to Haiti, where they should start their asylum application process if given the chance to do so (Laguerre 1998, 83).

grief, fear, anxiety, isolation, homesickness and depression which can be more chronic than PTSD (Hron 2018, 288). The reasons behind such discomfort are the numerous stressors—similar to those experienced by other immigrant communities—with which Haitians have to cope when they leave their homeland and arrive in the new country: lowered socio-economic status, linguistic problems, cultural and ethnic clash along with the loss of their homeland, familial and social networks, culture and language (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Hron 2018). Furthermore, once settled in the host land, Haitians usually face immigrant-hardships like exploitative work, inadequate living conditions, hostility, discrimination and violence, which may lead to traumatic consequences (Hron 2018, 289).

All these traumatic experiences related to migration are shared by most Caribbean expatriates in general as illustrated by the numerous novels written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by Caribbean authors in the diaspora (e.g Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul, Paule Marshall, Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kincaid, Caryl Phillips, Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz or Angie Cruz). In the Haitian case, the most representative author of diaspora narrative is Edwidge Danticat, whose novels *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and *The Dew Breaker* shed some light on the singular pressures and experiences undergone by the Haitian immigrant community established in the US. But the Haitian migratory trauma has a peculiarity which has to do with the concept of *dyaspora*. As Danticat explains, in the Haitian context, the Creole word *dyaspora* is employed “to identify the hundreds of thousands of Haitians living in many countries of the world” (2011, 49) with “their feet planted” both in their mother and host lands (51). However, the use of this term in Haitian territory most often implies otherness and exclusion of those who left as well as their offspring and provokes in this group a collective feeling of shame and guilt at having fled the country “and stayed away from [it] during difficult times”



(50). While the diaspora status creates a feeling of collectivity among such a numerous community living far from their roots in what Danticat figuratively calls the country's "tenth department" (49), it clearly divides Haiti's people between patriotic citizens who remained and "arrogant, insensitive, overbearing, and pretentious" expatriates (50).<sup>24</sup> Hence, this inbetweenness can also be regarded as a characterising traumatic stressor for the Haitian immigrants living abroad. As will be explained in Chapter 3, Roxane Gay's novel *An Untamed State* tackles the effects of the trauma of the Haitian diaspora and the Haitian Dream on her characters.<sup>25</sup>

#### *1.3.3.1. The Traumatic Stressor of Rape as a Weapon of Terror and Domination for Contemporary Haitian/American Women*

As explained above, the Haitian community located both in Haiti and the US is prone to trauma owing to a dramatic past and present which is silenced or ignored by First World nations and Haitians themselves. Undoubtedly, this has created a painful "cognitive lacunae" passed on through generations (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2011, 24). In fact, Carole Sweeney notes that, regardless of Haitians' resistant nature illustrated on many historical occasions, "it is the repetitive non-history of its unmemorialised experience of slavery, the descent into poverty, civil unrest, and internal terror and corruption that more acutely occupies the present" (2007, 55). However, as in the case of the Native and African American communities, the Haitian individuals who suffer the most are

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<sup>24</sup> This division leads many Haitian immigrants to experience what Abdelmalek Sayad (2004) called "the double absence," for they feel that they do not belong entirely to the former home or the new host country. Hence, the dislocation, settlement and adaptation of first generations and the hybridity of second generations make Haitians immigrants and their offspring live in a liminal or "third space" (Bhabha 1994, 36) which can provoke anxiety and unhappiness. Significantly, as some scholars like Volkan have demonstrated, immigrant parents can transmit their "diasporic trauma" to their children (2017, 47) and Haitian ones are not an exception to this phenomenon.

<sup>25</sup> In his book *Poverty in Haiti*, Mats Lundahl defines the Haitian Dream as the emigration of the Haitian peoples to the US in search for a better future (2011, xii).

women, for they not only have to deal with the aforementioned traumatic stressors, but also with the insidiousness of sexist and sexual violence.<sup>26</sup>

Following the arrival of Columbus to Hispaniola, indigenous Taíno women and girls were abused and taken as sex slaves by the Spanish colonisers (de las Casas [1552] 2010), and years later, as would happen in the US since 1619, the African slave women taken to the island were usually raped by European merchants and owners (Duramy 2014, 19). With the passing of time, and regardless of a revolutionary fight for freedom and equality, post-independence Haitian society continued developing as a patriarchal one just like the society formerly imposed by the white settlers. Whereas men were the family breadwinners, women were relegated to household work, the care of children and, sometimes, the selling of produce in the market (Duramy 2014, 40, 144).

Over a century after the Haitian Revolution, the trauma of rape came back in the years of the US occupation when numerous US marines, especially those coming from the racist and segregated Southern states, sexually abused many Haitian women as a way to demonstrate their white supremacy and power to the black Haitian population under their control (Renda 2001, 180). This dreadful practice infused so much terror that, according to Mary A. Renda, it created and maintained “an atmosphere in which rape would go unrecognized, unnamed, and of course, unpunished” (163). Further, during the Duvaliers’ dictatorship and Raoul Cédras’s *de facto* regime, their respective militias—Tonton Macoutes and *Zenglendos*—used torture and rape against female dissenters or women related to dissenters as a weapon of political oppression (E. James 2010, 63; Girard 2010, 139). It is true that these thugs tortured male dissenters so as to humiliate them, yet, in the case of women this violence was even more destructive, as it was also meant to cause them infertility or miscarriages (E. James 2010, 70).

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<sup>26</sup> In the States, Haitian immigrant women and their female offspring have had to deal with dislocation, homesickness and anti-immigrant discrimination alongside the same problems of racism, shame, colourism and sexual fetishisation that African American women have been experiencing for centuries.

Unfortunately, since the dictatorship and Cédras's regime of terror, female rape has remained "deeply embedded in the Haitian society," both in the domestic and public spheres, to the extent that it has become a part of Haitian women's everyday life (Duramy 2014, 38). As Benedetta Faedi Duramy explains, nowadays, the systematic rape of women and girls in this country "torn by poverty, political instability, inequality, and internal tensions" is not only a political weapon but also a frequent practice of criminal gangs from the urban slums of Haiti who represent an inevitable menace of sexual assault, sexual slavery and forced prostitution for Haitian females (51, 31). Furthermore, the 2010 earthquake, which especially hit the slums in Port-au-Prince, left poor women and children in an extremely vulnerable position. Many of them, as denounced by *The Times* in 2018, were exploited and raped not only by gangs but also by aid workers at NGOs like Oxfam (O'Neill 2018, n.p.). Besides, since the aftermath of the earthquake, prostitution and sex tourism have increased in the area (Duramy 2014, 146). This demonstrates how, one more time, the white supremacist and patriarchal values of Western visitors continue damaging many Haitian women who, so as to survive and feed their families, find no choice but to exploit their own bodies for money.

This brief summary of the lingering presence of sexual violence in Haiti is necessary in order to understand the historical, collective and cultural scars that this sort of violence has left on Haitian women's psyches to this day. As for the current state of women in the country, it is important to remark that Haiti still remains a patriarchal nation where, due to the cultural relation of women with their family honour, female Haitians become targets of kidnapping and gang rape, inhuman practices purposefully used as "weapons of destruction, submission, and humiliation" (Duramy 2014, 55). Further, I would add that the sexual aggressions perpetrated by white men like

international aid workers are caused by a sense of white superiority and the historical fetishisation of the black female body since colonial times, while rapes committed by Haitian men respond to their internalisation of the historical use of sexual violence as a war weapon since colonial times.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that rape in Haiti is a rampant problem: not only has it become normalised as a result of the internalisation of gender stereotypes and hierarchy, but there is also a significant lack of sexual aggression reports to the authorities due to the victims' fear of stigmatisation and the overwhelming presence of corruption and dysfunction within the Haitian security and judicial sectors (Duramy 2014, 96-99). All these factors have contributed to increasing the number of rape cases against Haitian women in the last years and to the encystment of such traumatic experiences, which cannot be easily worked through by their victims and their families. Interestingly enough, Haitian American authors like Edwidge Danticat and Roxane Gay have played a part in the disclosing of the scourge of gender/sexual violence historically suffered by Haitian women and the traumatic consequences that it provokes in the protagonists' and their families' lives. Particularly, as will be analysed in Chapter 3, in *An Untamed State*, Gay explores the role of perpetrators and implicated subjects that whites, Haitian locals, diasporas and returnees play in the perpetuation of sexual violence as a weapon of terror, commerce and extortion in Haiti.

#### **1.4. A Methodology for the Analysis of Trauma and Healing in the Selected Novels**

In view of the complexity behind the cartography of trauma in the US outlined above, we can observe that although early trauma theory was helpful for a while to understand the universally shared processes of trauma (those related to the mental responses to this

condition), it shows evident limitations *vis à vis* non-Western contexts such as the ones under study here. This is so because classical trauma theory is a prescriptive psychoanalytic system that disregards the long-term and systemic violence derived from (settler) colonialism, racism and gender oppression. Accordingly, and for the sake of critical rigour and responsibility in the analysis of the novels, my study of the selected narratives will draw on a combination of classical and postcolonial trauma theory.

For the analysis of each text's representation of the individual and collective responses to and healing of trauma, besides Western trauma scholars like Caruth, LaCapra, Whitehead, Abraham and Torok, Volkan or Judith Herman, I will also resort to Indigenous, Caribbean and African American ones. In the case of *The Round House*, I will draw on tenets by Brave Heart, DeBruyn, Vizenor, Leanne Simpson, Lawrence Gross or Glen Coulthard. As for *An Untamed State*, I will employ ideas and concepts from Édouard Glissant, Stuart Hall and Frantz Fanon. Regarding the study of African American trauma/healing in *God Help the Child*, I will rely on scholars like DeGruy, Collins, hooks and W. E. B. Du Bois. Finally, in order to analyse the novels' reproduction of trauma and recovery, I will also explore each text's generic and thematic coalescence of culturally-specific and Western elements. For so doing I will draw on the work of formalist literary critics like Gérard Genette, Monika Fludernik, Mikhail Bakhtin and Joseph Campbell as well as postcolonial ones such as Rothberg, Kimberly Blaeser, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Kaiama L. Glover, Borzaga, Martínez-Falquina and Ibarrola-Armendariz among many others.



Figure 1. North America portrayed as “Turtle Island” by Anishinaabe artist Elizabeth LaPensée for *Singuistics* (2016).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **FIGHTING (NEO)COLONIAL VIOLENCE AGAINST THE INDIGENOUS MOTHER/LAND: FROM INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE SUFFERING TO HEALING IN LOUISE ERDRICH’S *THE ROUND HOUSE***

#### **2.1. Louise Erdrich: A Crucial Voice within Native American Literature**

Contrary to what was often reflected in traditional studies of US literature, long before the arrival of the European settlers, there was a rich literary tradition of the diverse Indigenous communities in the American continent—which comprised oral stories together with other cultural expressions such as music, dances, ceremonies, prayers, and chants (Adorno 1996, 35). As a result of colonisation, the Indigenous groups who inhabited the vast territory which is nowadays known as the US gradually adopted the language of the coloniser, including writing, and registered their stories by hand in that new linguistic system. Even though such an important cultural change radically

transformed the oral tradition of the Native peoples, it also gave room for its continuity. The written literature produced by Native Americans after the arrival of the colonisers drew on pre-contact oral traditions and on Native peoples' belief in "the transformative power" of language and thought (Porter 2005, 43). It also delved into the Indigenous sense of interconnectedness between all things and the close relationship of humans with the land they inhabit.

The first instances of Native American written fiction in English would appear at the end of the eighteenth century. Although it grew in the nineteenth century, Native authors did not start to be recognised more generally until the 1960s, during the agitated era of the Civil Rights Movement in which the US ethnic minorities vindicated not only their rights as US citizens but also their differential identities. The most crucial date for Native American literature was 1968, the year in which the publication of N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* marked the beginning of the so-called Native American Renaissance (J. Ruppert 2005, 173).<sup>27</sup> In the following years, what has been considered the first generation of authors in this literary tradition published relevant works that, together with Momaday's novel, set its key characteristics.<sup>28</sup> This is the case of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978) and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), to mention some of the most representative examples. All these works strove to correct the biased views of Indigenous peoples' identity imposed by white authors for five centuries. They also allowed the diverse Native communities to

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<sup>27</sup> "Native American Renaissance" is a term which Kenneth Lincoln coined in 1983 to identify the large production of literary works by Native American authors from the late 1960s onwards.

<sup>28</sup> Although Native American poetry existed before the Native American Renaissance as the poems of authors like Zitkála-Šá or Frank James Prewett demonstrate, multifarious works of poetry by Native writers have been published since the 1960s. Among the most celebrated poets we find Joy Harjo—current United States Poet Laureate—, N. Scott Momaday, Simon J. Ortiz, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Lois Red Elk, Gerald Vizenor, Louise Erdrich, Roberta Hill Whiteman, Linda Hogan, Sherman Alexie, Gordon Henry Jr., Joseph Bruchac and Kimberly Blaeser.

denounce the unfair and traumatic situations the past generations had lived and the consequences that their descendants still have to endure today.

If this generation of writers tackled themes such as alienation, dislocation, identity issues, relations within the family and interconnectedness with the land, about a decade later, another prominent group of authors interested in newer questions emerged. This later current within the Native American Renaissance included Paula Gunn Allen, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie and Linda Hogan, whose works are characterised by an ambiguous and hybrid understanding of what it means to be Native American in an increasingly connected world at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium. Such a change of emphasis in comparison to the forefathers of the Native American Renaissance has led scholars like Catherine Rainwater to acknowledge a second wave within the Native American Renaissance, in which Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), became a paradigmatic example of the new direction of this literary trend (Rainwater 2005, 272).

Louise Erdrich, the writer under analysis in this chapter, stands out as one of the most—if not the most—popular Native American authors at present. She is a successful and prolific author who, to date, has written eighteen novels, seven children's books, a collection of short stories, a number of essays and various volumes of poetry, all of which have earned her numerous awards like the Pulitzer Prize in 2021. This recognition evidences the high quality and value of her writing. Among her more renowned works we find *Love Medicine*, her debut novel about a multigenerational family saga set in both imaginary and actual places in North Dakota, which is also integrated by *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), *Four Souls* (2004) and *The Painted Drum* (2005). Owing to the creation of this saga of



multiple narrators and recurrent characters set in a specific and imaginary geographical area, critics like Lorena Stookey (1999) have compared Erdrich with William Faulkner and his fictional landscape of Yoknapatawpha. Other novels written by Erdrich until the present day which are not included in the North Dakota Saga are *The Crown of Columbus* (co-authored with Michael Dorris) (1991), *The Antelope Wife* (1998), *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), *The Plague of Doves* (2008), *Shadow Tag* (2010), *The Round House* (2012a), *LaRose* (2016), *Future Home of the Living God* (2017), *The Night Watchman* (2020) and the recently published *The Sentence* (2021).

One of the reasons behind Erdrich's success among readers and critics is related to the way in which she represents cultural hybridity in her stories. Erdrich was born in 1954 to Ralph Erdrich, a German American, and her mother Rita (née Gourneau), an Ojibwe<sup>29</sup> of French descent. Although she is originally from Minnesota, Erdrich would spend part of her youth in North Dakota, where her parents taught at a school set up by the BIA. Her connection with the Anishinaabe tradition was established through her grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, a storyteller who also served as the head of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians at the end of the nineteenth century (Beidler and Barton 2006, 1). Since Erdrich and her siblings belong to a Native American community but were raised as Catholics, she is able to portray the experiences of characters whose spiritual worlds, in Rainwater's words, "blend Ojibwe and Catholic cosmologies" (2005, 271), which is one key characteristic of her fiction.

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<sup>29</sup> Although "Chippewa" is the legal term used by the US authorities, members of the Algonquian tribes of the Great Lakes area on both sides of the border between the US and Canada tend to use "Ojibwe" (also spelled "Ojibwa" or "Ojibway") or "Anishinaabe" (also spelled "Anishinabe" or "Nishnaabeg") as a term for self-designation (Stirrup 2010). Erdrich, who is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, uses the terms "Chippewa," "Anishinaabe" and "Ojibwe" to refer to her origins. However, because for the time being, Erdrich seems to prefer the terms "Ojibwe" and "Anishinaabe," which she uses interchangeably, in compliance with the writer, I will use both terms throughout this thesis, except when referring to the tribe to which Erdrich is enrolled and when quoting other authors' literal words.

As the product of two traditions, the Native American and the Western one, Erdrich commonly focuses on cultural amalgamation in her works. After all, like other contemporary Native authors, Erdrich is influenced by the storytellers from her community and also by her Euro-American heritage (see C. Jacobs 2001, 12-14, 181-84). Accordingly, it is not rare to find in her work conventions of traditional Native American oral and written literature as well as features and intertextual references to the Anglo-American fiction and culture as is the case of *Love Medicine*, which presents clear references to *Moby Dick* (1851) as noted by Thomas Matchie (1989) and Fabienne C. Quennet (2001). Notably, this combination of Western and non-Western literary and cultural elements in Erdrich's stories not only displays what P. Jane Hafen calls "a Chippewa experience in the context of the European American novelistic tradition" (quoted in Stirrup 2010, 3) but also bespeaks Erdrich's role as a cultural translator of both traditions.

Moreover, Rainwater attributes the popularity of *Love Medicine* to the "greater accessibility to a mass audience" (2005, 272) if compared to previous Native American authors. As this critic observes, readers unacquainted with the Anishinaabe culture and history could quickly engage with the novel thanks to Erdrich's "audience-accommodating narrative strategies" adapted "from oral to written storytelling" (272) and the development of Native and non-Native characters who "negotiate gaps between cultural realities" (272). Precisely, it is in this ability to move between the Western and Native American worlds, a characteristic that continued in her subsequent novels, that Erdrich's genius lies. However, it is also important to bear in mind that through her distinctive blurring of the dichotomies between Natives and non-Natives, full-blood vs. mixed-blood Indians, modernity vs. tradition (Stirrup 2010, 10), in her fiction Erdrich problematises the traditional definitions associated with Native Americans. In so doing

she becomes a revealing example of how Native writers, in their “restoration and re-storying of Native voices in contemporary encounters with the western archive,” concomitantly “write over the interpretative super-positioning of non-tribally produced” discourses on their culture and identity (Henry 2017, 33).

From a thematic point of view, Erdrich’s novels address and move beyond familiar injustice, for they “call on us to develop a new historical consciousness” which allows us to see “how dominant societies have constructed their own versions of history that have passed for objective truth” (Rainwater 2005, 277-78). Thus, as Rainwater suggests, in her fiction, Erdrich defends the idea that “a more inclusive vision might help humanity to heal some historical wounds [e.g. colonisation] and to avoid repeating mistakes in the future” (278). Other themes that recurrently appear in Erdrich’s narratives are the connection with the land (L. Owens 1994; Martínez-Falquina 2020b), relationality and the importance of the community (Tharp 1993; Martínez-Falquina 2020a),<sup>30</sup> the complexities of Native American identity (J. Smith 1991), family and motherhood (Tanrisal 1997; C. Jacobs 2001), healing from (American Indian) historical trauma (Martínez-Falquina 2017b; Ibarrola-Armendariz 2017), historical consciousness (Peterson 1994; C. Jacobs 2001; Stirrup 2011) and environmental issues (Martínez-Falquina 2019).

In relation to form, Erdrich is well known for her use of multiple narrators and points of view, which serve her to create multivoiced or polyphonic novels where “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” give way to “a genuine polyphony of fully valid voice” (Bakhtin 1984, 6). Furthermore, the outstanding “intertextual connections between and among her novels” (Rainwater 2005, 279) result

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<sup>30</sup> Following Cherokee scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice, due to Indigenous communities’ traditional relationship “to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures, as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs,” relations are “the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers” (2018, xix).

in the recurrent appearance not only of the aforementioned themes but also of characters and geographical locations in her fiction. In addition, Erdrich mixes modern and postmodern techniques with narrative elements from the Ojibwe oral tradition (Beidler and Barton 2006, 1-2). As Connie Jacobs explains, although with a Western language Erdrich's novels "replicate a traditional storytelling situation with a teller and an audience" (2001, 46) as is the case of *Tracks*, techniques like shifting narrators, story cycles and the lack of a central voice in favour of a constellation of characters-narrators telling their lives are both contemporary Western and Native traditional literary constructs that appear in her works (184). Such multivocal narrative style, which has "become the hallmark of [Erdrich's] fiction" (Peterson 2021, 135), infuses her writing with complexity requiring attentive and willing readers (Rainwater 2005, 279).

Another characteristic of Erdrich's writing is the presence of supernatural or magical elements and events that instil a sense of the unreal within her realist plots (Sanders 1996; Velie 1997; Quennet 2001; Benito et al. 2009). This feature has determined that her fiction has often been analysed as an example of Magical Realism. Peter Standish defines this literary trend as "fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical, or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptive break in the narrator's or characters' consciousness" (1995, 156-57). Withal, even though to the naked eye this narrative tradition—deployed as a resistance response to Western late-nineteenth century realism and its connection to the colonial project—is an oxymoronic concept of opposing terms (fantasy and mimesis), both magic and realism coexist in a continuous dialogue with each other (Slemon 1995, 409). Erdrich enjoys and appears to have been influenced by key writers in the aforementioned magical realist tradition, namely William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez or Toni Morrison (Chavkin and Chavkin 1994, xvii). This indebtedness of the

“marvellous” can be observed, for instance, in *Tracks* where Fleur Pillager—one of the main characters—survives various drowning in the lake, a miracle that the community ascribes to Misshepeshu, “the water man, the monster” (Erdrich 1989, 11). However, Erdrich rejects the categorisation of her work as magical realist literature because “the events people pick out as magical don’t seem unreal” to her owing to the fact that she “was raised believing in miracles and hearing of true events that may seem unbelievable” (Chavkin and Chavkin 1994, 221).

Notably, the reason behind Erdrich’s refusal to identify her writing as Magical Realism is related to the use of this style by ethnic authors as a means to offer the reader “two systems of possibility, one that aligns with European rationality” and another containing the writer’s mythic and folkloric tradition of his or her non-Western context (Noriega Sánchez 2002, 30). In this respect, not only has Magical Realism served ethnic writers to detach from the imposition of Western literary conventions, but it has also allowed them to create hybrid and interwoven works which clearly resemble their mixed identities. This is the case of Native American authors like Erdrich, who have usually tried to compensate for the fact that conventional Western realism is not entirely capable of conveying their cultural beliefs through the use of tribal wisdom, mythical stories, characters and events (Noriega Sánchez 2002, 87) related to their cosmologies. Furthermore, in the particular case of Erdrich, the inclusion of this “folkloric” or “mythic realism” also enables her to create narratives that reach a balance between Native and Western forms and material in line with her mixed heritage. Such a compelling harmonisation eventually serves Erdrich’s diverse readership to better understand her own ontological approach to reality as an Anishinaabe writer.

It is important to remark, though, that in her second saga of interrelated novels—the Justice Trilogy made up by *The Plague of Doves* (2008), *The Round House* (2012) and

*LaRose* (2016)—Erdrich seems to put on hold the supernatural elements typical of her previous work and approaches a more traditional form of realism.<sup>31</sup> Set on an Anishinaabe reservation and including shared characters, plots and themes—namely justice, guilt, trauma and healing—the aforementioned novels are filled with meticulously true-to-life depictions of an Anishinaabe community.<sup>32</sup> Within this realist turn, I highlight *The Round House* as the most formally realist piece in the Justice Trilogy, for it includes plenty of factual details about US legislation, the life on a reservation in the 1980s, as well as a detailed account of the individual and collective trauma of rape and sexual violence in Native American communities. Particularly, this novel presents the story of a thirteen-year-old Anishinaabe boy, Joe, who has to deal with the brutal sexual assault of his mother, Geraldine, in the area occupied by the ceremonial building alluded to in the title. As an adult, retrospectively but in a quite objective and precise manner, the young protagonist recounts his mother’s attack, the traumatic aftermath and the investigation process he carries out together with his father, friends and community members with the purpose of discovering the perpetrator’s identity. In this investigation Joe will learn that the rapist cannot be imprisoned and he will decide to take justice into his own hands.

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<sup>31</sup> Even though, as Peterson and Jacobs point out, Erdrich did not originally intend to write “a deliberately planned group of novels,” once *The Plague of Dove*, *The Round House* and *LaRose* came out, the three narratives “serendipitously began to interconnect, to make up a trilogy, and thus inspired the use of the term ‘justice trilogy’ to refer to them” (2021, xii).

<sup>32</sup> Following the Justice Trilogy, Erdrich penned a dystopian story entitled *Future Home of the Living God* (2017) which broke the more traditionally realist tendency in her recent work. This is her first speculative novel set in an undetermined dystopian tomorrow which, as Martínez-Falquina recognises, seems an innovative turn in the author aimed at making readers “react in the face of climate change and the persisting attacks on women’s rights all over the world” (2019, 163). Later on, in *The Night Watchman* (2020), Erdrich turned back to a realist narrative inspired by her own grandfather, who in the 1950s fought against the US government’s efforts to eliminate his peoples’ reservation. Yet, in her latest narrative, *The Sentence*, Erdrich returns to a clear form of Magical/Folkloric Realism through a ghost that haunts a bookstore in Minneapolis from All Souls’ Day in 2019 to All Souls’ Day in 2020. All these changes point to Erdrich’s ability to move across narrative forms and modes with ease, which, in turn, evidences her genius as a writer.

As Erdrich herself has admitted, the main intention behind this novel is an urgent social and political goal: to denounce “that one in three Native women is raped over her lifetime” and that most of them are “demoralized to report rape,” because “federal prosecutors decline to prosecute sixty-seven percent of sexual abuse” (2013, n.p.).<sup>33</sup> Due to this activist aim behind the novel, I argue that the realism in *The Round House* responds to her desire to make such an important theme accessible to a wider audience. In this sense, the novel can be considered a good example of the new literary tendency among some contemporary writers who are responding to the challenges of Transmodernity by means of less experimental fiction.

Attending to this change in Erdrich’s writing, the present chapter explores the historical, cultural and social connections she establishes between the victims-survivors and perpetrators of the racially and patriarchally-motivated sexual attack against the protagonist’s mother in *The Round House* as a way to demonstrate that such violence cannot be regarded as a single or fortuitous occurrence. On the contrary, as I shall prove, the attack against Geraldine is inextricably related to the US ongoing (neo)colonial oppression against Native peoples, thereby giving way to and/or re-enacting individual, collective and cultural traumas that not only affect this character, but also her family and the entire community. In order to demonstrate this interpretation and delve into the representation of trauma and healing in *The Round House*, I will carry out an analysis which encompasses the idea of relationality operating in Native American communities like the Anishinaabeg, who have always maintained a strong connection with the land and the elements and beings of the natural world, including

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<sup>33</sup> Although in an article published in *The New York Times* in 2013 Erdrich discusses these outrageous statistics based on a 2009 report by Amnesty International, she had previously demonstrated this “uncomfortable truth” in the Afterword to *The Round House*. In this paratextual piece Erdrich also succinctly explains that the reason why the book is set in 1988 is her desire to note that “the tangle of laws that hinder prosecution of rape on many reservations still exists” despite the passing of time (2012a, 319).

human and non-human, with the aim of achieving *mino-bimaadiziwin* or the good life (Simpson 2011, 2017; Gross 2014; Spry 2018; Martínez-Falquina 2020b). As I shall demonstrate, this ethics—which is not based on hierarchical and individualistic logics as is the case of the cultures behind settler colonialism, but rather on reciprocity and interconnectedness, that is, on a balance between all living and inert elements that surround the community—is observable in Erdrich’s treatment of her characters, themes, and hybrid style as a whole. In this sense, this chapter deploys “tribal [tradition and] knowledge as theory” (Henry 2009, 8) for the reading of the novel.

Hence, so as to carry out my study on *The Round House*, in section 2.2 I will begin by exploring Erdrich’s shift to a much more mainstream prose, where she resorts to more Western elements—namely popular genres, intertextual relations and popular culture within the Euro-American tradition—than in her previous novels. As I contend, this is aimed at making the urgent consciousness-raising political and ethical message behind her novel’s lines—the systemic sexual violence against Native women on reservations—accessible to a wider readership. In sections 2.3 and 2.4 I will illustrate how the novel presents readers with the idea that this sort of violence strikes the direct victim—the protagonist’s mother—, her family and the community, thereby confirming the key role that relationships and interconnectedness play in the Anishinaabe culture. In section 2.5 I will show how the text demonstrates that the oppressive context of jurisdictionally-limited reservations and the transgenerational transmission of historical unresolved grief can drag the new generations of Native Americans to a never-ending circle of violence which may aggravate the community’s collective and cultural trauma. This will lead me to conclude, in section 2.6, that, through her protagonist’s journey from trauma to post-traumatic growth, Erdrich manifests, perhaps more clearly than ever, how Native American peoples’ healing and socio-political goals—i.e. sovereignty,



self-determination and freedom—can only be achieved by means of three factors: the recovery of tribal lands, a strong resilient community and a reconnection to tribal traditions.<sup>34</sup>

## **2.2. *The Round House: A Strategic Stylistic Turn in Erdrich’s Activist Crusade***

Winner of the National Book Award, *The Round House* has been defined as a combination of “activist testimony and fiction” (Bowers 2017, 51). Erdrich’s objective behind this novel is twofold. Firstly, as the author acknowledges in the afterword to the novel, she wants to make her diverse readership aware of the causes—sexism and a lingering (neo)colonial project against Native peoples—and the traumatic consequences of unpunished sexual violence against Indigenous women on reservations. Secondly, as will be further developed in this chapter, Erdrich highlights the importance of the Native community and their resilience in the fight against this scourge derived from settler colonialism.

It is my contention that, in order to carry out her denunciation through this novel, Erdrich adapts her writing. Although, like in previous works, this author intermingles Native American/Anishinaabe cultural elements—such as *doodems*, spiritual ceremonies and celebrations (e.g. sweat-lodges and powwows) as well as myths—with elements and references to mainstream US culture, she creates a unique novel in her work with a crucial innovation.<sup>35</sup> This change is nothing but a conspicuous turn to a

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<sup>34</sup> Some preliminary results from the analysis of the novel for this PhD dissertation were published in an earlier and shorter version in Laura Roldán-Sevillano “From Revenge to Justice: Perpetrator Trauma in Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House*,” *Revista Española de Estudios Norteamericanos* 20 (2016): 137-58.

<sup>35</sup> Besides some of Erdrich’s references to the US pop culture of the 1980s (e.g. *Star Wars*, *MacGyver* or *Cher*), *The Round House* could be related to famous US novels such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) given the characterisation of the young protagonist and his internal journey. Likewise, there is an obvious connection between the episode titles of *Star Trek: The*

more linear, stripped-down and traditionally realist prose on the one hand, and the elaboration of a plot more clearly related to Euro-American mainstream genres than ever before, on the other. By means of these tactical literary moves, Erdrich favours, using Laura Castor's words, a "page-turning readability" (2019, 132) which sheds more light on the systemic violence suffered by Native women on reservations and potentially raises awareness about this issue in a wider readership.

To begin with the formal analysis of the novel, it is important to highlight that it starts with the "off-scene" rape (Martínez-Falquina 2020a) and attempted murder of Geraldine Coutts, an Ojibwe woman who lives on a reservation in North Dakota together with her husband, Bazil, and her teenage son, Joe. Since Joe—the narrator—did not witness the attack and recounts the details as he discovers them, at first neither he nor the reader has access to the rapist's identity or the reasons behind his barbaric act. Throughout the story, together with his father and some members of the community, Joe will find out that Geraldine was raped by a cruel and racist man called Linden Lark. This violent aggression takes place when Geraldine was trying to protect Mayla Wolfskin—a young Native girl from the Coutts family reservation—and her baby. Although Mayla does not escape the attack, Geraldine manages to do so. Yet, she ends up suffering from PTSD, which will strike her family and community too. For this reason, and because the entangled jurisdiction over reservation land enables the perpetrator to move freely without being prosecuted, Joe will try to capture his mother's rapist. His search will turn into a journey of premature psychological and moral growth.

The first characteristic that calls the attention of those readers acquainted with Erdrich's style is the absence of choral mutivocality or multiple narrators that had characterised previous novels like *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Tracks* or *The*

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*Next Generation* (first season) and Erdrich's chapter naming (Bender and Maunz-Breese 2018, 143), with the exception of the opening and afterword sections.

*Plague of Doves* (Kakutani 2012; L. Miller 2013; Marszal 2013; Tharp 2014). Instead, *The Round House* presents one single narrative voice, Joe's, as exemplified in the following passage: "I was the sort of kid who spent a Sunday afternoon prying little trees out of the foundation of his parents' house. I should have given in to the inevitable truth that this was the sort of person I would become, in the end, but I kept fighting it" (2012a, 5). Particularly, the choice of a young male autodiegetic narrator and internal focaliser in Gérard Genette's sense of the terms ([1972] 1980, 245, 188-89) is, according to Julie Tharp, "strategically effective" (2014, 31). As this scholar argues, this narrative voice "increases the likelihood that the novel will be read by men as well as women" (31) who can become aware of the author's "crusade against rape" (25). Such a narrative technique is also a witty strategic move since, thanks to this male point of view, Erdrich "shifts the focus away from women's veracity" so often questioned by patriarchal prejudices (32). This additionally favours a less biased view on the effects of sexual violence on women. Moreover, selecting a teenager as the only narrator and focaliser in the story makes complex issues related to the Native American community—like justice and disenfranchisement—more understandable to a mass audience, as readers have access to such information through the eyes of a boy who is not as acquainted with tribal law and history as the adults around him. Therefore, it could be argued that the presence of a single narrative voice makes the learning process of Erdrich's protagonist-narrator run parallel with that of the reader.

Another important choice in *The Round House* is the use of a linear plot. Whereas in other works like *Love Medicine* or *LaRose* Erdrich disposes chapters in a non-chronological manner, here she favours a more straightforward organisation. The reason behind this move may be no other than helping readers to understand the complexities of the jurisdictional and historical reality of Native American communities living on

reservations like the one portrayed by Erdrich in the novel. Furthermore, because *The Round House* is a trauma narrative depicting the psychological and collective/cultural scars left by sexual and neo-colonial violence on American Indian communities, such simplicity in the arrangement of events confirms, contrarily to what some literary critics suggest (Vickroy 2002; Whitehead 2004; Luckhurst 2008), that trauma narratives are not necessarily experimental texts.

Together with the single narrative voice and the linear plot, other generic choices in *The Round House* are very telling. The most obvious genre—detective story—is, as Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz rightly observes, an unusual option for Erdrich (2016, 20). This novelty proves a purposeful change in her style as she recognised in 2012 in an interview with author Mary Beth Keane: “The immense difficulty of prosecuting crimes of sexual violence on reservations has haunted me for many years, but I didn’t know how to tell the story. I wanted to write it as a suspense novel. How else to include the jurisdictional complexity? I didn’t want to bore myself” (quoted in Ibarrola-Armendariz 2016, 18). Certainly, Erdrich here makes clear how she consciously uses the suspense novel style and format—one of the most popular genres in literary fiction—in order to make her story more accessible.

It is worth noting that, although an atypical feature in Erdrich’s work, the genres of mystery and detective fiction have often been used by Native authors because they are an engaging form of storytelling that brings attention to particular settler-colonial crimes which keep on impacting the lives of US Indigenous peoples today (Stoecklein 2019, 1-2). Among the most popular detective/mystery Native American authors we can find Linda Hogan, Louis Owens, Ron Querry, William Sanders or Frances Washburn, to name but a few.<sup>36</sup> Like in some of the thrillers written by these authors, *The Round*

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<sup>36</sup> Of all these authors, I find Frances Washburn and her work *Elsie’s Business* (2006) an interesting case of contemporary Native American detective novel because of its similarities with *The Round House*,

*House* includes one of the unmistakable generic elements of detective fiction: an abduction reported in the first chapters of the novel. Particularly, Geraldine's disappearance takes place at the very beginning of the story when Joe's father realises that his wife is missing: "Where is your mother? [...] At work? I said, to break his gaze. I had assumed that he knew where she was, that he'd got the information when he phoned. I knew she was not really at work" (Erdrich 2012a, 3).

Erdrich also includes other elements of detective fiction listed by Geraldine Pederson-Krag (1949) such as a clear violent crime—the homicide of a Native woman and the rape and murder attempt of a second one—and a perpetrator kept hidden for the reader throughout most of the story. Likewise, the novel presents two Native detectives—a tribal judge and a teenage amateur sleuth—who must puzzle out all the enigmas so as to find out the perpetrator's identity. However, because in the prototypical detective novel the investigator must have an acute perception and undaunted perseverance (Pederson-Krag 1949, 207), in spite of his father's profession, Joe's "seemingly innate ability to detect relevant evidence" (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2016, 26) and his tenacity in the searching for his mother's attacker make him the actual Sherlock Homes here. Lastly, in order to create the characterising suspense hook of detective fiction (P. James 2010, 15), the story includes several suspects, most notably two white men (Linden Lark and Father Travis). Yet, thanks to Joe, his sidekicks, his father and even his wounded mother, the actual perpetrator is eventually discovered.

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especially the theme of sexual violence against Native women. Washburn's novel is about a father's investigation of the strange murder of his partly Lakota, partly African American daughter, who, years earlier had survived a sexual attack perpetrated by three white youngsters who were never held accountable for the crime. Like Erdrich would do six years later with *The Round House*, with this novel Washburn tried to underscore the lack of justice for raped Native women and their families owing to the non-prosecution of white assailants by the US institutions. Hence, it could be argued that both novels seem to signal a new tendency of Native American detective fiction claiming for the re-examination of indigenous people's sovereignty in relation to racist and sexual violence perpetrated by non-Indigenous assailants on Indian Territory. Furthermore, it is possible to find other points in common in the two novels, such as an accidental male detective related to the victim, the mimicking of real unprosecuted crimes against Native women and the mixture of generic features of the detective novel with Native stories narrated by tribal elders that the protagonists must interpret so as to complete their respective investigations.

In addition, as Ibarrola-Armendariz (2016) notes, Erdrich amalgamates the detective novel with a prominent genre in the US literary tradition: the *Bildungsroman*. The novel of formation, explains Mikhail Bakhtin in his influential article “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism,” portrays “the world and life as *experience*, as a *school*, through which every person must pass” (1986, 22) and it includes as a defining generic characteristic the transition “from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality” (22). In tune with Bakhtin’s ideas, *The Round House* can be understood as a coming-of-age novel that portrays Joe’s passage from puberty to maturity following his mother’s attack, as he goes through diverse moral and ethical dilemmas related to revenge, justice, violence and sexism. His main moral crisis is, without any doubt, his hesitation around the decision to kill his mother’s rapist, a mission he eventually accomplishes with the help of his friend Cappy.<sup>37</sup>

In his evolution from childhood to adulthood, Joe follows the archetypical journey of the hero and his main rites of passage—(i) initiation, (ii) departure, (iii) return— theorised by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* ([1949] 2004). Particularly in *The Round House*, the departure moment starts when Joe crosses the threshold of his safe home and accompanies his father and wounded mother to the hospital in chapter one. Regarding the initiation rite in the story, this phase covers the part of the plot devoted to the narration of Joe’s detective investigation and the killing of his mother’s rapist in an attempt to bring peace and justice to her and the community.

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<sup>37</sup> In an article included in the volume *History of the Bildungsroman*, Sarah Graham points out the difference between the European and the American novel of formation. Whereas the former frequently ends “in the protagonist’s acquiescence to social norms,” the latter includes a main character that tends to “question and reject social norms” (2019a, 120-21). An example of the prototypically rebellious US protagonist to which this critic makes reference is Huck Finn, the hero of Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, who disobeys the social (including legal) norms of the racist pre-Civil War southern society in order to help his tutor’s black slave, Jim, escape into freedom (2019a, 125). In this sense, *The Round House* could be regarded as another example of the American Bildungsroman, for it includes a young protagonist who, against the social norms dictated by the rule of (white) law, decides to kill his mother’s perpetrator in order to take into his own hands the justice that institutions do not guarantee to his community.

Finally, Joe's return home takes place at the end of the novel, when, some time after the villain's death, a car accident which shockingly kills Cappy truncates the westward journey Joe and his friends had set off in order to visit Cappy's girlfriend. Following the car crash, once Joe is picked up by his parents, he is driven back home so that the family, and especially a now more mature Joe, can continue with their lives.

Erdrich's choice of such a traditionally Westerncentric genre as the *Bildungsroman* may be related to its popular use by ethnic or postcolonial writers as a weapon to "respond to the trauma of colonialism and neo-colonialism, conveying the difficulties of maturing in a racially oppressive context" (S. Graham 2019b, 7). In relation to Native American literature, the *Bildungsroman* usually deals with the cruel colonisation, dispossession of tribal land, and forced relocation of Native peoples on reservations, where they subsist with "attenuated resources, agency and prospects" (135). In addition, it tackles the transgenerational effects of geographical relocation such as historical unresolved grief, disenfranchisement, poverty and alienation. Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Silko's *Ceremony*, Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), and Brandon Robson's *Where the Dead Sit Talking* (2018) are good examples of Native American *Bildungsromane* depicting and denouncing the unequal position of Indigenous peoples in the US. This is also the case of *The Round House*, a novel whose young protagonist's maturation journey enables him and readers to apprehend the (neo)colonially-influenced jurisdictional entanglement on reservations which leaves Native families in an extremely vulnerable position. It is true that in some of her more polyphonic works (e.g. *Love Medicine* and *LaRose*) Erdrich employs elements of the novel of formation in non-chronological chapters devoted to or narrated by young characters that grow up physically and morally throughout the story. Yet, *The Round House* differs from these works in that, for the

first time in her career, Erdrich deals with the maturation process of a single protagonist who is also the only narrator from beginning to end.

Although, on a surface level, *The Round House* can be read as a detective novel and a Bildungsroman, both connecting the text to the Western tradition, closer study unveils its allegiance to a more specifically Native American genre: the trickster narrative. This implies a revision of the aforementioned whitestream forms and vindicates the text as part of the Anishinaabe literary tradition. The trickster is an ancient archetypal figure that, as anthropologists and literary critics have demonstrated throughout the years, is universally present in oral and written stories of multiple Western and non-Western cultural communities that have historically defined it with local features (Wiget 1990, 86).<sup>38</sup> The ubiquitous and timeless Native American trickster is always presented in continuous motion, as a wanderer of the world moved by its own appetites that presents an ambiguous and multiform identity. Between the divine and the human (Stookey 1999, 23), this mythic figure appears at times as a human being with animal characteristics and at others, as an anthropomorphic animal. For instance, in the diverse Indigenous tribes of North America, the trickster usually assumes the shape of a raven, a rabbit, a coyote or a spider among other examples. As a consequence of this duality and because, on some occasions, the trickster may appear as a culture hero, a saviour or healer of its people, yet on others, it shows up as a buffoon or a fool, it has traditionally been regarded as a “mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence” (Hyde 1998, 7). On account of such a liminal or paradoxical nature, the trickster can be said to oscillate between—or even be at once—the hero and anti-hero. It also moves

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<sup>38</sup> The trickster appears in many cultures under different names like Anansi, Maui, Coyote, Hermes, Prometheus or Loki among others (Scheub 2012, 25-28) and with a male or female identity as is the case of the Native American one (Allen 1992a, 307). Owing to this gender duality, which can be appreciated in some of Erdrich’s novels where her trickster-like characters are either male or female individuals, in this chapter I use the neuter pronoun “it” when referring to the mythic figure of the trickster in a broad sense.



between order and disorder, while introducing an element of change that reverses norms and established values in a given community. As we will see, these general features of the Native trickster are essential to grasp the meanings offered in *The Round House*.

In the Anishinaabe oral storytelling tradition, the mythic figure of the trickster is called Nanabozho. In some stories it appears as a cultural hero who creates the Earth, brings fire to its people or slays the community's enemies. In others, it is presented as a deceitful fool moved by its food and sexual appetite, who plays tricks and tells jokes (Gross 2014; Simpson 2011, 2017). Another key characteristic of the Native American trickster that is retained in the Anishinaabe culture is its embodiment of humour, for it is a foolish creature that breaks taboos and even ridicules sacred customs. Indeed, the stories around the mythic and ludicrous figure of the Native American trickster have historically served Native peoples to "laugh off their failures" and learn "how useless it is to take life too seriously" (Ricketts 1966, 347). But also, according to Anishinaabe writer and literary critic Gerald Vizenor, since post-contact times, the trickster in Native American narratives has functioned as a "comic holotrope" (1990, 282) that dismantles colonialism's reductionist conception of Native American literatures as a compendium of tragic stories about vanishing tribes. What is more, as Anishinaabe writer Kimberly M. Blaeser explains, the ultimate purpose of a trickster tale goes beyond entertainment, for it is meant to serve the individual and the community as a repository of tribal history and tradition as well as a teaching tool (1994b, 55). "Trickster errs," notes Blaeser, and it is the job of the listener or reader to learn from those mistakes (56). Therefore, the trickster in Anishinaabe stories—whether a cultural hero or a fool—plays the role of teacher for the community inasmuch as it transmits valuable lessons as well as knowledge of the tribe's history and culture from one generation to the next. It is my

contention then, that by sharing his story, Joe Coutts is also fulfilling this essential trait of the Anishinaabee trickster.

As the following sections in this chapter will demonstrate, Joe unmistakably functions as the trickster-like character of the novel in three main respects. Firstly, and just as traditional tricksters usually do (Blaeser 1994b, 52), Joe is on the move for most of the story. Especially, he appears riding his bike to and fro and transgressing geographical boundaries within and outside the reservation. Secondly, he is more often than not moved by his own appetites—most specifically hunger and sexual desire—that make him commit foolish and even deceitful actions—e.g. lying or stealing—sometimes loaded with a humorous tone. And thirdly and perhaps most importantly, he plays the role of hero and anti-hero whose mistakes and moral crises provide readers with material from which they can extract valuable historical, social, political and personal lessons as is customary in trickster tales.

It is important to bear in mind that the trickster is not a new element in Erdrich's work. As numerous critics have shown in the last decades, some of her novels like *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace* or *Tracks* contain trickster-like figures sometimes represented by one or even a variety of characters (L. Owens 1994; Stookey 1999; Quennet 2001; Martínez-Falquina 2002). However, what seems innovative in *The Round House* is the direct links that Erdrich establishes between her young trickster-protagonist and the *picaro* from the Euro-American literary tradition, especially Mark Twain's Huck Finn. Interestingly, Blaeser defines the curious and sometimes reckless trickster-wanderer as an adaptable and uncontrollable picaro who "links up" with pals, plots, gambles and breaks the rules (1994b, 52). Although in the Euro-American tradition, the picaro surely lacks the mythic significance of the Native American trickster, like Blaeser, scholars such as Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (1975) and

Franchot Ballinger (1991) have pointed out a resemblance between the two figures. In his article “Ambigere: The Euro-American Picaro and the Native American Trickster,” Ballinger remarks that the affinity between the trickster and the Euro-American roguish hero is rooted in their respective marginality, their episodic heroic adventures, their rebelliousness and transgression of social order as well as the humorous or satirical nature of the stories wherein they appear (1991, 21). This is the case of Huck Finn and Joe Coutts, who share common traits such as their youth, their roguish and marginal nature, their transgression of the *status quo* that these protagonists themselves recount with a humorous and satirical tone and, last but not least, the moral and psychological maturation they undergo in a land of social, racial divisions.<sup>39</sup>

Together with the aforementioned generic choices which differentiate *The Round House* from other novels written by Erdrich, yet another new stylistic decision is her turn to traditionally formal realism. This shift can be noted first and foremost in her explicit and detailed use of tribal history and law for the denunciation of Natives’ sovereignty problems and the (neo)colonial relation between the rape of the Indigenous female body and the appropriation of Native lands. It is true that in her works Erdrich has always turned to history—as in the case of *Tracks*, where she portrays the history of her Anishinaabe people’s struggle to retain their lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, as David Stirrup offers, although Erdrich criticises the decimation of her community and the establishment of removal and assimilation policies by tackling historical and legal information in this novel, she does so in an implicit manner by means of “evocative metaphors” (2011, 57) like the ones used in the passage that opens the novel:

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<sup>39</sup> In *The Round House*, by means of various comic moments protagonised by tricksters, Erdrich offers a satirical criticism of Catholicism (2012a, 191), colonisation (202, 273), Native stereotypes (273) or even the legal consideration of Natives as such through bureaucratic practices only (30).

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long flight west to Nadouissieux land where we signed the treaty, and then a wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible. (Erdrich 1989, 1)

In contrast, *The Round House* presents in a much more realist manner, historical, factual and legal details that bring to light two crucial themes. On the one hand, we are presented with the relationship between the growing rates of sexual violence against Native women living on reservations. On the other, we learn about the impossibility of a protective jurisdiction for these women and their families caused by Native tribes' lack of sovereignty. For so doing Erdrich includes explicit references to the history of Anishinaabe dispossession and to legal sentences—*Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823), *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), *Oliphant v. Suquamish* (1978)—plus Felix S. Cohen's *Handbook of Federal Indian Law*, which illustrate how the novel's stylistic and thematic choices have a more determined aware-raising aim if compared to previous works.

Erdrich's realist turn can also be noted in her faithfully detailed and contextualised characterisation of a rather ordinary middle-class Native American family from North Dakota in 1988. Likewise, she carefully impregnates Joe and his pals with typical characteristics of regular US adolescents of the 1980s, such as their interest in TV series like *MacGyver*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (2012a, 19) and the film *Alien* (104). The depiction of Joe's context through the references to the US popular culture of the 1980s makes the story more firmly rooted in its temporal setting and more approachable for non-Native readers. It also allows Native and non-Native readers alike to establish a nostalgic but also sympathetic relationship with Erdrich's young protagonist. Yet, Joe is an Anishinabee kid too, and so, thanks to him, readers enter his Native culture when he attends and assists in spiritual ceremonies and

celebrations of his people or when he learns about kinship connections and the Anishinaabe culture thanks to the community and oral stories about the trickster and cultural hero Nanapush. In addition, the absence of the supernatural elements that characterised much of Erdrich's previous fiction makes the plot more plausible. Only a ghost—probably the product of Joe's imagination and traumatically enraged psyche—makes occasional appearances. Everything else in the narrative could be rationally explained, a characteristic which once again demonstrates Erdrich's intentional turn towards a more stripped-down style which does not interfere in the generalised credibility of the urgent message behind her story.

Lastly, Erdrich's traditionally realist impulse could be connected to a literary trend that some critics have called "traumatic realism," and which is grounded on the narrativisation or testimony of traumatic experiences. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominic LaCapra connects the rise of trauma studies with the emergence of a sort of realism "that differs from stereotypical conceptions of mimesis and enables instead an often disconcerting exploration of disorientation, its symptomatic dimension, and possible ways of responding to them" (2001, 186). Additionally, at the dawn of the new millennium, in *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Michael Rothberg proposed the rethinking of realism as a reaction to the literary and poststructuralist attack on mimesis started in the 1960s by Roland Barthes and the Tel Quel group, which had stopped critical discussions about realism ever since (2000, 8-9). As Rothberg puts it, the recent rise "of various new forms of testimonial and documentary art and cultural production" around traumatic experiences proves the need of a new idea or concept—traumatic realism—which could mediate between "the ordinary and extraordinary" aspects of trauma stories (9).

As will be more thoroughly explored in the following section, if we approach *The Round House* through LaCapra's and Rothberg's notion of traumatic realism, we can best apprehend the relevance of the mimetic portrayal of Geraldine's process of acting out and working through of her PTSD. Nonetheless, as I will argue, Geraldine is not the only character struggling with trauma; Joe, the Coutts family and the whole community also go through collective and cultural traumatic unresolved grief related to the ongoing oppression that Native peoples endure in the US. While Geraldine's rape and suffering has been tackled by some critics (Tharp 2013; Carden 2018; Martínez-Falquina 2020a), the post-rape psychological consequences undergone by Joe have not yet been thoroughly explored. As I will demonstrate in the ensuing analysis, the boy suffers from a transgenerational trauma transmitted to him by his mother and the community as a whole. In line with the growing scientific and social acknowledgement of perpetrator-perspective and perpetrator trauma theory, I also explore Erdrich's realist portrayal of her protagonist's transformation from victim to victimiser whose decision to take justice into his own hands provokes in him a moral injury that gravely affects his psyche. However, rather than re-victimising Native women and people in general, the novel depicts Joe, Geraldine and the community as resilient subjects who resist and fight settler-colonial violence through relationality, collaborative action and tribal traditions.

### **2.3. Sexual Violence and the Traumatic Blow to the Family Tissue**

In *The Round House*, the investigation carried out by Erdrich's young protagonist allows him to learn that his mother, a tribal record keeper with access "to everybody secrets" (2012a, 150), was raped by a racist white man called Linden Lark when she tried to prevent him from seizing a file containing private information about Mayla

Wolfskin, another Indian woman. As Tharp notes, it is not clear in the novel whether Linden wants to run away with Mayla and the hush money that the South Dakota governor, Curtis Yeltow, gave her after she became pregnant while working for him, so as to either save Yeltow or blackmail him (2014, 34). Another possible reading could be that Linden, who has an obsessive fixation with Mayla, feels so jealous of her relationship with the Governor that he wants to force the girl to flee with him. What becomes clear in the novel, though, is that, following Geraldine's involvement in Linden's business, both women are brutally attacked. Eventually, although Linden kills Mayla and makes her body disappear, the baby survives. On her part, Geraldine is raped and almost burnt alive with gasoline but she manages to escape. However, she will suffer from an acute PTSD that she will struggle to overcome.

### ***2.3.1. Rape and Psychic Trauma***

*The Round House* is not the first novel in which Erdrich includes a rape episode by a white man. Just as Geraldine is abused by Linden, in *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace*, Fleur Pillager and June Morrissey are respectively raped by white strangers too. Alongside the interracial condition of the sexual attacks, the three novels share another aspect: the aggression is never narrated by the survivor but by another voice. In *Tracks*, the gang rape attack against Fleur is retrospectively narrated by Pauline Puyat who, while hidden, observes the event until she becomes so horrified that she tries—with no success—to close her eyes and put her hands on her ears so as to block out everything she witnesses (1989, 26). In *The Bingo Palace*, it is a third person narrator that recounts how June was molested as a child by Leopold, her alcoholic mother's white boyfriend (1994, 59-60). *The Round House* also presents a mediating narrative voice. Yet, unlike the narrators-witnesses of the aforementioned novels, here the reporter (not of the rape

event but of its traumatic aftermath) is a boy. As aforementioned, this narratological choice clearly points to Erdrich's purposeful use of a single male narrator/focaliser so as to raise awareness in both male and female readers alike.

Moreover, unlike in *Tracks* and *The Bingo Palace*, where rape was not the main theme, *The Round House* includes a faithful portrayal of the physical and psychological scars left on the survivor's body and mind just after the attack. This fulfils the aim of sensitising readers to this sort of violence. As a victim of psychic or individual trauma, Geraldine undergoes a process of post-traumatic acting out, as can be observed in the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event in her mind and in her experiencing of multifarious PTSD symptoms. The boy portrays his mother as a skinny, "disoriented" and "invaded" woman (Erdrich 2012a, 112) who isolates herself from the rest of the world. He describes her state of depression provoked by the traumatic event through allusions to her erratic sleep habits, continuous weeping and loss of appetite (45).

In addition, Joe refers to his mother's loss of tenderness, fear and responses of hypervigilance, which are common symptoms among traumatised subjects as they tend to lose their trust in the rest of humanity (Brison 1999, 44). A poignant example of these reactions is the episode when Joe tries "to throw [him]self down next to her" while she is sleeping and she "[strikes] him in the face" with "a forearm back blow" that "stun[s] [him]" (Erdrich 2012a, 23). Geraldine's distrust and fear are also highlighted by Joe in the scene where his father enters the kitchen and hugs Geraldine while she is cooking. In principle this is an innocent action, but because it brings back the memory of her attack, it makes her so paralysed by her terror to the sudden and unexpected human touch that she drops a casserole and starts "trembling [and] breathing heavily" (42) as in an anxiety attack.



Susan J. Brison notes that an individual is able to self-identify as the same person over time thanks to the ability to envision a future and to remember the past (1999, 44). Yet, when these abilities are lost, the sense of self is lost as well. Given that Geraldine's past, present and future have been interrupted by the aggression, she experiences a dissociative process—she is not herself anymore. As a consequence, she is regarded by Joe and Bazil as a ghostly entity:

[S]he stepped over the mess on the floor and walked carefully away. I wanted her to shout, cry out, throw something. Anything would have been better than the frozen suspension of feeling which she mounted the stairs. [...] Her steps were soundless. She seemed to float. [...] I think as we watched her, we both had the sense that she was ascending to a place of utter loneliness from which she might never be retrieved. (Erdrich 2012a, 43)

Brison also points out that trauma survivors' inability to feel their former emotions often leaves them numbed and without the motivation to carry out the task of reconstructing an ongoing narrative. This reaction is caused by survivors' difficulty in regaining their own voice after having been reduced to silence, to the status of the perpetrator's object (1999, 47). Hence, following Brison's observations, we can relate Geraldine's silence, overwhelmingly present for a great part of the novel, to the psychological injuries that prevent her from disclosing both what happened the day when the attack took place and who the rapist was.

What Joe does know after some weeks of research is that, while he was fighting the "small trees [which] had attacked [his] parents' house at the foundation" (Erdrich 2012a, 1) at the beginning of the novel, his mother was being sexually assaulted by a stranger. This eagerness to eliminate the small herbal "invaders" by removing them "down to the very tip of the root" (2) advances his stubborn and committed character with issues that really preoccupy or bother him, like the catching of his mother's rapist. Significantly enough, just like Joe's house is encroached by the rebel treelets, after the attack, the place seems invaded by the effects of Geraldine's rape which not only

change the homely atmosphere of the house but also the family's habits and routines.<sup>40</sup> An example of this transformation can be noted when the day after the aggression, Joe goes back home from school and, for the first time in his life, rather than perceiving his house as a secure and protecting place, he "dread[s] going into [it]" (21). Joe's bad omen is reinforced by his finding of the house doors being locked "for the first time [he] ever recall[s]" (22), which forces him to look for a hidden key used only when the family "returned from long trips" (22).

Once inside of what at first sight seems an empty house (as it turns out, Geraldine is sleeping in her bed), Joe feels a "tremendous hush" (22).<sup>41</sup> This quietness is reflective of his mother's inability to speak up her trauma as well as Joe's and his father's unvoiced suffering provoked by Geraldine's attack and her subsequent traumatic state. The novel also shows, through the paralysed "clock's ticking" (22) and the unusual "hollow [...], stale, strangely flat" air (21) that Joe relates to the lack of cooked food, how time seems to have stopped for the Coutts family since the traumatic event. But the most significant change noticed by Joe is the discovery of a bottle of sour milk in the fridge (21), which points to Geraldine's inability to fulfil her nourishing role as a mother as a consequence of her psychological state. This role is temporarily adopted by her sister, Clemence, who keeps the house garden like Geraldine used to do (165) and

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<sup>40</sup> Joe's reference to the plants growing in his family garden is one of the many herbal metaphors that can be found in Erdrich's work. In *Love Medicine*, her symbolic depiction of Lipsa's Morrissey digging of dandelions is especially remarkable. As the narrator in that novel explains, the plant is "a buried root" that in spite of being fragile and "a nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither," has "indestructible" seeds (1984, 258) which continue to grow. In this novel, the dandelions symbolise Native American peoples in the US who have always been seen as annoying weeds to be pulled up and left to die, but, like these plants, are resilient and keep on growing (Blaeser 1994a, 3-4). Whereas in *Love Medicine* dandelions are related to Native Americans' endurance, the treelets' attack of the Coutts' garden could be compared with the ones launched by colonialism and neocolonialism to Indigenous roots. Interestingly, Joe tries to fight that ongoing invasion with "a rusted old dandelion fork" (Erdrich 2012a, 2) which, in my contention, could symbolise the inextinguishable efforts of the Native communities, including the new generations, to withstand the US government oppression.

<sup>41</sup> In her compelling book *Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse: Stories of Survival and Possibility*, Castor provides an illuminating analysis of how the (traumatic) effects of Geraldine's rape invade the round house where the event took place as well as the interior of the Coutts' home (2019, 135-36).

takes casseroles that Geraldine leaves “half-eaten” (22). Also, Bazil and Joe will take up Geraldine’s nourishing role for they will try to cook for themselves (34-36, 86) as well as take care of their wife and mother while she is in bed. Interestingly, the fact that Joe is a teenager who has to learn to take care of himself and others is both a sign of his coming of age as a self-reliant individual and a lesson in line with his tribe’s relational values and ethics of care that he will internalise that summer.

Geraldine gets better, albeit slowly. Even though Joe, Bazil and the women in her family such as Sonja—the ex-stripper girlfriend of Joe’s uncle, Whitey—, Clemence and LaRose—a close friend from boarding school times—try to communicate with her for a while after the attack, Geraldine refuses their help. Surprisingly, it is Linda Wishkob—a white woman adopted by a family of Native Americans after her biological parents’ abandonment due to her physical deformity and who happens to be Linden Lark’s rejected twin sister—that catalyses Geraldine’s healing process when she visits her. When Linda talks to Geraldine, she creates a safe space for Geraldine to chat and connect, which prompts the disappearance of Geraldine’s numbness as well as her testimony of the traumatic event.

The “talking cure” is an essential tool in the recovery of individuals suffering from PTSD since, by talking about the traumatic event, they can gain control of fear and distress of their trauma (Breuer and Freud [1893] 2000). Brison in turn asserts that narrative memory is an act on the part of the narrator that “defuses traumatic memory giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self” (1999, 40). Hence, in order to recover, “a trauma survivor needs to be able to regain control over traumatic memories and other intrusive PTSD symptoms” (45). If the talking cure is a Western psychotherapeutic methodology whereby speech acts as a curative force, in the last two

decades—drawing on Breuer and Freud, and connecting to indigenous traditions—Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) have remarked the restorative function that shared oral rites, principally storytelling, have in American Indian cultures as a reconfigured healing. Accordingly, the moment when Geraldine is able to narrate and, therefore, create a shared story of what she remembers about her attack—“I was raped, Bazil. [...] I remember everything” (Erdrich 2012a, 158-59)—can be considered the beginning of her own process of working-through.

Although it has not been sufficiently explored so far, the fact that the restorative chats with Linda become the turning point in Geraldine’s healing is very telling. It is thanks to a person who represents the curative and saving power of the community while being an adoptive member of it that Geraldine starts working through her trauma. As readers learn through Linda’s account, she was saved against all odds by the Wishkobs, who adopted her, helped her with her physical condition and raised her “as an Indian person” (116). Likewise, when, ensuing a meeting with her biological mother decades later, Linda donates a kidney to Linden and becomes very ill after the operation, she is saved by the solidarity of the community: “My real family came to my rescue [...]. And Geraldine too, of course. Also Doe Lafournais put me through their sweat lodge. That ceremony was so powerful. Her voice was wistful. And so hot! Randall gave me a feast. His aunts dressed me in a new ribbon dress they made” (127).

In this respect, because Linda’s own survival and recuperation was possible thanks to the people from the reservation, she can be regarded as a reminder of the healing capacity of the community that acts as a collective aider embracing and helping those who need it regardless of their bloodline. As Anishinaabe writer and critic Leanne Simpson affirms, because “the well-being of individuals is directly linked to the well-being of collectives” in the Anishinaabe culture, when someone is “hurt or sick or

having a hard time,” the community is required to respond (2016, 23). This is precisely what happens with Linda, especially in the wake of her surgery, and is repeated with Geraldine after her attack. Thus, I would contend that Linda’s healing power and her fruitful connection with Geraldine can be interpreted as a strong example of the key role that the community and their relational ethics play in Native American peoples’ welfare.

Following the conversations with Linda, also important to Geraldine’s recuperation process is the moment when she learns about Mayla Wolfskin’s death and her baby’s survival. This information makes her get out of bed—albeit with difficulty and pain—and tell her family about the file she was trying to keep from the attacker: “*I need that file, she said. My life depends on that file*” (160).<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, this exteriorisation of her deepest worries in relation to the attack provides new and crucial information for the investigation carried out by the Coutts family. On the other, despite Geraldine’s fear for her life and even though her efforts burn out her “flittering energy” (195), this momentous event enables her to gradually return to work at the office of tribal enrolment and to her cooking and gardening routine. This moving back to her daily chores clearly represents the beginning of Geraldine’s psychological and physical recovery. Hence, it can be concluded that in depicting her progressive healing, Erdrich avoids Geraldine’s re-victimisation by presenting this character as a rape survivor and a resilient woman.

### ***2.3.2. The Ripples of Rape Trauma within the Family***

The traumatic impact of sexual violence, Sarah Deer notes, tends to expand from survivors to the loving ones who surround them (2015, 10-13). Erdrich portrays this

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<sup>42</sup> Mayla’s baby is picked up from the crime scene and left at the Goodwill. When Geraldine learns that the little girl is alive, she officially identifies her as Mayla’s daughter and the authorities place her with her grandparents, George and Aurora Wolfskin, so that they can take care of the child (212-13).

“ripple effect” of rape trauma (Deer 2015, 10) in the novel when Geraldine, in spite of her gradual healing process evinced by her return to her family and job, transmits her trauma to her son, who becomes a reservoir of Geraldine’s unconscious externalisation of her own traumatised self. Through Joe’s secondary traumatisation, the text reinforces the idea that, rather than simply an individual phenomenon, trauma is a process that can simultaneously affect multiple individuals. Joe’s traumatisation becomes noticeable, for instance, when he finds himself wishing he could turn the clock back to the days when his mother cooked dinner every night and laughed (Erdrich 2012a, 43). Moreover, Joe’s seeming inability to cope with his mother’s PTSD—as can be deduced from his attempts to avoid having contact with her—points to his own traumatised psyche: “I didn’t want to look at my mother, propped up staring wearily at us as if she’d just been shot, or rolled into a mummy pretending to be in the afterlife” (152).

Nevertheless, although Joe’s traumatisation becomes evident once Geraldine is back home and neither he or his parents are able to continue with their routines, the shocking moment when he sees his badly-injured mother for the first time after the attack could be considered the trigger of his own trauma. In this dramatic episode, Joe describes her with the following words:

There was vomit down the front of her dress and, soaking her skirt and soaking the gray cloth of the car seat, her dark blood. [...] She was silent, though now she moistened her cracked, bleeding lips with the tip of her tongue. [...] Her face was beginning to swell. [...] She vibrated with a steady shudder, like a switch had been flipped inside. A strong smell rose from her, the vomit and something else, like gas or kerosene. (7)

The image of Geraldine that Joe offers in this description evidences the violence with which she was attacked by Linden. Such a brutal aggression, as reflected by Joe’s second depiction of his mother when he visits her at the hospital, changes Geraldine’s physical appearance and behaviour, and this inevitably shocks Joe:

I saw my mother's face puffed with welts and distorted to an ugly shape. She peered through slits in the swollen flesh of her lids. [...] I looked at her. [...] There were scrapes of blows and the awful lop-sidedness. Her skin had lost its normal warm color. It was gray as ash. Her lips were seamed with dried blood. [...] I hung my head and leaned toward her. I tried to stroke her wrapped wrist and cold, dry fingertips. With a cry, she snatched her hand away as though I'd hurt her. She went rigid and closed her eyes. This action devastated me. (10)

Therefore, as if it were a defence mechanism for fighting his secondary traumatising, Joe takes to action. He finds refuge in his and his pals' research aimed at finding out the perpetrator's identity, a research running parallel to FBI's investigation with which Joe's father collaborates. Joe himself confesses to his mother that his aim is to put an end to Linden's life: "I'm going to find him and I'm going to burn him. I'm going to kill him for you. [...] There is nothing to stop me" (89).

During his own eager investigation, Joe learns that Linden might never be brought to court on account of the jurisdictional conflict over the land on reservation territory, which makes crime prosecution difficult. Linden intentionally decided to intimidate and humiliate Geraldine and Mayla in the round house, a sacred place located in "a legal limbo between competing jurisdictions" (Tharp 2014, 36) as it covers three classes of land: "tribal trust, state and fee" (Erdrich 2012a, 160).<sup>43</sup> In Bazil's words:

Here's the round house. Just behind it, you have the Smoker allotment. [...] Then a strip that was sold—fee land. The round house is on the far edge of tribal trust, where our court has jurisdiction, though of course not over a white man. So federal law applies. Down to the lake, that is also tribal trust. But just to one side, a corner of that is state park, where state law applies. (196)

With this commentary Bazil clearly demonstrates the jurisdictional entanglement which makes justice for his wife difficult, almost impossible.

Bazil is a character who already appeared in Erdrich's *The Plague of Doves*, where he is one of the narrators of the story. Both novels tackle the topics of (in)justice

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<sup>43</sup> Since the publication of *The Round House*, scholars like Tharp (2014), Carden (2018), Castor (2019) and Martínez-Falquina (2020b) have explored the issues of land and/or the historical jurisdictional maze on Indian Territory that Erdrich presents in the novel.

and Native Americans' lack of sovereignty or self-rule over their reservation territory because of the intersection of jurisdictions. In *The Plague of Doves*, readers are shown Bazil's vocation as a lawyer and later a tribal judge grounded in his willingness to defend the legal rights of the tribe—"I am sentenced to keep watch over this small patch of earth, to judge its miseries and tell its stories" (Erdrich 2008, 217). However, in *The Round House*, in spite of his legal education—a great part of which comes from his father's and grandfather's vocation as tribal judges—he is unable to guarantee or provide justice and security to his family, especially to Geraldine. Therefore, because in this second novel justice fails him and his family, Bazil partly loses his faith in law.<sup>44</sup>

Bazil's passivity, provoked by his newly gained scepticism and, probably, a depressive-like state, contrasts with his son's inextinguishable energy and eagerness to find the attacker's identity. Affected by the aggression against his wife and by the difficulties that an investigation process with such a problematic jurisdiction entails, Bazil appears to be an absent or emasculated father and man of law. His seeming lack of passion and his submission to federal law provokes anger and frustration in Joe, and this is what motivates the boy's decision to run a parallel investigation with his friends. Due to his innocence and youth, Joe is initially unable to see that his father and other elders "are trying to build a solid base here for [their] sovereignty" that will hopefully allow them to "*prosecute criminals of all races on all lands within [their] original boundaries*" (Erdrich 2012a, 229-30). In order to do so, they need to be extremely cautious with their actions, for "[their] records will be scrutinised by Congress one day

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<sup>44</sup> In *LaRose*, Erdrich shows that, like US legislation, tribal law has its drawbacks. The novel revolves around an Ojibwe man, Landreux Iron, who accidentally kills the son of Nola and Peter Ravish. In order to compensate the Ravishes for their loss, Landreux and his wife follow "the old way" (Erdrich 2016, 6) and give them their youngest son, LaRose, who from that moment on "will be [the Ravishes's] son" (16). This is a tough decision, a hurtful one that has negative consequences on the two families, but, at the same time, it shows the need "for something more significant and restorative" than vengeance and punishment for justice (Ibarrola-Armendariz 2021, 57). This sort of "reparative justice" (57) marks the beginning of a process of healing for the Ravishes and the Irons and thus, as Ibarrola-Armendariz puts it, of the possibility that the community regains its balance (61).



and a decision on whether to enlarge [their] jurisdiction will be made” (229).<sup>45</sup> Bazil’s words demonstrate that he is not passive or unemotional. Rather, they prove that he is a judge and father in an impossible legal and personal situation, which makes him take decisions while trying to keep a cool head. And yet, although he tries to act according to the law during the investigation process, Bazil is so affected by his family’s misery that when he encounters Linden at the grocery store, he cannot help but attack him:

I was pushing the cart in front of my dad, and so I saw Linden Lark first. [...] My father must have looked up just after I did. [...] [He] threw the cream, surged forward and grabbed Lark by the shoulders. He spun Lark, jamming him backward, then gripped Lark around the throat with both hands. [...] He attacked with such an instinct of sudden rage it looked slick as a movie stunt. (244)

As a result of this confrontation with his wife’s rapist, Bazil has a heart attack which leads to his hospitalisation. Such a dramatic moment in the novel could be understood as the epitome of the ripple effects of Geraldine’s rape, which not only affects her body and psyche, but also Joe’s behaviour and Bazil’s health. Thus, since conventional justice cannot bring peace and reparation to his mother—who, despite her gradual process of working through, is once again overwhelmed by fear after Linden’s liberation—and because his father is unable to protect them on account of his coronary problem, Joe will decide to take justice into his own hands by killing Linden.

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<sup>45</sup> The criminal law of today’s Anishinaabe tribal justice systems is usually akin to US legislation as tribes tend to adopt and sometimes even borrow the criminal code of the state where they are located (Fletcher 2017, 103). Accordingly, offenders in Anishinaabe territories are sentenced “to fines and imprisonment” in a very similar way—although with a few changes—as in any other US justice systems (103). The problem is that this tribal jurisdiction applying to all the Native American communities is limited to minor felonies and Indian subjects. Therefore, in order to change this situation, as Bazil reminds Joe and by extension the reader, the steps taken by tribal judges and courts in the fight for the attainment of a larger judicial autonomy must be carefully measured.

#### **2.4. Attacking the Roots: The Rape of the Mother/Land, Historical Unresolved Grief and Collective Survivance**

In line with postcolonial trauma theory's claims against the Westerncentric and event-based model of classic trauma theory, which did not take the long processes of colonial trauma into consideration, Joe's behaviour should not be simply interpreted as a consequence or response to the single traumatic event of his mother's sexual assault and subsequent suffering. Instead, an analysis of Joe's character should also take into consideration the painful social and historical relations between Native Americans and the European colonisation, particularly Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Andrea DeBruyn's notion of Native American historical unresolved grief (1998) so as to carry out a more accurate and culturally specific study of Erdrich's protagonist. After all, Joe forms part of a generation whose suffering is caused by the marginalised reservation context where he lives and by the lack of justice in Indian country as result of a jurisdictional maze created by white colonisers. For all these reasons, this section is aimed at offering a complete study of Joe's and his community's collective suffering as well as their resilience and resistance to the racism and (neo)colonialism that provokes that grief.

##### ***2.4.1. Racism and the (Neo)Colonial Domination of Native Lands and Female Bodies***

In *The Round House*, Erdrich illustrates the effects of settler colonialism oppressing Joe and his community through different characters' actions and discourses that reveal the latent racism within North American society. For instance, at the beginning of the story, while waiting to see his badly injured mother, Joe confronts a racist woman who does not bear sharing a waiting room with a Native American: "Don't you Indians have your hospital over there? Aren't you building a new one?," she asks Joe, to which he replies,

“The emergency room’s under construction,” an answer followed by a disdainful reply from the woman: “Still, she said” (Erdrich 2012a, 8). The woman’s words contain evident traces of bigoted discourses rooted in the history of settler colonialism in the US, where Native Americans have traditionally been considered underdeveloped and violent individuals, and have been excluded or alienated by the majority of society. After all, as Sara Ahmed explains in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, in the Western world, those bodies distinct from the familiar white one are associated with dirt and danger (2000, 51), a thought system that led to the Euro-American identification of other ethnic groups and races as inferior, unclean and dangerous. Hence, firstly because Joe is an easy-identifiable Native American—as can be inferred from the hospital woman’s rapid recognition of his ethnicity—and secondly, because the woman feels uncomfortable with his presence, it is clear that for her, the boy encapsulates the image of the improper and unclean Other—what Julia Kristeva (1982) calls “the abject”—that must be expelled, for it generates rejection.

Concomitantly with characters representing ordinary citizens’s bigotry towards Native peoples, Erdrich includes fictional public figures like Governor Yeltow, who displays a racist attitude towards these communities similar to many actual past and present US politicians.<sup>46</sup> As Geraldine explains, the governor “is well known for his bigoted treatment of Indians,” an image he tries to mitigate through “public relations stunts like sponsoring Indian schoolchildren or giving out positions in the Capitol” (Erdrich 2012a, 157). Whitey also characterises the governor as a man who “[p]ays

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<sup>46</sup> According to Julie Tharp (2014), Governor Yeltow is based on an actual public figure, William Janklow, Governor of South Dakota from 1979 to 1987, who, in 1967, was accused of raping his teenage Sioux babysitter. In spite of the survivor and her mother’s efforts to make Janklow pay for his crime and, most especially, to keep him from practicing law in tribal courts, both women were suspiciously killed and the case remained unsolved. Janklow was never prosecuted but, before becoming a governor, in his position of state attorney, he eagerly worked to promote *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, the 1978 Supreme Court case that took away Native American tribes’ right to try non-Indians. Interestingly, Erdrich largely bases her novel on the consequences of this law—which entailed yet another blow to Native peoples’ sovereignty—for the Coutts family and their community.

homage to the noble savage but tried to store nuclear waste on sacred Lakota earth” and who considers Native American customs and dances “a form of devil worship” (166). But this political figure’s ultimate and perhaps most insulting strategy is his attempt at adopting the child Mayla gives birth to with the only purpose of gaining more votes by pretending to foster a Native child who is in fact his own daughter.

The most flagrant case of racism in the novel is, nevertheless, illustrated through Linden’s racist discourse and actions, which denote an acute disdain towards Native Americans and his ideas of white supremacy: “I suppose I am one of those people who just hates Indians generally and specifically for they were at odds with my folks way back [...]. [T]he strong should rule the weak. Instead of the weak the strong!” (161). This commentary reveals a racist line of thinking still alive in the US. In fact, as Ella Shoat and Robert Stam note, racism towards Indigenous peoples in this country is “an ambivalently repressive mechanism [that] dispels the anxiety in the face of the Indian, whose very presence is a reminder of the initially precarious grounding of the American nation-state itself” (1994, 118). Consequently, in order to consolidate their sovereignty over Native lands, colonisers and their descendants have justified the theft of these territories on account of Native people’s alleged inferiority, as the novel denounces in the passage where Bazil tries to explain tribal disenfranchisement to Joe:

Take *Johnson v. MacIntosh*. It’s 1823. The United States are forty-seven years old and the entire country is based in grabbing Indian land as quickly as possible in as many ways as can be humanly devised. Land speculation is the stock market of the times. [...] Justice Marshall went out of his way to strip away all Indian title to all lands viewed—i.e. “discovered”—by Europeans. [...] Marshall vested absolute title to the land in the government and gave Indians nothing more than the right of occupancy, a right that could be taken away at any time. Even to this day, his words are used to continue the dispossession of our lands. [...] [T]he language he used survives in the law, that we were savages living off the forest, and to leave our land to us was to leave it useless wilderness, that our character and religion is of so inferior a stamp that the superior genius of Europe must certainly claim ascendancy on and on. [...] *Oliphant v. Suquamish* [...] [t]ook from us the right to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes on our land. (Erdrich 2012a, 228-29)

In this passage, Bazils's jurisdictional lesson to his son includes the problematic historical laws and legal sentences that have gradually snatched Native communities from sovereignty over their lands and their capacity to apply the law on white perpetrators (e.g. rapists, murderers) on reservations. As Jacqueline Agtuca explains, of great importance was the 1823 decision that Chief Justice John Marshall wrote in *Johnson v. McIntosh*, which enabled the US to create an empire by taking Indigenous peoples' lands even through wars when needed (2008, 15). Although Native peoples signed treaties in exchange of peace and their sovereignty over allotted territories on reservations, decades later, the Major Crimes Act of 1885 resulted in a significant intrusion on Native sovereignty, as it granted the federal court the jurisdiction over serious crimes committed on tribal land, such as sexual abuse, murder and kidnapping. The motivation behind the implementation of this act was the common regard of Native tribes as not competent to deal with and punish serious issues of crime. Almost seven decades later, in 1953, Public Law 280 transferred federal criminal jurisdiction on reservations to certain states. This change meant that public law states had to pay for the legal action which had been previously funded—albeit, insufficiently—by the federal government.

In 1978, in the widely-known case *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, the US Supreme Court stripped from tribal authorities the right to prosecute non-Natives who committed crimes on reservations, even if the perpetrator was a non-Native husband and the victim a Native wife. Instead, state and federal courts were given jurisdiction to do so, although, as Owens asserts, these authorities “often drop the ball on investigation, follow through, and prosecution of rapes and sexual assault,” to the extent that sixty per cent of the cases are dropped (2012, 513). Regarding sexual violence, as Deer notes, “the *Oliphant* decision means that non-Native men who rape Native women on tribal

lands completely escape tribal criminal sanctions” (2015, 7). Thus, it can be argued that the systematic displacement of Native peoples from their land base—functioning both as their economic source of livelihood and their spiritual foundation—set up conditions for what Jaimes Guerrero calls a “colonially induced despair” (quoted in Lundquist 2004, 262) as well as a historical unresolved trauma.<sup>47</sup> As could be expected, it also resulted in a “jurisdictional maze” (J. Owens 2012, 509) between tribal, federal and state laws which has enabled white men to enter reservations and rape, abuse and/or murder Native women with impunity for decades. This violence against the Indigenous woman, as explained in Chapter 1, is both an attack on her female and Native identity because, in the history of settler colonialism in the US, the colonial expansion across American territory went hand in hand with the oppression of Indigenous women.

What Erdrich aims to denounce in *The Round House* is precisely the unfair and dangerous effect that the laws and sentences Bazil refers to have on Native women. For this reason, the author includes a victimiser who does not choose a random place where he can perpetrate his criminal actions. On the contrary, because Linden is very much aware of the legal entanglement and jurisdictional gaps on reservations and especially on the area where the round house is located, he plans his movements carefully.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The special connection of Native Americans to the land and nature—understood as the whole natural world, from living and inert beings to any sort of natural phenomena—has always worked as a source of tribal memory which has been transmitted from generation to generation through the art of storytelling, either in oral or written form (Martínez-Falquina 2020b, 146). Yet the land is not just a resource and an identity symbol for American Indians. It is a token of relationship too, since, as Glen Coulthard explains, it is “an inseparable part of an expansive system of interdependent relations covering the land and animals, past and future generations, as well as other people and communities” (2014, 63). This reciprocal relationship characterised by “place-based practices and associated form of knowledge” has always moved Native peoples to live “in relation to one another and [their] surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way” (60) as opposed to the capitalist and imperialist values behind settler colonialism and the systemic dispossession of tribal lands. This ethical framework based on the significance of the land for Native peoples of America is what Coulthard calls “grounded normativity” (60) and the core aspect that has been attacked by white settlers and defended through social, legal and literary mobilisation by Natives since colonial times.

<sup>48</sup> The novel reveals in its third chapter that Linden Lark’s acquaintance with land jurisdiction comes from his family’s involvement in certain trials for cheating Ojibwe families. According to Bazil, the trial which made Linden become “aware of the jurisdiction issues on and surrounding the reservation” (Erdrich 2012a, 52) was the one in which his parents were found guilty of charging an illegal fee to

Following Geraldine's testification when she starts working through her trauma, not only does Linden rape her in the jurisdictionally entangled area near the round house, but he also disorients her by covering her head with a pillow case so that she cannot determine the exact location of his crime (Erdrich 2012a, 159-60). Hence, by neatly linking her fictional white rapist with an obtuse jurisdiction resulted from the US government's historical oppressing agenda towards the North American Indigenous communities, Erdrich fulfils a twofold goal. Firstly, she denounces a white supremacist drive behind the systemic rape of Native women like Geraldine in the US. Secondly, she unmasks the country's authorities as implicated subjects or indirect perpetrators of that violence, as they do nothing to solve the jurisdictional problems with the purpose to avoid losing white sovereignty over Native peoples' territories. In this sense, Erdrich shows her readership how settler colonialism is not over, for present-day Native peoples are still dealing with its ongoing effects.

As for Linden's aversion for Native women, who, according to him, "have no standing under the law for a good reason and yet have continued to diminish the white man and to take his honor" (Erdrich 2012a, 161), this attitude reflects, one more time, a colonial and sexist mindset. Such thoughts are particularly based on a colonialist consideration of Native women as threatening due to their ability "to reproduce the next generation of peoples who can resist colonization" (A. Smith 2003, 78). Thus, Geraldine's rape can be read as Linden's attempt to colonise the Indigenous woman's body, just as colonisers occupied the Indigenous lands. This point is important since, in the novel, Geraldine's rape somehow runs parallel to the profanation of a traditional feminine symbol in the community: the round house. This place, as Joe and by

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Ojibwe people living on tribal land for using their gas station services and facilities located in fee land. Later in the novel, Linden himself will admit that his wide knowledge on law makes him untouchable: "I won't get caught. [...] I know as much law as a judge. [...] I have no fear" (161).

extension readers learn through his grandfather's stories was built by the trickster and cultural hero Nanapush. The following subsection explains the importance of these oral narratives integrated in the main linear narrative vis-à-vis the collective suffering and resilience of Joe's community.

#### ***2.4.2. Collective Suffering, Survivance and Resurgence***

In *The Round House* Erdrich incorporates Native peoples' historical fight against the lingering effects of patriarchal settler colonialism through a turn to the Anishinaabe mythic tradition and the focus on the community. She does so by offering a view of how Joe, his family and his people try to cope with a simultaneous attack against tribal women and a sacred place connected to the tribe's lands, myths and history. Erdrich encompasses all these aspects in the stories recounted by Mooshum (Joe's grandfather), the main metanarrative element in the novel (together with Linda's self-narrated story) and which recalls Erdrich's habitual polyphonic or multivocal style. Mooshum's oral tales reflect the important role that contemporary Native peoples like Erdrich give to Native *resurgence*, that is, the recuperation and transmission to the coming generations of "their own culture's stories, philosophies, theories and concepts" so that these can be used as tools to fight for their sovereignty (Simpson 2011, 148).<sup>49</sup> As Simpson regards, the maintenance and transmission of resurgence seeds is more than a cultural ritual; it is an ethical and communal responsibility (18, 20). Accordingly, I will explain how the stories recounted by Mooshum are not just simple mythical tales, but artefacts of theory and inspiration crafted and adapted to the new times so as to pass on Joe the

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<sup>49</sup> As Justice notes in his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, imposed stories about Native Americans like those coming from the Euro-American culture can be harmful. Yet, Native peoples' own stories "can be good medicine" for they "drive out the poison, heal the spirit as well as the body" and remind the diverse Indigenous nations "of the greatness" of their origins and their future, thereby dismantling the deterministic colonial narrative of Indigenous innate deficiency (2018, 4).



Anishinaabe culture and resistance mechanisms that he needs to work through his individual and collective trauma.

The traditional stories from which Joe learns valuable lessons that will help in his recovery and will accompany him for the rest of his life are about Nanapush, the cultural hero of the Anishinaabe mythology.<sup>50</sup> As Mooshum tells Joe, Nanapush was the son of Akiikwe or “Earth Woman,” who, together with her husband, “could always get food for their children, and even extra meat” (179). However, during “the reservation year,” when white settlers forced the tribe “into [their] boundary,” all the food sources disappeared and the ones promised by the US government never arrived (179). One day, thinking that Akiikwe had become a *wiindigoo*, a possessed person with an incessant hunger for “fellow humans as prey meat” who must be killed “right away” by “blood family” (180), her husband and the community men order Akiikwe’s twelve-year-old son to slay his own mother, a deed he rejects (180-81). Notwithstanding the men’s numerous attempts to kill her, Akiikwe hides under the waters of a frozen lake and when the men are gone, she emerges to teach Nanapush a “hunting song” she was given by the lake fish (182) so that he can find the last buffalo in the country with the tune. After dragging “himself along, mile after mile” (184) singing the hunting song, Nanapush eventually attracts Old Buffalo Woman, who allows him to “aim point-blank at her heart” for she is “the only hope” for his starving community to survive (185).

Nanapush eats pieces of her heart and liver and afterwards shelters into her body so as survive a snowstorm. Extremely exhausted, he passes out and almost freezes. As Mooshum recounts, in so doing, Nanapush becomes “a buffalo,” whom Old Woman

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<sup>50</sup> Nanapush, Naanabozho or Nanabush is one of the names used for the trickster figure in traditional oral stories. In her previous novels *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, Erdrich includes a character with this name. Particularly in *Tracks*, Nanapush, a wise elder who serves as one of the narrators in the book, has clear features of the Anishinaabe trickster. Like Nanapush, Mooshum plays the trickster role in *The Plague of Doves* and in *The Round House*. But in the latter novel, whereas Mooshum represents the foolish trickster, Joe will play the role of the trickster-cultural hero at the end of the text.

Buffalo adopts and tells “all she knew” (186) while he is still unconscious. Nanapush eventually survives because Akii hacks him out of the carcass and warms him with a fire (186). Both mother and son return to their community taking “every bit of the buffalo back to their family and relatives” (187). Thanks to Old Buffalo Woman, Nanapush and his “unkillable mother” (187), the tribe is saved. For this reason, following the desires of his spirit helper, Nanapush constructs a place where together, the Ojibwe community “could do things in a good way” instead of falsely accusing someone of being a *wiindigoo*, without first asking “the wise and the old” (187). As Mooshum remembers, when he was a child, he saw the people constructing the round house following Nanapush’s instructions, directions that Old Buffalo Woman had imprinted in his mind: “The round house will be my body, the poles my ribs, the fire my heart. It will be the body of your mother and it must be respected the same way. As the mother is intent on her baby’s life, so your people should think of their children” (214-15). In this sense, through the circular building constructed on Joe’s reservation, the story of Nanapush materialises in a tangible space which embodies the values promoted by the Anishinaabe cultural hero.

As can be noted in the previous summary of Moonshum’s tale, this story evidences the symbolic relationship between the round house, the community and the crucial role of tribal women for the Anishinaabeg. In fact, the round house can be interpreted as a symbolic feminine and maternal space embodying both Old Buffalo Woman and Nanapush’s mother. The novel establishes a key parallelism between the rape of Geraldine and the profanation of such a sacred and communally-maternal space. This connection is firstly presented through Joe’s association of the round house with the body of his own mother when he hears a “grieving cry [that] seemed emitted by the structure [of the round house] itself” (59) while collecting clues of the aggression in the

nearby area (59). As adult Joe explains, back then, he understood this “crying out” as “[his] mother’s anguished voice” telling him that “[Linden] had attacked her [t]here” (60). Likewise, the parallelism between Geraldine’s raped body and the damaged ceremonial house is established through the now wrench-off plank-door of this ceremonial building (59). If the hexagonal round house represents a woman’s womb as proposed by Many Pannicia Carden (2018, 95), then the broken door clearly bespeaks a forced entry into—a violation—of this doubly feminine space by either Linden or the white police who had “picked up” the community’s papers and blankets (59). In this sense, because the physical degradation suffered by Geraldine also manifests in the damaged maternal shelter of the community, Linden’s atrocious actions and their after-effects must be understood as an attack against that very community, too.

Besides the textual evidence that demonstrates that the individual attack against Geraldine turns out a collective blow against her people, the novel offers further proof of this idea. As Joe/narrator explains, in the “pre-1978” era when the practice of the Anishinaabe or any other Native American spirituality was not allowed, the round house was a sacred place of worship where the community secretly held religious ceremonies and fooled the priest and the BIA superintendent by taking out the Bible and reading “aloud from Ecclesiastes” (59-60). Precisely this disobedience sheltered in the round house by Joe’s community points to this location as a site of Native American resistance to the assimilation policies that the US government imposed on Native peoples. In this respect, because Linden’s crime takes place around and in a space that epitomises the tribe’s symbol of resistance to settler colonialism *par excellence*, one more time, the novel presents this wrongdoing as an attack against Joe’s community and culture. Yet, despite the hard stroke that Linden’s aggression represents for Joe and his people, Erdrich focuses on their impressive resilience.

Michael Hardin observes that, to forget all the pain that came with Western colonisation would serve Native Americans to “free” themselves “from the burden of a victimizing past, but it would also free the victimizer from responsibility” (1998, 26-27). Similarly, Deborah Madsen argues that forgetting is an undesirable option for Native peoples because it “involves repression, melancholia, and the regressive cycle of acting out the symptoms of trauma [as] [t]he repressed will always return” (2008, 66). However, although mourning is what Madsen calls “an undesirable location of the Native American subject,” she recommends writing against grief and the assimilated self as a resistance strategy which breaks with the traditional image of the passive hopeless Native victim (66). In this sense, Madsen’s tenets coincide with the idea of *survivance* developed by Anishinaabe critic and writer Gerald Vizenor. This key concept indicates that Native American people’s survival must never be grounded on a passive position but rather, on “an active resistance” which leaves behind the image of Native peoples as never-ending passive victims historically promoted by whites’ discourses (1998, 15). Precisely, Native stories of survivance work, according to Vizenor, as an active presence which rejects that image of “dominance, tragedy and victimry” (15).

With *The Round House*, Erdrich provides an outstanding example of contemporary novels of Anishinaabe survivance. As contended by Ibarrola-Armendariz, far from victimising its Native protagonists, *The Round House* shows that Linden’s crime unites the Coutts family as it “brings together” the entire community including their ancestors (2017, 266), for they all want to deal with the collective grief on the reservation. This resilient union is noted in the episodes when different members of Erdrich’s fictional community feed and take care of Joe while his mother is still convalescent and his father is working non-stop so as to get the case solved. For

instance, Geraldine's sister, Clemence, brings Joe to her house the first night after the attack so he can rest better (Erdrich 2012a, 14), she cooks meals for the Coutts family while Geraldine cannot get up from bed (22) and brings light reading into the house (83) so that Joe and Brazil can get distracted. Grandma Ignatia Thunder—Zack's grandmother—also takes care of the young squad by preparing frybread for them (72).<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, Sonja, who, as she confesses, would “waste” the attacker if she knew his identity (26), feeds Joe and lends him her dog Pearl so that she can guard the Coutts' house and protect Geraldine while she is dealing with her PTSD there. Also, Sonja helps Joe secure the forty thousand dollars that the boy finds inside a doll floating on the river at a few commercial banks off the reservation (139). As readers eventually learn, this is the governor's hush money that Mayla had hidden in her baby's toy. Regardless of the murky origin of such a big amount of money, acting as a fostering mother figure that temporarily replaces Joe's incommunicative actual mother, Sonja makes him promise that he would employ those savings for college (167-68). This episode certainly displays Sonja's somewhat motherly interest in his nephew's well-being and education in a moment when Joe seems to have an absent mother owing to the traumatic effects that the attack had on her.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, other characters help the Coutts family by providing them with useful information for the investigation. Undoubtedly, Joe's sidekicks, Cappy, Zack and Angus, are a good example and so is his uncle Whitey, who tells Joe about the existence of the racist Governor to whom Mayla

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<sup>51</sup> According to Jen Miller, frybread “links generation with generation and also connects the present to the painful narrative of Native American history” because this traditional Native American food was developed out using the flour, sugar, and lard that the US government provided indigenous peoples with after their forced removals (2008, n.p.). Likewise, frybread is used in today's Native celebrations like powwows which, in Miller's opinion, are somehow a reaction against the prohibition of intertribal gatherings by the US government in the nineteenth century. For both reasons, this food has become a symbol of Native resilience and unity.

<sup>52</sup> Sonja's mother-role is only temporary, though, for, she betrays Joe by using some of the money they hid to buy expensive accessories and, eventually, by using it to leave her abusive partner and escape the reservation.

was related. Linda also provides Bazil and Joe with information about her brother Linden and, apparently unaware of Joe's plan to kill him, she even lets him know about his whereabouts (268).

An additional instance of the community's resilience as a group regardless of the continuous reminders of their heavy subordination to the US government (e.g. the land jurisdictional entanglement, the misogynistic attack against Geraldine and Mayla, the degradation of the community's most sacred place) can be noted in the preparation of ceremonies and parties. According to Aaron R. Denham, although the sustained traumatic impact of colonialism on Native American families and communities is undeniable, it is also important to acknowledge the different Native tribes' development of resilience strategies which permit the negotiation and reframing of painful memories and therefore, the working-through of historical unresolved trauma (2008, 392). Particularly he posits that "collective act[s] of remembering"—for instance the participation in powwows—are a fundamental move which increases the likelihood that future generations will not have to deal with a narrative void around their past and present (399), or, in other words, with the transgenerational transmission of American Indian trauma. Precisely in *The Round House*, performative traditions such as the sweat lodge or traditional ceremony for the purification of those undergoing any sort of transformation or healing prepared by Cappy's brother, Randall (Erdrich 2012a, 36-40), become useful for the working through of historical mourning and the reinforcement of the Native American identity.

Likewise, another healing tool presented in the novel is storytelling. As Denham explains, Native oral stories about the community's ancestors are one more crucial artefact for developing transgenerational resilience strategies since especially children establish "an embodied memory" of those predecessors and their lives through the

learning of their “stories, personality traits, traumas and accomplishments” (2008, 400). However, as this anthropologist indicates, only the replacement of stories of suffering with stories of survival wherein family members or ancestors succeed “at overcoming difficulties and remaining strong in the face of traumatic circumstances or change” enable a transgenerational transmission of resilience to the young (405). In *The Round House*, together with the different communal ceremonies and celebrations, the resilience strategies referred to by Denham are mainly provided to Joe by Mooshum through his stories. In these oral narratives, both Akii and Nanapush—who, in the tale, is the same age as Joe—are characterised as survivors rather than passive victims of the after-effects of settler colonialism. Nanapush is particularly presented as a hero committed to protect his mother and destined to save the community as a whole. Hence, it could be argued that, just as Mooshum’s tales reflect the important cultural role that the round house plays in the community, they also become lessons of survival and resistance, or—to use Vizenor’s term—survivance, which Mooshum transmits to his grandson.

By the same token, these tales epitomise the resurgence seeds that, according to critics like Simpson, must be passed across generations so as to achieve “the regeneration of social, political, spiritual, and legal systems within [the Native] communities” which allows for the formation of “a generation of individuals that has the intelligence to create the alternatives” to the current settler-colonial system (2016, 26). As we will see in the following section, the internalisation of these stories of resilience and resurgence that Mooshum passes on to his grandson result in Joe’s

identification with Nanapush and his attempt to save his family and community like his forefather once did.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.5. The Liminal Space between Wiindigoog, Perpetrators and Heroes

Together with trickster Nanapush, Mooshum's stories deal with another important mythical figure in the Anishinaabe tradition: the dreaded *wiindigoo*. As will be explained in this section, the trickster and the wiindigoo, respectively embodied by Joe and Linden in the novel, are complicated by Erdrich in a move that shows the consequences of the cycle of violence provoked by neocolonialism and racism on Native American reservations.

The wiindigoo is a cannibalistic monster-like creature that appears in winter times of food scarcity and has an insatiable craving for human flesh (Lockard 2008, 209; Simpson 2011, 70).<sup>54</sup> According to Basil Johnston, given that the wiindigoo "has no other object in life but to satisfy this lust and hunger, expending all its energy on this one purpose," this creature always provokes fear in the community (1995, 222). All that matters for this cannibalistic figure is his or her survival and, as a result, this monstrous man or woman "with heart of ice" (Lockard 2008, 209) neglects other people's suffering (Johnston 1995, 222). It is no wonder then, that in spite of its mythical or exaggerated nature, this flesh and bone monster illustrates humans' tendency to egotism, which may end up in an extreme "erosion of principles and values" (224). For

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<sup>53</sup> Castor finds in the relationship between Nanapush, Mooshum and Joe an example of "twinning," a characteristic in the literary style of some Native American authors like Erdrich by which they relate characters and themes. As Castor explains, Erdrich "twin[s]" *The Round House* with *Love Medicine* and *Tracks* where Nanapush appears, and she also links Mooshum and Nanapush as tricksters, and Nanapush and Joe through the terrible injustice suffered by their respective mothers (2019, 176).

<sup>54</sup> The figure of the *wiindigoo/wiindigo/weetigo* as a cannibal monster is shared by different Native tribal cultures, hence the varied spelling that can be found in the literature about it. In this thesis, I am using the form "wiindigoo" for the singular and "wiindigoog" for the plural as used in Anishinaabemowin or Ojibwe language. In citations, the author's original spelling will be retained.



this reason, the figure of the wiindigoo was used by Anishinaabe ancestors to warn the community against excess, greed and even addiction so as to avoid imbalance in the tribe (Simpson 2011, 70).

As well as a mythical concept, the wiindigoo malady has been used among the Anishinaabeg to refer to colonialism and capitalism because of the unstoppable hunger for natural resources manifested by Western nations' predatory behaviour towards the environment and the Indigenous peoples of America (Johnston 1995, 235-37; Simpson 2011, 70-71). As Johnston explains, "[t]hese modern Weendigoes looked into the future and saw money—cash, bank accounts, interest from investments, profits, in short, wealth beyond belief" (236). For them, "profit, wealth, and power" are the ultimate goal to accomplish (237). With these ideas, Johnston demonstrates that ancient wiindigoog did not disappear with the passing of the centuries. Rather, they have been "assimilated and reincarnated as corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals," have acquired "new names and polished manners" and replaced their fixation on human flesh for more "refined viands" (235). Moreover, Joe Lockard observes that while in European epistemology the Indigenous Other was regarded as a fearful cannibal who could devour the white man, Anishinaabe people feared being consumed or transformed by the greedy foreign culture that had arrived in their lands (2008, 213). Although it is true that in both cases, Europeans and Natives projected on each other their own fears in relation to the unknown Other, Simpson identifies the Anishinaabe stories about resistance to the European wiindigoo not only in response to the colonisers' prejudices and supremacist line of thought, but also as cultural weapons of resistance against colonialism (2011, 71).

Although not new in Erdrich's fiction, the cautionary figure of the wiindigoo—which had appeared in some of her previous novels, such as *Love Medicine* and *The*

*Antelope Wife* (Tharp 2003)—is more extensively developed in *The Round House*. Here this motif is very clearly related to the features of selfishness, jealousy, greed and white supremacy that have so commonly been employed to describe this monstrous creature. Not surprisingly, the character who most explicitly epitomises the terrifying predatory-human mythical being is Linden Lark. Johnston depicts the wiindigoo as a giant and skeletal monster at the edge of emaciation with “jagged teeth” and bloody lips “from its constant chewing” (1995, 221). Linden is never presented as a physically monstrous man. However, it is not incidental that Joe focuses on Linden’s mouth the first time he encounters him at Whitey’s gas station. In his narration of this episode, Joe describes Linden’s lips as “thick, dark red, like he had a fever. When he smiled, I saw his teeth were white and even” (170).<sup>55</sup> In this depiction of the man who, as he will later discover, raped Geraldine, Joe’s words point to the abnormal reddish colour of the stranger’s lips and, even though he does not refer to Linden’s teeth as serrated, the symmetrical pattern of his dentition could resemble that of the ghastly wiindigoo.

Yet another characteristic which makes Linden a symbolic embodiment of the mythical cannibalistic creature is the unsettling and cold aura he leaves behind. As Johnston explains, the wiindigoo usually leaves an “eerie odor of decay and decomposition, of death and corruption” and when attacking a human being, the air turns cold and a wind rises, “no more than a breath at first, but in moments whining and driving, transformed into a blizzard” (1995, 221). This is precisely what Joe and his friends feel when looking for clues near the round house:

My throat burned and I was invaded by a stab of feeling so acute that I wanted to cry—again. Suddenly, we froze. We heard what sounded like a high-pitched eagle-bone whistle up the hill through the rattle of woods. The wind had changed direction, and a series of notes sounded as the air poured through the gaps in the

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<sup>55</sup> In their article “Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House*, the Wiindigoo, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*” (2018), Jacob Bender and Lydia Maunz-Brese also explore Linden in relation to two cultural evils: the Native American wiindigoo creature and Armus, a malevolent entity in the US-made *Star Trek* TV series that Joe enjoys so much.

mud chinking of the round house. Cappy stood up and stared at the round house. Angus made the sign of the cross. (Erdrich 2012a, 69)

Likewise, Joe relates Linden to the wiindigoo's deathly nature when, on their first vis-à-vis encounter, he refers to the way the latter speaks: "Every word sticks with me, every single word he said. The way he said things, in a dead voice, then cheerful, then dead again. Then amused" (161).

Nonetheless, what makes Linden all the more monstrous is his violent and nasty behaviour, his ill morals based on egotism, envy, racism and sexism. On the one hand, as his sister Linda explains, besides humiliating her when she offered herself as a kidney donor for him notwithstanding their inexistent relationship since the moment when their mother abandoned her (125), he was a permanently "jealous and possessive" man (299) with Mayla, the woman he supposedly loved.<sup>56</sup> This controlling conduct ends up turning his love for Mayla into an obsessive infatuation which leads him to commit a crime of passion against her when she refuses to flee with him and the governor's hush money. On the other hand, Linden represents what Lockard calls the "Euro-wiindigoo" related to (neo)colonialism (2008, 209) due to his racist views of Native Americans and the white supremacist ideology evinced by his appreciation that whites should rule Indians (161). Considering Linden's attack as a consequence of his white supremacist mindset, it could be suggested that his aggression against two Indigenous women and mothers epitomises the colonial attempt to eliminate the bearers of future Native generations through rape and murder. In this respect, as Carden observes, Linden certainly represents the most "monstrous" excesses of American settler colonialism

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<sup>56</sup> Castor regards Linda and Linden's relationship as contrasting twins and, therefore, as yet another example of Erdrich's twinning in *The Round House* (2019, 144). Whereas Linda is a good-hearted woman, Linden is a sadistic individual—his sadism was even present within the womb of his mother when he crushed against Linda to the point of deforming her—whose hatred for others and especially for Native Americans is absorbed from his evil-spirited mother, Grace Lark (Erdrich 2012a, 123). However, as Linda notes, perhaps Linden's only altruistic action was deforming her before their birth since Grace's inability to stand her daughter's crookedness leads to Linda's abandonment and, therefore, to her salvation from such a monstrous maternal influence (123).

(2018, 107). Accordingly, Joe will attempt to adopt the role of communal hero and to get rid of this white wiindigoo who threatens his mother and the community. Yet, by so doing, the boy will become a perpetrator psychologically haunted by guilt.

### ***2.5.1. From Victim-Hero to Traumatized Perpetrator***

Mooshum's tales about Nanapush and Geraldine's comparison of Linden, who still prowls the reservation, with a wiindigoo "trying to eat [them]" (Edrich 2012a, 248), propel Joe to kill the attacker. His intention is to stop his mother's suffering and by extension, the community's grief. However, before committing this fatal action, he struggles with his conscience, for he knows that by killing Linden and thus becoming "part of [all] this" (90), he will also be failing his family and tribe. Despite these moments of doubt, and in accordance to Joe's tricksterlike characterisation, he tries to use all the means around him to achieve his purpose. In fact, in a humorous turn, he resorts to the priest of the reservation in search for logistic help.

Significantly enough, in his daily life, Edrich's protagonist is not a practising Catholic.<sup>57</sup> However, as he admits, "[e]very day since the grocer, I wished I had brained Lark. I imagined myself killing him over and over. But since I hadn't, I was going to visit Father Travis first thing in the morning. I decided I would join his Saturday morning catechism class" (249). Edrich adds a note of humour after these words when Joe confesses that the real reason to visit the priest—a former military—is to ask him to teach him "to shoot gophers" so that he can "get some practice" (249) before trying with his actual objective. Father Travis never does such a thing, yet, during his catechism lessons, Joe does find a pretext for killing Linden as can be observed in the following

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<sup>57</sup> In *The Round House*, although all the Native American characters are familiar with Catholicism, they still celebrate rituals and ceremonies from the Anishinaabe tradition such as the sweat lodge ceremony which Joe attends with his friends. The coexistence of these two religions in Joe's community—which reflects a syncretism typical in Edrich's work—provides a realist image of contemporary Native American identity as a hybrid one.

passage: “The sins that cried out for vengeance were murder, sodomy, defrauding a labourer, oppressing the poor. I thought I knew what sodomy was and believed it included rape. So my thoughts were covered by church doctrine” (251). Therefore, by means of his received knowledge coming from his tribal and Christian upbringing—namely the community values and heroic nature of Nanapush, the dreadful wiindigoo and the Sins of Crying Out to Heaven for Vengeance—which he transforms in a trickster-like way, Joe tries to convince himself and by extension readers, of the righteousness of his desire to kill his mother’s attacker. In his own words, “I was dedicated to a purpose which I’d name in my mind not vengeance but justice” (260).

It could be argued that the traumatic influence of Geraldine’s rape on Joe pushes him to kill Linden in an attempt to change the helpless and humiliating situation that his parents—especially his mother—are undergoing and that conventional justice seems unable to palliate. Erdrich reinforces this idea in an interview when she comments that Geraldine’s rape “catapults” Joe to adulthood because, “as he sees that the adults cannot find justice, it becomes clear to him—and then [...] to his best friend, as well—that they may have to seek justice on their own” (2012b, n.p.). And so, after taking the decision to kill Linden and worming his whereabouts out of his sister Linda, Joe goes to the golf course where, camouflaged behind some trees, he shoots Linden several times.

At first sight, it could seem that Joe kills his mother’s rapist as a revengeful response which drives him to act on his own. However, as Mooshum explains in his tales about Akii and Nanapush, tribal tradition established that a wiindigoo had to be killed “right away,” and the truth is that the person in charge of this deed “couldn’t do it alone,” as the community’s “agreement in the matter” was needed (Erdrich 2012a, 180). Interestingly enough, throughout the story many characters try to help Joe by preventing him from meddling in the investigation and also from developing feelings of vengeance

against the perpetrator. A good example can be found in the order that Geraldine blurts out to his son: “You will stop asking questions and you will not give me any worry. You will not go after him. [...] You will not be part of this” (90). Moreover, as readers learn at the end of the novel, neither does Joe kill Linden as a consequence of his revengeful drive, nor does he get rid of the white wiindigoo through a solo job. Instead, he plans Linden’s death as a way to bring justice to his family along with his people and, unknowingly, he is helped to accomplish this goal by the community in various ways that prevent him from being traced as his sole killer.

A clear example of this communal help—a collective aid based on the relational values of the Anishinaabeg—is observed in Joe’s sidekicks’ company and especially in Cappy, who provides Joe with a rifle and is the one who, as the novel suggests, gives Geraldine’s perpetrator the actual *coup de grace* (282-83). Likewise, because Joe’s uncle, Whitey, learns from the police that Linden has been killed just a few minutes before his nephew appears suspiciously nervous at the gas station, he imagines what has happened and rapidly creates an alibi for Joe and Cappy (289-91). On her part, after finding the rifle used by Joe hidden in her yard, Linda has the gun disassembled and gets rid of the pieces by throwing some in the Missouri River and ditching the rest in sloughs of backroads far away from the reservation (301).

Even Vince Madwesin, an officer of the reservation’s tribal police who finds Joe’s pickle jar on the hill from where he had shot Linden, returns the incriminating clue to Geraldine so that she can wash it out (295) presumably so as to remove Joe’s fingertips and DNA. In addition, despite Geraldine’s and Bazil’s suspicions about Joe’s involvement in the crime, they never turn him in. In fact, Bazil confesses that, although he should, he is not willing to share any information about the killer: “I’ve decided that I would do nothing. I would offer up no information. [...] Lark’s killing is a wrong thing

which serves as ideal justice. It settles a legal enigma. It threads that unfair maze of land title law by which Lark could not be prosecuted. His death was the exit. I would say nothing, do nothing, to muddy the resolution” (306).

Lastly, although Bazil warns Joe that “the person who killed Lark will live with the human consequences of having taken a life,” he assures his son that he will “protect” that person by “attempting to argue” a tribal legal precedent: that Linden “met the definition of a wiindigoo, and that with no other recourse, his killing fulfilled the requirements a very old law” known as wiindigoo justice (306). Ironically enough, prior to Bazil’s decision to offer this argument from tribal law to police enforcement so as to close the legal case around Linden, as has been proved, the whole community had already acted following this tribal law as a way to heal the wounds derived from the Coutts case.

Notwithstanding the community’s indirect exculpation of Joe, by killing his mother’s attacker, he becomes the hero that secretly saves the tribe at the same time that he turns into the story’s second perpetrator. This positions Joe in the “gray zone in which victims become executioners and executioners become victims” (Agamben 1999, 17) for, regardless of his teenage naiveté, he is able to carry out such a terrible act. The murder of Linden reflects Joe’s ambivalent position as a victim and perpetrator through which Erdrich complicates the victim/victimiser binary.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, this problematisation is temporary—which is why we could consider it strategic—because at the end, readers are most likely to regard Joe as a victim of his unfair, racist context and Linden as the villain/victimiser in the story.

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<sup>58</sup> This ambivalent position between the good and the bad also reveals Joe as another trickster besides Mooshum, for traditionally, tricksters are “neither solely good, nor solely bad” but mediate “between supposed contradictory forces or elements by retaining aspects of both, by revealing them to be coexisting parts of one whole” (Blaeser 1994b, 51).

Some reviewers such as John Greenya have reiterated that it is the seeking of vengeance that drives Joe to plot what this author calls a “plan of revenge” (2012, n.p.). Rather than providing an explanation for Joe’s acts, such a reading of the protagonist’s behaviour reinforces the stereotypical image of the American Indian as a revengeful and violent, blood-thirsty warrior provided by white settlers since the “discovery” of America by Christopher Columbus (Todorov 1992, 36-40). Consequently, by relating Joe’s actions with vengeance, Greenya and other reviewers (Gordon 2016; Johnson 2016) risk reinforcing a vision of Native Americans which, for centuries, has promoted the interests of the first European settlers: a stereotyped image that unfortunately survives in various forms today and that authors like Erdrich are constantly striving to subvert.<sup>59</sup>

In light of the analysis conducted so far, it can be argued that Joe’s story contains several layers related to the power relations that determine both the racial and gender violence exerted on Native American groups. For this reason, the killing of Linden should not be simply considered as motivated by revenge. Instead, it can be best understood as a painful consequence of the problematic conditions of reservation Native people’s liminality. This positioning requires a difficult negotiation between two imperfect moral codes: the “ideal justice” that does not reach Geraldine and “the best-

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<sup>59</sup> The revengeful Indian has been a common trope in Western literature and cinema. According to Clara Kidwell and Alan Velie, in the past, historians and novelists like James Fenimore Cooper and his novel *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), later on adapted to film, “established the tradition of triumphalism narratives that glorified the advance of American society against backwards and dangerous indigenous peoples” (2005, 12). More recent revisionist histories lament the difficult situation that Natives had to endure, offering what Donald Bahr calls a “victimist history” (1989, 36) of Native Americans. Following that tendency, fiction about Native Americans romanticised their culture and the Indian people who were no longer savage but noble, possessing a spiritual connection to land and animals, and who suffered the felonies of the white settlers. This is the case of films such as *Dances with Wolves* (Costner 1990) or Disney’s *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg 1995). It is important to remark that considering Natives purely victims is as one-sided and unfair as treating history as Hollywood used to do it through John Wayne’s westerns in which Indigenous peoples were savages who hindered the “winning of the West.” In fact, Kidwell and Velie argue that, because for a long time “Indians were allies as well as enemies of whites in the colonies and United States, and they gave as well as they got into battle,” it is inaccurate and unfair “to treat them as if they were nothing but hapless victims” (2005, 12).



we-can-do-justice” (Erdrich 2012a, 306) that Joe has no choice but to embrace. It cannot be denied that Joe’s act poses a difficult ethical choice to readers: clearly Joe is a perpetrator. But because he is an ordinary and non-problematic thirteen-year-boy facing a tremendous familial legal and social problem, the novel invites readers to reflect on the reasons pushing him to commit such a crime. Similarly, by paying attention to the racist and sexist context in which Erdrich’s story is framed, readers end up understanding that, in spite of becoming a perpetrator, Joe never fully stops being a victim of the unfair situation going on in the reservation territories. As a consequence, when Joe kills his mother’s attacker, readers cannot simply condemn his action. After all, this murder provides his family and community with the justice that the conventional legal system cannot guarantee, and so, at the end of the novel, readers are able to eventually forgive Joe and the victim/victimiser binary is reinstated.

A second reason why Joe cannot be clearly condemned stems from the way in which the text is written. As the story is focalised through the innocent eyes of a reliable autodiegetic narrator whom we trust, readers empathise with the protagonist from the very start. Additionally, the story is told chronologically, which contributes to the creation of suspense and the revelation of Joe’s suffering before he kills Linden. These narratological aspects together with the protagonist’s naiveté and youth as well as his continuous Hamletian dilemmas predispose readers to believe in his innocence and forgive him in spite of his crime. Thus, it can be argued that Erdrich purposely guides us to turn our judgement on what she really wants to denounce through her novel: the terrible situation that reservation Native Americans and especially Native American women experience due to an ongoing and largely forgotten situation of (neo)colonialism. Likewise, it seems reasonable to suggest that through *The Round House*, Erdrich vindicates justice as she concomitantly complicates Native American

stereotypes and awakens ethical and moral questions by using a protagonist who blurs the borders between victim and victimiser. Although readers cannot clearly condemn Joe, as we shall see, Erdrich wittingly shows how the killing of his mother's attacker brings Joe partial relief.

It is important to bear in mind that Erdrich's Justice Trilogy takes readers along a literary journey from vigilante violence against three Native Americans (*The Plague of Doves*) and "self-served" justice as a response to unattainable real justice (*The Round House*) to communal restorative justice (*LaRose*). According to Seema Kurup, this continuum reflects how complex it is for Native Americans "to find satisfactory resolution in legal conflicts" in a country where historical treaties, entangled jurisdictions, reservation/state boundaries and neglect based on white supremacy coexist (2018, 115). The effects of this conflictive context can be clearly seen in Joe. As the novel shows, due to his desperation to find some kind of justice for his mother, family and community so that they can psychologically, emotionally and spiritually heal, Joe ends up turning to a similar "vigilante justice" (Kurup 2018, 113) to that used by the whites who kill the three Indians in *The Plague of Doves*. With *The Round House*, Erdrich somehow warns us that when justice cannot be achieved, a sort of restorative balance, even if it is one out of the officially legal system, may be sought. However, she also offers a warning of the terrible consequences derived from personal justice so as to highlight the need of real justice on Native lands: violence always begets violence alongside guilt and shame. Thus, in order to make her readership reflect on this lesson, Erdrich makes her protagonist go through a difficult psychological experience as a consequence of his violent crime.

This negative experience is nothing but perpetrator trauma or PITS, the moral injury experienced by victimisers haunted by feelings of shame and guilt following their

atrocious action (MacNair 2002; Litz et al. 2009; Jinkerson 2016). By mimicking the belatedness pointed out by Freud, Caruth, LaCapra and other trauma theorists, Erdrich presents Linden's killing as a haunting or possessive influence which continuously makes Joe's fatal action present through intrusive thoughts, flashbacks and nightmares like the one he depicts: "I was not exactly safe from Lark. Neither was Cappy. Every night he came after us in dreams" (Erdrich 2012a, 307). As explained in Chapter 1, all these symptoms are typically suffered by trauma survivors and also by perpetrators when they become haunted by the overwhelming feelings of anxiety, shame and guilt that their executions provoke in them (MacNair 2002, 97). According to Thomas J. Scheff, victims of shame feel inferior, since they perceive themselves as deeply flawed and defective or as bad individuals, which in turn leads them to experience compulsive "replaying" of the shaming scene alongside a "painful confusion and unwanted physical manifestations" (1987, 110-11). Moreover, as Sue Vice puts it, perpetrators' reactions such as rages, vomiting, and intrusive dreams are responses caused by a mixture of disgust, guilt and pity which form the basis of the "killers' self-pity at having to assume the burden of these stress-inducing acts" (2013, 22). Notably, Joe presents a similar behaviour to that pointed out by these scholars not only when he is haunted by bad dreams but also when he becomes sick with episodes of weakness, exhaustion and drowsiness (Erdrich 2012a, 294) and high temperature as a result of the overwhelmingly and continuous presence of feelings of shame and remorse in his mind: "I was down. I was sick for real now, with the summer flu, just as I had pretended. [...] I was running a fever of alternating sweats and chills and my sheets were sodden. While I was ill, I watched the golden light pass across my walls. I could feel nothing, but my thoughts ran wild" (293).

In addition to these responses, as happens with PTSD, dissociation—understood as the defence mechanism to cope with “the psychological overload” of the brain and the body provoked by a traumatic situation or event (Bloom 2010, 200)—is a major predictor of PITS (MacNair 2002, 33). According to MacNair, the dissociative symptoms suffered by a traumatised survivor or victimiser include “distortion and a sense of unreality and detachment from the event and from other people” (2002, 33). Precisely, such an altered psychological state resulting from the repression of their feelings of anxiety and guilt is experienced by Joe and Cappy just after killing Linden, as adult Joe’s retrospective depiction of that moment suggests: “We were speaking without emotion. Like we were talking of other people. Or as if what we did had just happened on television. But I was choking up” (Erdrich 2012a, 287).

The novel also reflects Joe’s traumatic dissociation when he goes back home after shooting Linden and feels he is “separating [himself] from who [he] was” (291-92), that is, from his former self, the one prior to the rape of his mother and Linden’s death. Joe’s dissociation is also illustrated through one of his intrusive bad dreams: “We are back at the golf course in the moment I locked eyes with Lark. That terrible contact. Then the gunshot. At the moment, we exchange selves. Lark is in my body, watching. I am in his body, dying” (307). The fact that Joe turns into the victim in his nightmare is noteworthy since, as Hillel Glover explains, those who feel guilty tend to have dreams in which they are killed (1985, 17). Furthermore, on account of the moral burden that his atrocious act has in him, Joe’s sense of self breaks. This self-fragmentation is so severe that he even experiences an identity crisis, and so does Cappy. Joe’s identity issue is illustrated when the latter asks him: “What are we? [...] What are we now?,” to which Joe answers: “I don’t know man, I don’t know” (Erdrich 2012a, 90). Lastly, like many trauma sufferers—including perpetrators (MacNair 2002, 7)—Joe tries to mitigate

his anxiety and identity crisis through the use of alcohol, for, as he admits, it sterilises his insides (Erdrich 2012a, 290) and makes everything look amber soft brown “as if in an old photograph” (310). Alcohol, then, makes Joe feel safe, but only temporarily.

It should be noted however, that despite his symptoms, Joe seems to work through his PITS. Because as a narrator, adult Joe addresses readers straightforwardly halfway through the story—“You have read this far and you know that I’m writing this story at a removal of time” (142)—, his mature narration whereby he reflects upon his past life could be interpreted as a confession of the killing that had been haunting him since his adolescence. Bloom points out that, after a traumatic event, individuals lose their capacity to put the traumatic experience into words and, thus, to remember that terrifying experience, talk about it and share it with others (2010, 204). Nevertheless, when the traumatised individual is able to create a narrative memory, this act defuses traumatic memory as it gives shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their remembrance and helping the survivor to remake his or her sense of self (Brison 1999, 40). Thus, as adult Joe is able to create a narrative memory by telling empathic listeners/readers his traumatic memories in relation to the attack against his mother and Linden’s murder, his confession could be interpreted as the last step in his healing process.

### ***2.5.2. From Incipient Sexism to Healthy Gender Relationships***

Another element which foregrounds the grey zone between victims and perpetrators inhabited by Joe is his attitude towards his ex-tripper aunt, whereby Erdrich provides important criticism of early-developed sexism in youngsters owing to the influence of

the sexist models that surround them daily.<sup>60</sup> After killing Linden, Joe goes through a phase in which he fears that his previous obsession with his mother's perpetrator and his eventual crime may make him suffer from the wiindigoo malady: "Would I become a wiindigoo? Infected by Lark?" (Erdrich 2012a, 294). Although it is true that Joe by no means becomes a spiritually and ethically monstrous man like Linden after killing him, it is worth noting that, prior to his criminal act, his treatment of Sonja denotes an incipient sexist behaviour which, if further developed, could turn as dangerous and predatory as that of the wiindigoo Linden.

As a teenage boy, Joe starts becoming interested in sexuality and girls. This is noticeable in his commentaries about Deanna, a female character from *Star Trek*—"We were in love of course with the empathic half-Betazoid Deanna Troy [sic] [...]. Her jumpsuits were low-cut, her red V belt pointed you-know-where, and her big head and short curvy body drove us wild" (20)—and the jokes he and his friends make around sexual organs (65-66). As the novel progresses, Joe develops an obsession with his aunt's body as evinced by the first introduction the narrator makes of her through his younger self's perspective: "Sonja was her name, and I liked her the way a boy likes his aunt, but I felt differently about her breasts—on them I had a hopeless crush" (24). As we see from this moment on, young Joe unconsciously establishes a division between Sonja as his aunt and a female body, with "[f]ull, delicate, resolute, and round" breasts which "break [the boy's] heart over" (25).

Joe's pleasure in looking at his aunt's body can be related to Laura Mulvey's classic theorisations about the male gaze and the sexual objectification of women. Traditionally in our patriarchal world, Mulvey holds, men have been the looking subjects and women, the passive objects of that male gaze which bears erotic

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<sup>60</sup> Martínez-Falquina mentions the ambivalence of Joe as a perpetrator in relation to his aunt in her article "My Body not My Own": An Intersectional View on Relationality in Fiction by Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich" (2020a).

connotations, thereby turning women into sexual objects and an erotic spectacle (1975, 11). Although Mulvey's work refers to the world of cinema, the sexualised and controlling male gaze can appear in other contexts like literature, for, no matter where, the sexual objectification inherent in this gaze always reduces the woman to her body parts, which, in turn, become the only elements that define her as a person instead of her personality (Frederickson and Roberts 1997, 175).

Given that in the novel under analysis Joe is the narrator of the story, he manifestly adopts the subject role in his relationship with Sonja. She, in turn, becomes the object of his sexual gaze:

She had a big flashy radiant white smile. Her cotton-candy hair was fluffed up in a swirly yellow crown and a glossy two-foot ponytail hung out of it, down her back. As always, she was dramatically outfitted—today a baby blue running suit with sequin piping, the top three-quarters unzipped. I caught my breath at the sight of her T-shirt, a paler fairy-wing-transparent tissue. She wore white unmarred spongy track shoes and crystals in her ears [...]. When she wore blue, as she did quite often, her blue eyes zapped with startling electricity. (Erdrich 2012a, 24-25)

As can be appreciated in his words, Joe's observation meets the definition of the objectifying male gaze provided by Barbara Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, for he does not introduce his aunt by describing her personality but rather, he focuses on her body. Especially, Joe highlights Sonja's breasts as her most relevant feature when he confesses that they make "most thoughts leave [his] head" (26).

It is true, though, that Joe is not the only character who observes Sonja in an erotic or sexualised manner. In the passage where Mooshum and Joe ask Whitey about Sonja's work tasks, both grandfather and grandson imagine her in a sensual way:

These days Sonja works behind the cash register, my uncle said [...]. Mooshum closed his eyes, [...] conjuring her up, bent over the accounts. I could see her suddenly, too, breasts riding like clouds over the long columns of neat little figures. And what will she do, asked Mooshum dreamily, [...] when she is finished? She will leave the desk and go outside with a bucket of water and the long-handled squeegee. She cleans the glass every week. Mooshum wasn't wearing his flashy dentures and his collapsed smile spread. (33-34)

The problem with Joe is that his sexual desire towards Sonja gives way to possessive sentiments towards her. A sign of these feelings can be found in adult Joe's acknowledgment of his aversion towards his friends' talks about his aunt because, at that time, he thought "Sonja was mine" (70). This remark discloses young Joe's possessive conduct in his ambivalent relationship with Sonja, who plays the role of mother-aunt but also of erotic symbol for him. A similar tone prevails in the jealousy Joe experiences when he realises that Sonja's birthday present for Mooshum is a striptease performance. In fact, it is precisely in the striptease scene that Joe's behaviour becomes utterly egotistic and sexist as, in order to see Sonja naked despite her efforts to prevent this, the boy blackmails her with telling Whitey about the money they hid if she does not let him see such a private spectacle. These words are terribly hurtful for Sonja since she knows that Joe saw Whitey beating her at home when, full of jealousy, he confused the new acquisitions she had secretly purchased using part of the hidden money with a lover's gift (175-76).

Joe's objectification of his beloved aunt throughout the novel and most especially in the striptease episode, denotes his unconscious assimilation of the patriarchal values so overwhelmingly present in his environment (e.g. the TV series he watches where female characters like Deanna Troi are highly sexualised,<sup>61</sup> Whitey's physical and psychological abuse of his girlfriend, and even the rape of his own mother). All these patriarchal values around Joe influence him so negatively that they lead him to treat his aunt in a somehow sexist-possessive way and behave, in Sonja's words, as "another

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<sup>61</sup> According to Robin Roberts, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, all female characters aboard the Enterprise except for Tasha Yar occupy what she calls "traditionally feminine occupations," for their roles are based on "caring for the sick and commanding only in the last resort" (1999, 59). Moreover, Roberts highlights the costumes worn by Deanna Troi as "humiliatingly revealing," which, as this famous US TV broadcaster seems to suggest, plays a more important part in the plot than her actual job on discerning when someone is lying or furious (59). This subordination and objectification of women presented in *Star Trek* are some of the patriarchal values that Joe and his friends absorb when watching their favourite TV series. Accordingly, it is no wonder that they reproduce them in their daily lives with sexist attitudes towards the girls and women around them.



gimme-gimme asshole” (223). It is important to remark that Sonja is not intimidated by her young nephew’s sexist demeanour. And so, after the striptease performance, she makes him aware of his reprehensible attitude by telling him about the perils and painful life she lived as a stripper. Notably poignant for Joe is the moment when Sonja shows him the scars of her previous life on her left breast:

Sneaking a good look at my tits when you thought I didn’t know. You think I didn’t notice? [...] Take a good look now. Close up. See this? [...] My manager did that with a razor, Joe. I wouldn’t take a hunting party. Think your threats scare me? [...] You’re crying, aren’t you? Cry all you want, Joe. Lots of men cry after they do something nasty to a woman. (222)

This rebuke provokes strong feelings of shame and remorse in Joe, for as he explains from his adult perspective, those words allowed him to understand that “my love for Sonja [...] had become a thing contaminated by humiliation, treachery, and even bigger waves of feeling that tore me up and threw me down” (225). So, to some extent, Sonja teaches Joe an important life lesson on respectful gender relations.

Further, as adult Joe confesses, he keeps a golden tassel from Sonja’s dancing dress that fell to the floor during the striptease. This object works as a reminder of his incipient male-chauvinistic behaviour towards his aunt and therefore, of the valuable lesson he learnt that summer: “[E]very time I look at it I am reminded of the way I treated Sonja [...], or about how I threatened her and all that came of it, how I was just another guy. How that killed me once I really thought about it” (223). Thus, despite the patriarchal and sexist values Joe finds in his environment, the novel shows that he eventually resorts to better models like his own father or Nanapush and rejects violence as well as the idea that women are commodities that can be owned.

It is important to remark how, in a novel written to denounce the violence Native American women suffer on reservations, Erdrich decides to include a young character whose sexist behaviour towards a woman close to him is influenced by the patriarchal

culture he consumes, the historical domination of women by white and Native men, and the rape attack suffered by his mother. What Erdrich seems to suggest here is that the contemporary wiindigoo malady is related to the ongoing treatment of women as mere objects that can be possessed and controlled. Nonetheless, the essential point that Erdrich makes through her novel is that men and especially young boys like her protagonist, have in their hands the capacity to stop that very cycle of violence against women regardless of their patriarchal context. This is what Joe does after realising about his shameful conduct: “A gimme-gimme asshole. Maybe I was. Still, after I thought about it for a long time—in fact, all my life—I wanted to be something better” (223). Notably, with these words the novel transmits the hopeful message that there is always room for positive change in relation to sexism.

Despite Joe’s temporary sexist demeanour, the confession by his narrating self demonstrates that he was able to see his wrongdoing and learn from his mistake, which, one more time, allows readers bear witness to the boy’s learning process and forgive him. After all, Joe is the young hero in this story who, as traditional heroes do, falls in the trial phase (Campbell [1949] 2004, 89), but rises again with much more wisdom than before. Hence, I would argue that, by means of this important lesson that Joe learns in his maturation journey, the novel criticises traditional roles of masculinity—like those adopted by Linden, Whitey and young Joe—and advocates an empathic and non-chauvinistic manhood like that which adult Joe, Bazil and the protecting Nanapush epitomise.

## 2.6. “The Sentence Was to Endure”: The Winding Road to Post-Traumatic and Personal Growth

*The Round House*'s denouement takes place in the crucial moment when the detective, coming of age and trickster narrative plots developed throughout the story converge. As I will demonstrate in this section, such a unification is noted both in the eventual merging of the Native trickster and the classical US hero in Joe, and in the interweaving of the former linear plot with a more circular structure in line with Native Americans' cyclical understanding of time that Erdrich reflects through Joe's maturation and healing journey.

In the last pages of the novel, Cappy learns that the parents of his Mexican Catholic girlfriend, Zelia, whom he had met on the reservation and had sex with, have discovered their relationship and subsequently resolved to separate them forever (Erdrich 2012a, 311). For this reason, Cappy decides to leave the reservation together with Joe, Angus and Zack and head for Montana to see Zelia. For so doing, he obtains a fake driving license that enables the four friends to start a road trip to the West. Interestingly, Joe's retrospective narration of his car trip brings readers reminiscences of Jack Kerouac's popular novel *On The Road* (1957). Of particular significance in this respect is Joe's description of the four wild-spirited pals singing and drinking in the car and of the joy he feels while travelling, for it undoubtedly recalls the metaphorical and reflexive tone used by Kerouac's narrator, Sal Paradise:

I know there's lots of world over and above Highway 5, but when you're driving on it—four boys in one car and it's so peaceful, so empty for mile after mile, when the radio stations cut out and there's just static and the sound of your voices, and wind when you put your arm out to rest it on the hood—it seems you are balanced. Skimming along the rim of the universe. [...] The air was cool and green with sage. The lights hit coyote eyes slipping along the ditches, in and out of fence lines. (Erdrich 2012a, 314-15)

Just as we note a Kerouacian stylistic influence in this passage, we can also identify a popular motif in Native literature: the coyote. This animal, usually one of the shapes

adopted by the American Indian trickster, points to Joe's own tricksterish nature characterised both by his victim-perpetrator ambivalence and by his trespassing of (geographical) boundaries—"in and out" (315) the reservation—as his road trip demonstrates.<sup>62</sup>

The relationship between Erdrich's young trickster and the quintessential hero of the North American literary tradition, epitomised by characters like Huck Finn or Sal Paradise, is by no means coincidental. As Harold Scheub explains in *Trickster and Hero*, various essential traits of the prototypical hero of myths and tales are embodied by the trickster. For instance, both figures are always represented as "trying the limits of their societies and their own natures" (2012, 12). Moreover, the hero's journey is nothing but the hero's overcoming of an inner battle derived from the combination of "creative and destructive forces" that define this character as much as they define the trickster (144). In this sense, it could be argued that through the juxtaposition of defining traits of the Native trickster and the popular roguish and nomadic US hero, Erdrich creates a hybrid literary figure that reflects the contemporary Native American identity, one moulded by the convergence of tribal and US cultures.

It is worth mentioning here that, in US culture, motion stories with rebellious protagonists such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *On the Road* have traditionally been related to the hero's circular journey and the different phases that comprise it, as Joseph Campbell theorises in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. At the end of this archetypal voyage, when the quest has been completed, the hero or adventurer always goes back home with his or her recently acquired wisdom, the sleeping princes or a trophy (Campbell [1949] 2004, 179). This is what happens in the aforementioned US classic

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<sup>62</sup> Martínez-Falquina regards Joe's continuous movement "within and beyond the reservation" as a re-mapping of the territory which asserts his and his people's ancient sovereignty over their land (2020b, 155). In this view, through her young protagonist, "Erdrich re-maps the reservation and Anishinaabe identity" by means of a political act of "Indigenous overwriting" (155) that defies the territorial and jurisdictional lines imposed by settler colonialism.

novels in one way or another. However, as Campbell also observes, what can occur before the return stage is that the hero may refuse the responsibility of making the return journey, which leads him to try to escape his or her destiny through what this anthropologist calls “the magic flight” (179, 182).

In the case of Erdrich’s young adventurer, his flight to the West with his friends could represent the hero’s escapist attempt in the monomyth pattern. Unluckily, here this flight is truncated when the car in which the four boys are travelling goes out of control and they have an accident. As a consequence, Cappy results killed and Zack and Angus wounded (Erdrich 2012a, 316). An ellipsis brings the reader from the accident scene to a police station where Joe awaits in shock until his parents arrive. According to Campbell, the archetypal hero usually has guides or assistants who allow him to start and accomplish his quest. Yet, he or she “may have to be brought back from his [...] adventure by assistance from without” ([1949] 2004, 192), that is, by influential guides or rescuers who bring the adventurous protagonist to his or her daily life. Following Campbell’s theory, Joe’s pals seem to play the role of his aides during his quest to find the villain, and Bazil and Geraldine epitomise the rescuers in charge of bringing him back home where things, although never back to normal again, are calmer thanks to Geraldine’s progressive healing and the death of the dangerous white wiindigoo.

Especially remarkable is the moment when Joe describes how his parents “rescue” him at the police station. His words reveal an acute sensation of the passing of time as if his journey had been longer than the summer when all the events occurred: “And there was that moment when my mother and father walked in the door disguised as old people. [...] At the same time, I found, as I rose from the chair, I’d gotten old along with them” (Erdrich 2012a, 317). This reflection can be associated with the traumatic passage from childhood to adulthood that Joe undergoes during the agitated summer of

1988. It is undeniable that, throughout the journey that he starts since Geraldine's disappearance until the moment when she and Bazil pick him up after the car accident, Joe, perhaps too rapidly, has grown psychologically and morally. After all, he is the protagonist of this Native American Bildungsroman which ends with Joe's parents driving him back home, to that familiar place behind the last threshold he must cross: the reservation line located after the roadside café which brings adult Joe melancholic childhood recollections (317). Thus, like other heroes in the US literary canon (e.g. Huck Finn or Sal Paradise), by crossing the "return threshold" (Campbell [1949] 2004, 201), Joe accomplishes the archetypal circular journey of the hero.

Unsurprisingly, Joe's round adventure is also deliberately and explicitly connected to Native American cyclical epistemology. In the Indigenous cultures of the US, the idea of the circle is present everywhere, "from the shapes of most native dwellings to the view of the world as a series of continual, repeating cycles" (Bruchac 1994, 10). From this perspective, life is a circular process firstly because we always return to the same place where we were born (mother Earth) and secondly, because "death is not an ending, but a continuance of a natural cycle" (10). Such circularity is also present in the individual's interrelation with the world and the beings around him or her. In contrast to the Western hierarchical structures traditionally associated with a straight pyramidal conception of life, the Native American communities regard the world as a circular structure where everything and everybody are equally valuable and important and where "[w]hat goes around will eventually come to you" one way or another (13). Like Native American myths and mythical figures, this epistemology has been traditionally expressed and transgenerationally passed on in oral and written stories (e.g. trickster narratives) whose plots are based on a cyclical world and time. Accordingly, it is reasonable to suggest that through Joe's circular journey, Erdrich

mingles literary elements and motifs from Native and Euro-American tradition one more time, and further visibilizes her Native circular view of the world.

Significantly enough, the novel ends with adult Joe accepting his accountability after understanding that, as his father said following Linden's death, the murderer would "live with the human consequences of having taken a life" (Erdrich 2012a, 306). For this reason, adult Joe ponders, "the sentence" for his crime "was to endure" (317). This reference to endurance can be linked to the Coutts family's journey too, for as Joe's last words demonstrate, even though he and his parents have gone through a traumatic experience during that summer whose consequences and sorrow "would persist into our small forever," they prove to be resilient subjects who "just kept going" (317). With these closing words, not only does Erdrich end the story on a seeming optimistic note that proves the resilient nature of Native American families after centuries of (neo)colonial subjugation. She also shows that, as the theoretical movement advocating for the decolonisation of trauma theory has demonstrated in the last years, healing and post-traumatic growth in ethnic communities is possible. Hence, with Joe's last words, readers understand that, just as Geraldine gradually works through her PTSD, Joe will likewise overcome his accumulated traumas. In fact, the retrospective testimony he offers here evidences his own healing.

On another note, according to Judith Herman, in the recovery process of survivors of a violence-induced trauma, together with the stage of narrativisation which helps them to heal, these individuals can become interested in social action, as it offers them "a source of power that draws upon [their] initiative, energy, and resourcefulness" (2015, 207). Behind this interest, Herman holds, there is the aim to prevent "others from being victimized" or attempt "to bring offenders to justice" (208). In accordance with Herman's study, besides Joe's decision to tell his traumatic story, another aspect that

demonstrates his recovery is the fact that, some years later, as readers learn in chapter ten through a prolepsis,<sup>63</sup> he follows his father's steps and becomes a tribal judge in order to help his people. This anticipated resolution is very telling. Whereas with Joe's crime and the novel's open ending Erdrich does not seem to make clear, at first, that legal and peaceful solutions for Native peoples' sovereignty issues are possible, the flash-forward of judge Joe Coutts appears to imply that the US unjust system can only be reformed from within. This is a lesson that Joe learns from his father—the masculine role he eventually chooses—as well as from the consequences of his own decision to take justice into his hands when conventional one fails. Moreover, in the aforementioned proleptic passage adult Joe admits that he still keeps his father's unfashionable ties, Sonja's golden tassel and a dog called Pearl (Erdrich 2012a, 246), all of which could be interpreted as reminders of the lessons he learnt in the past and that made him the person he is today.

Finally, it is important to remark that Joe is not only the resilient individual hero of Erdrich's novel. Owing to his trickster nature, he also functions as cultural hero—like Nanapush—and a teacher of an important lesson that Erdrich wants to underscore: violence against Native American women has been aimed at disrupting Indigenous communities since colonial times, a historical neocolonial oppression that could be stopped if these communities had full sovereignty over their lands and could charge and try perpetrators—whether Indian or non-Indian. This is precisely what Native peoples have been trying to achieve for decades, an endeavour that materialised in March 2013 (just one year after the publication of *The Round House*), when the US Congress passed

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<sup>63</sup> Genette considers that in first-person narratives where the narrator provides a retrospective account, his or her allusions to the future and “in particular to his present situation” can be considered prolepses ([1972] 1983, 65). This is exactly what we find in this tenth chapter, where Joe's narration of his past life shifts to an account about the present moment or, in other words, about the narrating time.



an amendment to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) which restored tribal jurisdiction over non-Native perpetrators of domestic violence and dating violence.

There is still a long way to go in the eradication of sexist violence against Native women, since the changes in the aforementioned Act do not cover sexual assaults by non-tribal strangers, which makes it limited.<sup>64</sup> For this reason, many Native women still suffer sexual abuse by white men that clearly epitomise the ongoing colonial battle “between tribal and dominant cultures in North America” (Bowers 2017, 53). Nonetheless, perhaps with novels functioning as activist artefacts like *The Round House*, Native American authors can continue challenging the US patriarchal and neocolonial foundations while providing self-affirming material for Native readers and opening the eyes of a non-Native readership to American Indians’ unjust reality. What is undeniable is that Erdrich’s reinvigorated stripped-down prose, her mixture of whitestream and Native genres and heroes, alongside her panoramic view of an Anishinaabe community’s resurgence and working through the individual and collective traumatic effects of neocolonial violence, all evidence that the cultural myth of the vanishing Indian does not hold today. Just as the round house in Joe’s story resists the numerous attacks of the white culture, so do the resilient Indigenous peoples of America

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<sup>64</sup> The main limitation of VAWA 2013 is the exclusion of non-Native assailants who enter reservations and commit an assault or “rape outside the context of domestic violence” (Deer 2015, 105). This is so because non-tribal perpetrators can only be prosecuted if they follow at least one of the following requirements: 1) they live in the victim’s reservation; 2) they are employed in the victim’s reservation; 3) they are the spouse or intimate partner of a tribal member living in Indian country. Other issues with VAWA are related to the BIA’s underfunding of tribal law enforcement, which “make[s] it difficult to reach widespread crime scenes in a timely fashion, gather evidence, and interview witnesses” (Tharp 2014, 37). Efforts are being made on the part of grassroots advocates, tribal justice and some congressmen and women to change this situation. In fact, a few advances have been achieved lately. In 2018, the Savanna’s Act was passed in order to improve data collection and access to information about missing and murdered Indigenous women, as well as to reform law enforcement and justice protocols appropriate to prevent and respond to this scourge. In 2019, a new bill which complemented the aforementioned one, the Not Invisible Act, was passed. This law aims to reduce violence against Native American women through the creation of an advisory committee comprised of tribal leaders, survivors, law enforcement, federal partners and service providers that makes recommendations to the US Government on combating violence against US Native American women (Carr 2020). More recently, in May 2021, President Joseph Biden committed himself to support the passage of the VAWA Reauthorisation of 2021, a bill that “reaffirms inherent Tribal authority to prosecute certain non-Indian offenders” like perpetrators of sexual violence, stalking, trafficking, child abuse or elder abuse “when [these] crimes are committed on Tribal territory” (US President 2021, 2).

and their endeavour for justice and restoration. Hence, it could be concluded that *The Round House* is not simply a trauma narrative, at least not in the most conventional sense of the term. Rather, it is a novel of Indigenous resurgence and resistance which explores the multilayered trauma of settler colonialism and proves that, despite the accumulation of psychic and identity wounds, Native American post-traumatic growth is possible.





Figure 2. A surrealist map of the Haitian American diaspora. Painting by Haitian American artist Michael Brudent entitled *Réflexion d'une femme* (1997).

### CHAPTER 3

## CHILDREN OF UNHEALED SHORES: A RHIZOMATIC RELATION AMONG SEXISM, RAPE AND HAITIAN AMERICAN TRAUMA IN ROXANE GAY'S *AN UNTAMED STATE*

### 3.1. Roxane Gay and the 2000s Haitian American Novel for Social Change

Although in the history of Haitian literature pre-independence works inspired by the local customs of the colony of Saint-Domingue existed, for Haitians, their literary production begins with the independence of the country in 1804 (Jonassaint 2003, 56). This early Haitian literature mainly consists of poems and non-fiction prose by Haitian military and political figures (educated mulattoes and pre-revolution freed blacks) “who conceived of their writing in terms of the larger national purpose” (Dash 1981, 2). Yet, despite the revolutionary, nationalistic and hopeful tone of the works produced at the time, there was “little concern with artistic originality” (3), for writers frequently turned to French and European classicism. With the passing of time, Haitian literature

experienced a change towards the influence of Romanticism, whose emphasis on cultural diversity and artistic individualism helped in the gradual liberation of the Haitian creative imagination from its excessive dependence on the literature produced in the metropolis. For this reason, many Haitian romantic poems deal with various manifestations of the Haitian culture, especially Haiti's landscape and peasantry (7-8).

During the nineteenth century, poetry was the prevailing literary genre in Haiti owing to a late development of the Haitian novel. This situation had to do with the fact that, for most of that century, Haiti had spent most resources and energies on defending the independence from the French troops rather than on educating the illiterate majority of the population, the ex-slaves (Satyre 2004, 142). Such a harrowing post-war context entailed a lack of readers capable of securing the survival of a mass literature genre like the novel. Nonetheless, this situation started changing at the opening of the twentieth century, when besides the new Francophile symbolist-inspired poets like Edmond Laforest, Etzer Vilaire and Georges Sylvain, Haitian literature witnessed the raise of both poets and novelists of "the Realist cause" (Dash 1981, 26). Thus, the first Haitian novelists were writers who used the realist and naturalist influences coming from France to "photographically" portray the Haitian society as specifically determined by certain historical conditions. Of particular interest for these authors was the exposure of the harsh realities endured by the Haitian peasantry, to the extent that, as Michael Dash observes, a new genre—the *roman paysan* or peasant novel—appeared (1981, 27). The characterising traits of this trend can be observed in works such as Frédéric Marcelin's *Thémistocle Epaminondas Labasterre* (1901), Justin Lherisson's *La famille des Pitite-Caille* (1905) and Antoine Innocent's *Mimola* (1906).

With the occupation of Haiti by US troops in the following decades (1915-1934), at first, a distinguishing epic and declamatory literary production with a very elevated

and Gallicised style—aimed at defending Haiti against charges of barbarism and uncivilisation—responded to the foreign invasion. Later on, in contrast to this “pedantic and stylised verse” (Dash 1981, 60), a younger generation of writers preferred the creation of a more irreverent and original literature. This group inaugurated the movement of *Indigénisme*, which developed in Haiti in the late twenties and can be regarded as a “cosmopolitan modernism” with a clear influence from “the Harlem Renaissance, Latin American literary traditions, Surrealism, Nietzsche and Marx as well as forms of ultra-nationalist thought” (Kaussen 2008, 27). Interestingly, *indigénist* writers promoted the reorientation of their nationalist-thinking towards Africa (e.g. traditional beliefs, popular music and dance), which, until that moment, had been largely denigrated in Haitian writing.<sup>65</sup> And so, during the US intervention, Haiti witnessed an explosion of novels—the so-called *romans de l’occupation* (Hoffmann 1982, 108)—depicting the American invader and/or criticising the Haitian elite for their collaboration with the US, as is the case of Fernand Hibbert’s *Les simulacres* (1923), Léon Laleau’s *Le choc* (1932), Stéphen Alexis’s *Le nègre masqué* (1933), Maurice Casséus’s *Viejo* (1935) or Cléante Valcin’s *La blanche négresse* (1934).<sup>66</sup>

When the US troops left the island, the differences between the various factions of *Indigénisme*—especially the Africanist and the Marxist ones—gave way to the splitting of the group (Munro 2012, 15). The writers of the Marxist tendency—who looked outwards because they wanted to place Haiti in the vanguard of progressive nations—saw themselves as the forefront of a proletarian culture and, accordingly, fostered the

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<sup>65</sup> This former rejection of Africa by Haitian intellectuals has been attributed to a self-definition attempt. As Martin Munro explains, Haiti negated its blackness and African roots in order to be accepted as the First Black Republic and promote an image of the nation as a “‘civilized,’ modern state” (2012, 13).

<sup>66</sup> Laurent Dubois et al. regard *Viejo* as a transition from the occupation novel to the peasant and proletariat roman (2020, 262). Moreover, it is important to remark that in her novel, Valcin—Haiti’s first published female writer—used a “syncretic Haitian form” that blended “modernist experimentation and psychological drama” (Chancy 1997, 48) so as to reflect the effects of the US occupation on the Haitian female psyche (47).

growth of the realist novel through two subgenres: the peasant and the proletarian *roman* (Hoffman 1982, 115-19). Some of the most important narratives within these two trends are Jacques Roumain's *La montagne ensorcelée* (1931) and *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), Anthony Lespès's *Les semences de la colère* (1949) alongside Jacques Stephen Alexis's *Compère général Soleil* (1955) and *Les arbres musiciens* (1957).<sup>67</sup>

In contrast, the Africanist movement in post-occupation Haiti tended to look inwards like Indigénisme, but it promoted a new essentialist trend based on *Noirism* or the *Négritude* philosophy. This doctrine, as Martin Munro argues, “implied a sliding scale of authenticity” where “the true Haitian soul was black, and the fairer the skin, the less Haitian one was” (2012, 17). Moreover, *Noirism* carefully (re)cultivated the rhetoric of racial victimhood based on the idea that black Haitians were innocent people “in perpetual exile” (17). This consideration of the original exile from Africa as a painful but shared cultural experience/memory for all Haitians created “strong bonds between the elite and the masses,” even if the latter were ignored or exploited “by their ‘fathers’ in the political classes” (17). Hence, as Munro explains, through this “remaining” in the past, the *noirist* movement “neatly sided-stepped the internal contradictions of color and class politics in post-occupation Haiti” (19).

Eventually, the essentialist ideology of Africanity and racial authenticity, also visible in politics, rose to power in 1946 with the election of *noirist* and anti-communist Dumarsais Estmé as president. This new situation brought about the reinvigoration of the myths of racial victimhood and original exile, and pushed some authors like Alexis and René Depestre to flee the country. Soon these writers were followed by novelists like Émile Ollivier, Marie Chauvet, Gérard Étienne, Dany Laferrière, Jean-Claude

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<sup>67</sup> Although Africanity and folk beliefs were tempered by Roumain's Marxism, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* does not bring a total rupture with the Africanist tendency within Indigénisme, but rather, it binds together themes like the land, race, and the Haitian peasantry.

Charles and Edwidge Danticat. The scattering of these intellectuals into exile escaping the Duvalier dictatorship in its earliest stages allowed the Haitian novel to leave behind themes like the nation, peasant culture or Africanity and, in turn, to confront (post)modernity and meditate on the multiple effects of displacement. Thus, the themes that emerged thanks to these new novelists' works are:

the evolving relationship between place and identity; the effects of exile on the collective and individual imagination; the loss or splitting of identity; the workings of exilic memory, the idealization or even exotization of Haiti, or conversely, the rejection of the homeland as a means of a new integration in the elsewhere; the temporality of the exiled experience (fixation of the past, uncertainty of the future); marginalization in the place of exile; and the persistence and impossibility of the dream of return. (Munro 2012, 29-30)

In this respect, the aforementioned writers coincide with other authors of the Caribbean diaspora like N. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kincaid, Cristina García, Caryl Phillips, Julia Alvarez or Junot Díaz, also preoccupied with matters related to migrant roots and routes. Although, as Elvira Pulitano warns us in *Transnational Narratives from the Caribbean*, the term “diaspora” should be used in the plural so as to truly “acknowledge the historical and cultural specificity of the islands and the resettlement of their population elsewhere” (2016, 17), some important aspects are shared by all these Caribbean migrant writers. These are the influence of a double diaspora from Africa to the Caribbean and from their insular homes to other countries (Hall 2001, 28), the (post)plantation socio-economic structures (Benítez-Rojo 1992, 38) they left behind, as well as the “suffering of the immigrant” (Sayad 2004).

As a place of repeated “transit, return, fluxes” (Benítez-Rojo 1992, 4) due to colonisation, slavery and transnational commerce, the Caribbean “is the signifier of migration itself” (Hall 1990, 234). Particularly in Haiti, given the numerous migratory movements from the island to other nations, diaspora is “such an integral part” of the country that Edwidge Danticat locates those Haitians living overseas on the “tenth



department” of Haiti, “the floating homeland, the ideological one” which joins “all Haitians living [abroad]” (2011, 49) and is always indeterminate and evolving (Munro 2012, 207). Interestingly enough, among all the post-1946 Haitian writers in the diaspora, Danticat stands out for being the first to produce fiction in English and not in French or Haitian *Kreyòl* like her predecessors, as well as for providing a transnational and post-1990s view of the diaspora experience as an ambivalent, mutable and negotiable life-long process. As Pulitano observes, similarly to other contemporary Caribbean diasporic authors like Kincaid and Phillips, Danticat forges her “stories of exile, displacement, and forced migration” around characters who “live a multi-centered existence and who are forcing us to question fixed notions of territory, citizenship, and belonging” (2016, 18). Likewise, in the same fashion as the aforementioned writers, she does not romanticise the Caribbean home as an exotic paradise for tourists and a haven of “ontological security” (23) where the Haitian immigrant can always return. Rather, she portrays the homeland as a place that carries with it “the visible signs of history of trauma and violence” (27) related to slavery, the (neo)colonial project and a lingering patriarchal cultural system that favours gender-based violence and rape.

For Danticat, diaspora “creates fluid, permeable spaces to embrace multiple intersecting identities both shaped and unmade by transnationality’s multiple locations” (Mehta 2009, 16). Such understanding of identity is connected to this author’s self-consideration as African, Haitian and American and her embracing of the three cultures “as a way of transcending truncation and stereotypical misrepresentation” (16). Given this interpretation of her own hybrid identity, it is not surprising that Danticat’s literary style shows a mixture of Haitian and African American heritage and the influence of Haitian authors like Jacques Roumain, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, René Depestre, and of African American ones such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange

(Dash 2010; Jean-Charles 2010). As can be deduced from the connection with these socially-concerned novelists, “the idea of purposeful writing, of ‘overall engagement’” (Dash 2010, 33) is crucial to understand Danticat’s work, which, unsurprisingly, has influenced other Haitian women writers in the diaspora, either first-generation immigrants like Katia D. Ulysse and Ibi Zoboi, or second-generation ones like the author under analysis in this chapter: Roxane Gay.

Gay is a contemporary black Haitian American writer, professor, editor, and social commentator born to Haitian parents who migrated to the US in their teens in search for a better life. Although Gay was born in Nebraska, she and her family had to travel across the country on account of her father’s job. In spite of this constant movement within the US, the family never refrained from travelling to Haiti every summer. Moreover, as the author admits, her parents taught her and her siblings the Haitian culture and traditions, and as a result she can speak French and Kreyòl and she is familiar with popular Haitian literature (2018a, n.p.). In this respect, Gay was forced to navigate “complex questions of identity since a young age” (2015b, n.p.). As she acknowledges, owing to her blackness and Haitian American identity, neither white nor African American students knew what to make of her, although the latter always accepted her in the community (2017b, n.p.). But, as she also recognises, this cultural and identity mixture made her “straddle all these identities at once,” which contributed to “[her] ability to consider issues with nuance” (2015b, n.p.).

Hence, like other second generation US Afro-Caribbean authors such as Paule Marshall, who always tried to bring about a synthesis of the Caribbean and American cultures while “connect[ing] them with the African experience” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1995, 23-24), Gay also offers a coalescence of her multicultural identity in her works. The literary influences which she renders in her own fiction one way or another come from

authors with Caribbean roots like Danticat and Zadie Smith, African American ones such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, and Euro-American authors, especially Edith Wharton (Gay 2018b, 2017a). In fact, Gay recognises that her keenness to these writers is due to the social goal or meaning behind their works (2018b, n.p.). This social element is precisely the most defining feature of Gay's fictional and non-fictional writing. Although the author relates this need to "look outward, [...] to look at everything happening in the world" and to her exhaustion for talking about her own traumas (2021, 30), such a key characteristic of her writing could also be reflective of her cultural connection to a good deal of Haitian female writers whose works have traditionally functioned as a "literature of revolution" and even as "political manifestoes" (Chancy 1997, 9). As Myriam Chancy explains, Haitian female authors pursue the recuperation of female voices while they attempt to provoke an "irrevocable alteration of the status quo" through the visibilisation of colour, class, gender and nationality as relational "points of oppression" for Haitian women (6-7). A good example of this type of literature can be found in Danticat's oeuvre. In it, she "speaks out against the injustices she observes" (Thomas 2017, 119) and recuperates individual and collective (hi)stories that "have been erased as a result of slavery, and colonization, dictatorships, and natural disasters" (102) by weaving the personal and the political. This mixture is also observable in Gay's work, where she includes aspects of her own life such as the traumatic rape experience she endured at the age of twelve when she was sexually abused by a group of classmates.

An avid reader of multifarious genres that go from socially-committed fiction to thrillers, romance novels, fairy tales and non-fiction, Gay writes across genres and styles, too. Together with some edited books and magazines, this author has published *Ayiti* (2011), a volume of short stories and poems on the Haitian diaspora; *An Untamed*

*State* (2014b), a novel about rape and kidnapping in Haiti in the form of a hyper-realist thriller and fairy-tale retelling; an essay collection on intersectional feminism entitled *Bad Feminist* (2014a); a book of short stories including realistic and also dystopic ones about strong women under the title *Difficult Women* (2017d); a memoir—*Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017e)—about her rape trauma and subsequent gaining of weight as a defence mechanism; as well as comics and graphic novels like *Black Panther: World of Wakanda* (2018), *The Banks* (2019) and *The Sacrifice of Darkness* (2020). In all these works, Gay—who is an intersectional feminist and a self-declared bisexual woman—deals with the analysis and deconstruction of feminist, racial and class issues through the lens of her personal experiences with race, gender, sexuality and social status.

This chapter is focused on *An Untamed State*, Gay's debut novel and a key text which demonstrates that Haiti is an island of contradictions where locals, returned diasporas and white foreigners alike contribute to perpetuate the Haitian trauma. As explained in Chapter 1, this cultural wound is made up of the ongoing traumas of poverty, (neo)colonisation, neo-slavery, immigration as well as sexism and sexual violence present in the country. In a nutshell, *An Untamed State* is about Mireille Duval Jameson, a black Haitian American lawyer kidnapped by a gang from one of Port-au-Prince's slums who ask Mireille's wealthy father—a returned diaspora—for a ransom he can pay but that he is unwilling to accept. This refusal is motivated by the man's attempt to avoid a potentially continuous extortion that takes away the economic and social safety that he and his family enjoy in one of the most privileged areas of the Haitian capital. Raped by the gang as a form of pressure, used as a bargaining chip by these men and her father, and misunderstood by her white American husband, once

back in the States after her release, Mireille finds shelter and post-traumatic healing in her own courage and resilience as well as in other women, especially her mother-in-law.

It is my contention that through this novel, Gay denounces the sexism and sexual violence that women suffer in Haiti while she establishes a rhizomatic connection between this issue and the collective unresolved Haitian traumas of extreme poverty, forced migration, post-plantation slavery and human trafficking on Haitian soil. Interestingly, as this chapter aims to demonstrate, Gay does not do it by means of an essentialist approach. Instead, she explores the grey zone between the victims and perpetrators of this sort of violence in order to expose the gender, economic, social and cultural factors that foster it.<sup>68</sup> After all, in an era of interconnections, it becomes imperative to remember that the Other is “that to which one is related rather than opposed” (Mardorossian 2005, 7). As I shall explain, so as to deal with the complexity behind Haiti’s reality, Gay creates an elaborate novel that mirrors the rhizomatic, interconnected and syncretic nature of the Caribbean. In section 3.2 I will show that this intricacy is firstly observable from a formal point of view, since the novel mixes multifarious literary genres—namely the thriller, the postmodern fairy-tale retelling and the realist novel—with Haitian and Euro-American socio-cultural elements in an attempt to represent the protagonist’s hybrid world. And lastly and most especially, as will be argued in the subsequent sections, the novel’s intricacy is noticeable in its problematisation of the victims and perpetrators involved in the “untamed state” of the protagonist, who in the story comes to symbolise the agitated nation-state of Haiti.

Section 3.3. examines the story’s heroine—who concomitantly develops an acute PTSD and a deep sense of homelessness—as a direct victim, but most especially, a survivor of rape used as a weapon of terror and coercion. Section 3.4 explores how,

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<sup>68</sup> Danticat also brings to the fore the multilayeredness of the Haitian trauma through the problematisation of victims and perpetrators especially in her works *Breath, Eyes, Memories* and *The Dew Breaker*.

notwithstanding the captors' obvious liability for Mireille's suffering, these characters are also desperate victims of extreme poverty, child-slavery and their institutions and wealthier compatriots' indifference who turn to crime in order to survive. As I will argue, the gang's socio-economic situation is rooted in the seeds of colonialism and the effects of the post-plantation societies that linger in the Caribbean in general, and Haiti in particular, because, since its independence, the country has witnessed the rise of a small elite that accumulates riches and power as it ignores the poor majority. This is exactly the reason why the gang and especially their leader violently react against the head of the Duval family (Sebastien) in an attempt to subvert and take revenge against this Westernised returnee for their own unfair situation. Additionally, this section tackles Sebastien's clear contribution to the violence suffered by his daughter when he decides to challenge and humiliate the gang. Yet, as the novel brings to light, behind Sebastien's appalling negotiation of Mireille's life value, we find a multilayered trauma related to his childhood poverty and his experience as an immigrant of colour in the States, which, as I contend, makes him an emasculated man. It is precisely Sebastien's eagerness to demonstrate his power and manliness to the local captors that creates a conflict which ends up hurting Mireille. Thus, far from taking an essentialist position towards sexist/sexual violence, the novel underscores the idea that men may not be inherently misogynistic, but their context often makes them act wrongly against women.

Finally, section 3.5. focuses on the novel's denunciation of both the Haitian society—including the rich and the poor, men and women—and the US (embodied by Mireille's husband) for playing the role of implicated subjects in the violence suffered by the protagonist. As I will argue, in highlighting sexism and sexual violence as a global scourge that must be acknowledged and attended, Gay puts First and Third

World nations at the same level, thereby dismantling a dichotomous either/or understanding of the world that is no longer operative in the current transmodern era.

### **3.2. *An Untamed State: A Hybrid Narrative of Rhizomatic Interconnections*<sup>69</sup>**

In *Poetics of Relation*, Martinican thinker and writer Édouard Glissant notes that the Caribbean “may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly” as it “has always been a place of encounter and connivance and, at the same time, a passageway toward the American continent” (1997, 33). Since what happened in the islands bathed by the Caribbean—“a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc” (33)—was a phenomenon of creolisation or mixture, as Glissant argues, this archipelago offers the best “natural illustration” of Relation possible (34). Hence, even though the Caribbean may seem a discontinuous and chaotic conjunction of “unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools” and contrasting cultures, languages and power relations, this seemingly chaotic area is rather “an island bridge connecting, in ‘another way,’ North and South America” (Benítez-Rojo 1992, 2).

In addition to this image of openness to the sea and other territories, Glissant finds a crucial archipelagic interconnection in the abyss of the boat and the depths of the Caribbean Sea faced by the black slaves brought from Africa to the American continent. Borrowing Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s arboreal image of the rhizome, “an enmeshed root system, a network spreading [...] with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently” (Glissant 1997, 33), this critic locates the foundation of the West Indian interrelation in the submarine roots sprout from the Africans who drowned in those

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<sup>69</sup> Some ideas in this section resultant from my investigation on the novel for this PhD dissertation will appear published in Laura Roldán Sevillano “Roxane Gay’s *An Untamed State*: A Caribbean Rhizomatic Novel Reflecting the New Transmodern Paradigm,” *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 29 (Forthcoming/December 2021).

tropical waters. These roots, Glissant explains, are not fixed in one position. Instead they float free, “extending in all directions [...] through its network of branches” (1989, 67). In this regard, as Glissant puts it, Caribbean peoples “are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship” (1989, 67), of a “*limitless métissage*” (1997, 34) that has always characterised the Caribbean islands.

All these ideas introduced by Glissant form part of the *Créolité*-thinking that he inaugurated in the 1990s and that other scholars like Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant subsequently expanded. In contrast to the previous *Négritude* nationalist movement that had described Caribbean identity as merely derived from ancestral African origins, the tenets about Créolité put forward by these authors foster a conceptualisation of Caribbeanness as an identity based on the New World alongside the syncretism and diasporic experience of the Caribbean peoples. In short, whereas *Négritude* perpetuated binary oppositions through the inversion of stereotypes related to Afro-descendants, the Creolist relational postulations seek the complete destruction of binaries through their emphasis on the heterogeneity and plurality of the West Indies.

Due to the intermixed identity of the Caribbean peoples, it is not coincidental that the literature produced by Caribbean writers, especially diasporic ones, is what Benítez-Rojo calls “*mestizo* text[s]” (1992, 27), where the Caribbean coexists with other cultures such as the Anglo-American and French ones in a polyphonic and “polyrhythmic” (25) manner. This relational view of Caribbean literature in line with the aforementioned Creolist tenets is present in *An Untamed State*. As will be explained it what follows, by creating a hybrid novel which combines and transcends literary genres and aesthetic modes (crime thriller, postmodern fairy-tale retelling and social realism), as well as socio-cultural elements from the Euro-American and Haitian tradition, Gay does not create a playful pastiche. Rather, she produces a complex relational novel which effaces



an either/or episteme which is no longer operative in the current interconnected world and even less so in the rhizomatic Caribbean.

As Gay herself has acknowledged and as readers can recognise from a first sight, *An Untamed State* is (partly) a thriller, a literary genre interested in “crime and its outcomes” (Symons 1993, 198). Although similar in some aspects, the thriller differs from detective fiction in its focus on a crime instead of its investigation and the exaggeration of events that evokes a rising sense of “danger, violence or shock” (D. Glover 2003, 137). Other differences between detective fiction and thriller are the latter’s focus on the “psychology of characters—what stresses would make A want to kill B?” (Symons 1993, 191); the usual absence of a detective (192); and the portrayal of the lives of the characters “continuing after the crime,” which contributes to “the story’s effect” (193). Also, in thrillers, the setting is often central to the atmosphere and tone of the story and is inextricably bound up with the nature of the crime itself (193). Finally, this genre is characterised by the inclusion of a distinct social perspective that usually “questions some aspect of society, law, or justice” (193).

This is the case of *An Untamed State*, a novel that delves into the gangster world of an armed group of Port-au-Prince’s slums who kidnaps and rapes the wealthy female protagonist, while it provides critical commentary on the socio-economic context that contributes to these men’s transgression of the law. Through this social view of the gangs of Port-au-Prince—a city which is portrayed as an urban jungle where only the fittest survive—Gay’s readers can get to know the reasons that lead some Haitian underprivileged youngsters to turn to crime in the “poorest country in the western hemisphere” (Hallward 2010, 1).<sup>70</sup> Yet, although some of the characteristics of the

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<sup>70</sup> In “Shades of Port-au-Prince: A Noir City,” Norrel Edwards points out how, in recent Haitian urban fiction such as *An Untamed State*, Port-au-Prince appears “as a monstrous place, which alleges well with traditional noir aesthetics” (2019, 41). The scholar proposes the term “Haitian Noir” for this literary trend, which combines “long-standing aspects of representing urban space in Port-au-Prince such as inequality,

thriller define Gay's story, they are mainly visible in the first part of the narrative, which deals with the abduction, rape, payment of the ransom and liberation of the protagonist. For this reason, reviewers have more clearly identified the novel with another popular genre whose formal features are identifiable from beginning to end, and which deserves a separate and more detailed analysis: the fairy tale.

### ***3.2.1. A Postmodern Feminist Fairy Tale of Haitian Princesses, Zombis and Maroons***

It is not surprising that *An Untamed State* has been related to fairy tales, for the genesis of this narrative is Gay's metafictional short story "Things I know About Fairy Tales" included in her book *Ayiti*. In it, the author offers a critique of popular fairy tales alongside gender and class problems currently taking place in Haiti, through the female protagonist's introspective comments of popular tales that she relates to her kidnapping story. But whereas this former brief text seems to focus more on a subversive interpretation of intertextual stories from a feminist perspective, in the novel Gay crafts a much more developed narrative whereby she offers a harsh and non-essentialist critique against Haitian locals, returned diasporas, white foreigners and the Global North for their contribution to the negative state of Haiti and the perpetuation of sexism and misogyny.

The second reason why this text has been related to the fairy-tale genre can be found in its "princess story" plot. Particularly, *An Untamed State* revolves around an upper-middle class Haitian American young woman—so this is the tale of a black princess—who, after being abducted and violated by a gang in Port-au-Prince, suffers from a severe case of PTSD following her release. Nevertheless, unlike in traditional

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migrancy, and social critique of the government," with narratives that immerse the reader in an investigation of mysteries and crimes like kidnapping and murders that regularly take place in Haiti's capital city (47).

tales, she is not protected by her prosperous and powerful father or saved by her white Prince Charming (her husband, Michael, in this case). Instead, she wakes from her psychic and emotional numbness by herself and with the help from other women, especially her atypical fairy godmother.

In her renowned work *From Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner maintains that “the happy endings of fairy tales are only the beginning of the larger story” (1995, xxv). Precisely, this is what happens in *An Untamed State*, a novel whose main plotline works as a sequel that develops from the happy ending onwards, as Gay explains: “The story follows a woman who was living a fairy tale and then she is kidnapped and her fairy tale ends. [...] I thought it would be interesting to start with the happy ending and see how that might unravel” (2014a, 121). As a matter of fact, the text starts with the traditional opener—“Once upon a time, in a far off-land” (Gay 2014b, 3)—and is divided into two halves entitled “Happily Ever After” and “Once Upon a Time.” The first half contains Mireille’s graphic description of her captivity, a brutal account whose linearity is interrupted by numerous memories of her former happy life. The second one firstly depicts Mireille’s experiences in the aftermath of her trauma and, secondly, how she progressively heals and endeavours to re-start her life. In this respect, it is obvious that Gay’s novel is not a traditional fairy tale but a revisionist one.

Another feature that makes this work a fairy-tale rewriting is its deliberate reversal of most of the defining characteristics of classic tales. For instance, just as the action of fairy-tale revisions normally takes place in a more concrete contemporary or historical setting and time than in traditional ones (Joosen 2011, 13), Gay’s story is set both in Port-au-Prince and the US in the time period between 2008 and 2013. Moreover, in this story, the fortified mansion or “Caribbean Camelot” (Gay 2014b, 90), where Mireille’s parents live, stands for a contemporary version of the castle in classic fairy

tales. Analogously, the tower where the princess is traditionally confined in tales such as Charles Perrault's "The Sleeping Beauty of the Woods" is replaced here by a more realistic location, a barred windowed room in a gloomy humble dwelling (Gay 2014b, 13), located in the decaying slums of Port-au-Prince that Mireille describes as follows:

The slums are an endless maze of narrow streets and alleys lined with small concrete block homes. The blocks rise up into a mountain and dark, narrow, winding staircases hold everything together. The sky is often blocked by a thick and tangled web of electrical wiring. [...] The streets are covered in trash [...]. The air is thick with the smell of too many people in too little space. (134)

Such a portrayal of the *locus* of Mireille's appalling experience taints the text with a Gothic touch which echoes the Brothers Grimm's dark tales.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise, just as in novelised fairy-tale revisions "realistic alternatives are given for the magical occurrences" (Joosen 2011, 13), in Gay's novel all magic is absent and macabre but realistic details of the protagonist's rape are given, as the following passage illustrates:

I scratched and kicked and screamed and spit in his face. [...] He stripped me of my clothing, [...] pulling me up by my hips, forcing my thighs apart with his, forcing himself inside me. [...] With his arm pressed against the back of my neck, forcing my face into the mattress, I tried to breathe, tried to free myself but there was nothing I could do. [...] I looked down at my thighs and saw blood in the dim light. (Gay 2014b, 79-80)

Although the novel includes a mirror, this is not the magical item from the Brothers Grimm's "Little Snow White" which evaluates the queen's appearance and drives her to jealousy and murderous insanity. Instead, this looking glass works as an instrument of self-reflection whereby Mireille contemplates her damaged face and body: "I stared at my reflection in the mirror. [...] My face was nearly unrecognizable, misshapen—two black eyes, contusions, bruising. [...] A constellation of small bruises lined my

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<sup>71</sup> Because in Gothic fiction old and gloomy houses are not just sinister places but sites of human decay, "of degeneration, even of decomposition" where the "living-space darken[s] and contract[s] into the dying-space of the mortuary and the tomb" (Baldick 1992, xx), the gang's dwelling could be interpreted as a symbol of the decline of these humans as criminals, but also of their dark past and present in poverty.

collarbones. There were darker bruises wreathing my neck, my shoulders, my thighs, my back, my stomach” (Gay 2014b, 230). This dreadful image evidently distances Mireille from Snow White’s “fairest of them all.”

Another key aspect of novelised fairy tales is the reader’s access to the inner lives of both main characters and more marginal ones including the king and the prince (Joosen 2011, 15). In Gay’s novel, whilst the story is recounted and focalised by the protagonist—or autodiegetic narrator—years after her difficult experience, other narratological techniques like an intermittent third-person heterodiegetic narrator, free-indirect speech and dialogues in several chapters give readers access to a variety of character’s perspectives. For instance, these narrative strategies allow readers to learn about the rationale behind Mireille’s father’s refusal to pay the ransom demanded by the kidnappers: “As always, he would do what was necessary to protect his family [...]. ‘This is the right choice,’ he said softly. He wasn’t going to lose everything he had worked for to thieving losers, only to be left with nothing of a life again” (Gay 2014b, 48). As can be deduced from these thoughts, Sebastien—a former poor Haitian expat migrated to the US, who, decades later, went back to his motherland as a wealthy businessman, a *nouveau riche*—is fearful of losing the capital that keeps his family safe. For him, paying once entails that “soon they’ll [the kidnappers] be coming for [his] entire family” (22).

An additional feature of postmodern retellings is their frequent “use of a complex chronological and narratological organisation of plot elements” (Joosen 2011, 16). This is the reason why stories reconstructed in flashbacks or working as a frame tale in which other stories are inserted are a common element in revisionist fairy tales. In Gay’s novel, alongside the repeated interruption of the plot line by Mireille’s post-traumatic flashbacks and memories of her past life, linearity is also broken through several

abridged classic fairy tales, folk stories and myths embedded within the main plot that provide reflective commentaries about Mireille's captivity experience, her trauma and the reactions of her family. These minor embedded fables function as a *mise en abyme éclatée*, for, on the one hand, they repeat part of the larger story and, on the other, they reflect it as a whole when joined together (Bal 1977, 107). For example, in chapter forty-one, Mireille incorporates in her account an abbreviated version of the first half of the Brothers Grimm's "Rumpelstiltskin," a tale about a poor miller who risks his daughter's life when he "trades her for the favour of a king" (Gay 2014b, 353). Interestingly, this *mise en abyme éclatée* not only repeats part of Mireille's story—her captivity for pecuniary reasons—but also works as a critique against Sebastien for having traded her life with her abductors, as Mireille's conclusive sentences prove: "No one ever says what happened to the father [...]. I know what happened to the girl. I know" (353). In this regard, *An Untamed State* demonstrates its self-awareness as a metafictional text while it deconstructs the conceptual and generic features of the classic fairy tale. In so doing, it presents an intricate story that reflects the complex reality where its Haitian characters are framed.

Nevertheless, this is a narrative penned by a Haitian American writer who is keenly aware of her mixed identity. It is thus not coincidental that she combines her Euro-American and Caribbean cultures in it. As the text shows, alongside the references to European tales, Mireille also includes in her narration "The Magic Orange Tree," a Haitian folk-tale about Haiti's hard reality of hunger and survival which also functions as a *mise-en-abyme-éclatée* in the novel. This popular oral *conte* revolves around a little starving girl whose cruel stepmother is killed by a magic orange tree that had started growing at the grave of the girl's dead mother on account of her weeping and chanting. At the end of the tale, the wicked stepmother is gone and the child keeps the delicious

oranges that she later sells for a living because the tree “was that little girl’s mother and a mother will do anything to protect and provide for her child” (Gay 2014b, 175). As writer and folklorist Diane Wolkstein explains, this story is based on Haiti’s rural custom of planting the newborn’s umbilical cord so that a tree can grow and become a source of food and money for him or her (1997, 14). On account of this tradition, trees are perceived as protectors or guardian angels of children in the Haitian culture (14). Thus, it is not farfetched to suggest that, through this traditional tale that Mireille mentions when the Commander blackmails her with the abduction of her son if Sebastien does not pay the ransom, she is equating herself with the protective mother-tree of her embedded story. Firstly, because she menaces to kill the Commander “if [he] touch[es] [her] child” (Gay 2014b, 175) and secondly, because her ensuing promise to “pull together what money [she] can” if “[her] father doesn’t pay” (175) suggests a fierce determination to survive for her beloved baby.

Such a firm reaction also proves that Mireille is a courageous woman. Nonetheless, regardless of her bravery, she ends up turning into a Sleeping Beauty *à la* Haitian, a *zombi*. This traditional Haitian figure—which represents yet another token of the interconnection of Euro-American and Haitian elements in the novel—has its origins in *vodou* and has often been employed as an image for the country’s long history of colonisation. Various critics define the Haitian *zombi* as an undead body or spirit subdued to the command of the *bokor*—a sorcerer who, after stealing the *ti bon ange* or soul of his victim and therefore leaving him or her without consciousness, will and personality—becomes a ruthless master of the depersonalised and submissive individual whom he enslaves (K. Glover 2005, 107-8; Lauro 2015, 50).<sup>72</sup> The affected subject

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<sup>72</sup> Although the *zombi* and the process of zombification are essential elements in the Haitian folkloric culture, it is important to bear in mind that similar concepts exist all along the Afro-Caribbean Atlantic, from Jamaica to Brazil (Rath 2018, 387). This cultural coincidence is likely motivated by the fact that the

then, turns into a “being without essence,” a “non-person that has lost not only its humanity, but that has accepted, without protest, the status of victim” (K. Glover 2005, 108-109), a situation that can be reverted if he or she ingests salted food (108). Certainly, because all these connotations of confinement, alienation, dehumanisation and exploitation behind the Haitian zombi are similar to those behind the plantation slave’s state of “social death” (Patterson 1982, 38), it is not strange that zombification has been traditionally related with the Haitian experience of colonial bondage.

Like the Haitian slaves in the past, in *An Untamed State*, Mireille is captured, confined as well as physically and sexually abused for economic purposes. As a consequence of the usurpation of her agency and body by means of constant aggressions and tortures, Mireille “feels nothing” because she is “no one” (Gay 2014b, 176). Deprived of her own body and will, she turns into a sort of zombi who submits to the Commander, as evinced by her words: “I undressed the Commander the way a woman who could want a man like him might. I began to forget everything I had ever known and anyone I had ever loved. I became no one” (139). Once liberated and reunited with her family, Mireille’s psychological numbing—which in truth results from a clear case of PTSD—will persist back in the US so, the second part of this tale will deal with her process of awakening from her zombified-traumatised state.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that the zombi’s subjugation, although profound, “is not necessarily definitive,” for this living dead “is a creature within whom coexist an utter powerlessness and an enduring potential for rebirth” (K. Glover 2005, 108). After

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zombi reaches back (both conceptually and etymologically) to West/Central Africa, from where it is believed to have crossed the Caribbean as a result of the transatlantic slave trade (388).

<sup>73</sup> Gay’s plot parallels Jacques-Stephen Alexis’s story “Chronique d’un faux amour” (1960), where an arrogant young Haitian girl sustained by her father’s wealth and social status is zombified on her wedding day. Interestingly, like in *An Untamed State*, the account retrospectively narrated by the protagonist also reveals her great disregard for the Haitian poor and black population. Because Alexis’s cautionary tale suggests that it was precisely the protagonist’s hypocrisy, prejudice and blindness that resulted in her zombification, Gay’s novel could similarly be interpreted as a story with a moralising function.



all, as Kaiama L. Glover explains, even though the zombi “refuses the notion of ready-made hero as some sort of whole and transcendent figure [...], the hero always remains dormant in the zombie” (106). Thus, in a similar vein to the *maroons* or fugitive slaves who fled the plantations before the Haitian Revolution and the end of bondage that came with the country’s independence, Mireille attempts to escape from the gang by running away to the streets. Though the Commander and his men find and take Mireille back to her gloomy chamber, this flight evidences how the revolutionary, fighting and resilient spirit of Mireille’s Haitian ancestors runs through her veins. Analogously, when, following Mireille’s release and return to Miami, her husband intends to confine her at home so that she can recuperate from her physical and psychological injuries, Mireille revolts and flees to the countryside so as to elude yet another enclosed world.

Notwithstanding such a distinct state of zombification, it could be argued that Mireille’s dauntless *marronage* denotes that she is not a damsel in distress to be rescued but a strong woman like her rebellious forebears. This makes Gay’s story a fairy tale in line with the feminist agenda focused on criticising and dismantling the patriarchal cultural values in traditional fairy tales that has been promoted by scholars and writers like Marcia R. Lieberman, Karen Rowe, Cristina Bacchilega, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood or Emma Donoghue since the 1970s. In fact, because the novel chooses not to present any male rescuer,—as neither Mireille’s husband nor her father risk either life or fortune to save her—it appears to follow a trend within contemporary feminist fairy-tale revisions where the inadequate male rescuer is replaced by an assertive self-liberated heroine and/or her sidekicks, that is, by female-bonding (Fernández-Rodríguez 2002, 57).<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, these two alternative endings are closely allied to outstanding

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<sup>74</sup> In chapter thirty-nine, we learn through the omniscient narrator and Michael’s focalisation that he does search Mireille for one day with the help of her Haitian cousin Victor. However, when they finally find one of the villains guarding the chamber where Mireille is locked, Michael is unable to shoot him or make him confess by using Victor’s gun, thereby proving himself the wrong rescuer in this story.

values of contemporary feminism, mainly self-love, sorority and individual empowerment, which *An Untamed State* also includes.

The first of these principles—self-love—is traceable in Mireille’s re-appropriation of her own body when she refuses to be intimate with her insistent and unsympathetic husband, who criticises her for being “completely unreachable” (Gay 2014b, 299) and, as a broken magic looking glass, continuously highlights her “terrible” and “skinny” look (160). Likewise, the confinement that Michael tries to impose on Mireille until she heals does not help her whatsoever, for this decision makes her feel “trapped in [her] own house” (261).<sup>75</sup> This situation leads Mireille to abandon Michael, a sign of self-love that could be interpreted as an attempt to recover her own body and subjectivity.

Sorority plays a crucial role in this feminist tale as well. After leaving Miami and driving for miles, Mireille takes refuge in the farm owned by her parents-in-law in Nebraska. Her mother-in-law, Lorraine, turns out to be the fairy godmother in the story, a motherly figure who accommodates and takes care of Mireille in such a kind-hearted manner that she makes her depressive and traumatic state progressively disappear, as Mireille’s new willingness to rebuild her marriage indicates. Further, Mireille’s sister (Mona) and two understanding female doctors also help Gay’s protagonist to gradually wake up from her zombified state, that is, her psychological and emotional numbness.

Finally, the third value of contemporary feminist ethics—individual empowerment—is articulated in the novel both through Mireille’s attempt to flee marital confinement and through the final episode where, some years later, she finds herself vis-à-vis the villain of her story, the Commander, at the restaurant where he

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<sup>75</sup> The intertextual connection with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) in Michael’s attempt to confine his wife as the manner to fix her psychic affliction is evident. In this short story, the “rest cure” traditionally prescribed to women with nervous breakdowns in the nineteenth century proves a complete failure and even a harmful practice that leads “to utter mental ruin” (Perkins Gilman [1913] 2017, 856). Contrarily, as Perkins Gilman explains in “Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper,” work—precisely what Mireille yearns—is what really allows for “joy” and “growth” as it enables the recovery “of some measure of power” (856).

works in Miami. There, full of rage, Mireille chases and confronts him physically: “I was crazy. I was all the crazy held in my bones for five years. I pounded his chest with my fists and he didn’t resist. He didn’t try to defend himself. He stood still [...]. He let me bruise his body and break the blood beneath his skin” (358). In sum, because Mireille is able to outface her victimiser and make him turn tail and run away (360), this index of valour could be understood as the final step in her quest for healing and self-empowerment which leads her to become the actual rescuer and heroine of this revisionist and hyperrealistic tale.

### **3.2.2. *A Social Realist Portrait of Haiti’s “Painful Truths”***

Realism, the literary mode especially deployed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-American literature that attempted to provide a faithful representation of reality and everyday activities and life, has been associated with the colonial project behind Imperialism. Consequently, postcolonial writers have often avoided its use by resorting to more experimental or folkloric alternatives (e.g. Magical Realism) to represent their realities while “writing back” the Empire. Nevertheless, regardless of the colonial connotations behind classic Realism, some recent postcolonial writers such as Zadie Smith or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have turned to this traditionally Western literary mode. Behind this shift in postcolonial fiction, as Jesús Benito et al. note, there is an evident interest in depicting the “actual” unfair conditions and experiences of their communities that so urgently need to be solved, without offering Western readers the possibility of an exotic escapism from their own privileged reality (2009, 119). Gay is an outstanding example of this postcolonial realist turn as well. Despite *An Untamed State*’s partially postmodern style, it follows the tradition of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century social realism’s portrayal of class, gender, race and geographical

conflicts with a twofold purpose: to depict the ambiguous relationship that some second-generation Haitians have with the homeland and to denounce Haiti's current gender and socio-economic problems neglected by the First World and the privileged Haitian population. But also, Gay's use of social realism derives from the Haitian literary tradition where the realist *paysan* and Marxist/socialist novels became standing genres bringing to the fore the lives of the Haitian proletariat and lumpen.

With a manifest intention of giving the most credible sense of Haiti's reality, in her novel Gay stays away from the supernatural or magical elements of classic fairy tales and Caribbean Magical Realism. She also locates the action in actual geographical settings (e.g. Port-au-Prince and some of its neighbourhoods like Bel Air slum or the lavish suburban Pétienville) and makes reference to existing personages, institutions and events like the Fanmi Lavalas party (2014b, 13) and the 2010 earthquake (344). Moreover, she includes lifelike characters such as Mireille—a representative of contemporary well-to-do second-generation immigrant women in interracial marriages—or the kidnapers, who faithfully represent the gangs of Port-au-Prince. Readers also have access to the point of view of Mireille as well as of other characters, including the gang members, thanks to a series of traditionally realist narrative strategies, primarily a heterodiegetic omniscient narrator, free indirect discourse and dialogues in direct speech (Barrish 2011, 50-54) that make this polyphonic or multifocal story all the more believable. Through all these techniques and the use of extremely vivid descriptions, Gay deploys a quite classic realist style whereby she brings to the fore three realities of the Haitian context: the nuances of the Haitian diaspora, Haiti's rampant poverty and social-class conflicts as well as the scourge of female sexual violence in this country. Additionally, the realist tone is enhanced through extreme and faithful detail of the protagonist's rape and her acute PTSD symptoms, which gives

readers a glimpse of what rape trauma syndrome truly is. Like in Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*, this traumatic realism serves to expose the often underestimated dramatic effects of sexual violence.

With regards to the first theme, the Haitian diaspora, the novel mirrors and even appears to celebrate the upward mobility that many Haitian diasporic families undergo after their migration or exile to the US, a popular destination not only due to its geographical closeness but also to the prominence of the Haitian community in cities like Miami and New York. Throughout the novel, readers learn that Mireille's father, who was born in an extremely penurious context, decided to migrate to the US at a young age in order to escape poverty and, after years of hard work and discrimination, he returns to Haiti with the purpose of running his own construction company. His savings, retirement pension and this new job make Sebastien an affluent and powerful man in his homeland and firmly locate the Duvals among the Haitian elite. Notably, this outstanding social change from rags to riches portrays the benefits of transnational mobility today for those immigrants who fulfil the American Dream. However, Mireille's acknowledgement of her father's wealth as a hindrance preventing him from recognising Haiti's serious social and economic problems because "they did not apply to him, to us" (36-37), points to the current reality of the country where the privileged class neglects their compatriots living in extreme precariousness.

On another note, like many second-generation Caribbean immigrants living in the States, the protagonist is depicted as a cosmopolitan woman who, albeit her complete assimilation into US culture, still keeps her Haitian heritage and has developed a hybrid or "mestiza consciousness" (Anzaldúa 1987, 80). This syncretism is observable for instance in her ability to speak English, French and Haitian Kreyòl as well as her knowledge of traditional Haitian and European stories like "The Orange Tree" or

“Rumpelstiltskin.” Furthermore, through her continuous trips to and fro Haiti, the celebration of her engagement party on the island and her wedding in Miami, as well as the conception of a mulatto baby with her white American husband, the novel displays, in a very realistic manner, two aspects of the contemporary era. Firstly, the hybridity that characterises the offspring of many Caribbean families settled in the US and secondly, how borders and identities are constantly navigated and crossed in our globalised times (Rumford 2006, 163).

In relation to the theme of Haiti’s extreme poverty, it is interesting how, instead of idealising Port-au-Prince as a safe haven (which is what the protagonist does until she is kidnapped), the novel reflects the harsh juxtaposition of the Haitian elite and the masses living on less than two dollars a day that inhabit the city (Hallward 2010, 1). Like the Haitian society, here Port-au-Prince appears divided into the bright and rich neighbourhoods full of mansions owned by families like the Duvals and the unsightly poor areas—the slums—governed by armed gangs. This huge contrast is noticeable for instance when Mireille remembers her husband’s impression of Haiti in his first trip to the island. Whereas Michael notes that the neighbourhood where the Duvals live is clean, “orderly” (Gay 2014b, 88) and safe, other parts of the city are overpopulated and full of garbage with numerous “*bidonvilles*, shantytowns, sprawled as far as the eye could see” (97). Arguably, through such a precise portrayal of the appalling gap between the Duval’s upper class area—which epitomises their prosperous status—and the impoverished districts of Port-au-Prince, the novel exposes the paradox of our era, in which globalisation has not enabled a worldwide economic growth, but contrarily, has exacerbated the inequalities among and *within* nations (Kacowicz 2007, 572).

Besides, by providing details about the origins of some of the kidnappers, the author highlights the negative consequences of the deterioration of living standards and

the current scarcity of job opportunities in Haiti, which have forced many citizens, especially unemployed youths, to see crime as their only way of survival and economic improvement (Duramy 2014, 33).<sup>76</sup> Such penury is caused by several factors. First, the systemic poverty of the ex-slave population who, albeit liberated by the Haitian mulattoes and free slaves from the European yoke, have ever since lived in oblivion; second, the deforestation of the land resulted from a lengthy plantation-economy; third, consolidated institutional corruption; and last but not least, the (neo)colonially-forced privatisation of state-run assets by the US and the International Monetary Fund which has favoured the proliferation of multinational corporations in the country (Hallward 2010). Mireille does not exonerate her victimisers—after all, they are the conspicuous villains in her tale. Yet, as her narrative voice makes clear in the story’s opening lines, she understands that, owing to their terribly wretched context, they are “fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope beating inside their bodies” (Gay 2014b, 3). Therefore, I would contend that, in bringing to light how the Haitian elite like Mireille’s family neglect the Haitian underprivileged on the edge of survival, Gay offers both a social photograph of one of Haiti’s endemic problems and a social critique against those privileged locals and returnees living opulently and indifferently to the systemic poverty of the country.

Not least importantly, *An Untamed State* also addresses the problem of sexual violence against women in Haiti so as to open the eyes of Western and non-Western readers to such an urgent issue. History has demonstrated that the colonisation of the West Indies went hand in hand with the conquest of the indigenous female body as a way for European settlers to show and enforce white colonialist rule. Nevertheless, in Haiti, rape has survived as a weapon of terror and domination employed both by various

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<sup>76</sup> Gay’s extensive and precise description of Mireille’s kidnapping provides a remarking insight into one of the most common criminal activities carried out by armed gangs in Port-au-Prince (Duramy 2014, 63).

repressive political regimes and the criminal gangs who resort to it in order to control the deprived communities (Duramy 2014, 47-51). Precisely, through the conflict between the gang and Sebastien, which so dramatically affects Mireille, the novel displays Haiti's internalisation of the historical use of female rape as a war tactic whose perpetrators normally go unpunished. Yet, Gay leaves no room for essentialisms here, because, just as she denounces the widespread presence of sexual violence in Haiti, she also exposes the indifference to raped women in the US, where some men's passivity towards this scourge contributes to its persistence.

### **3.3. From Victim to Survivor: Curing the Wounds of Sexual Violence**

Although, according to Laura Tanner, the sufferer of rape and torture is a human being stripped of agency in a physical and psychological way (1994, 4), as the anti-rape movement has tried to demonstrate in the last decades, the acknowledgement of sexually assaulted women as survivors rather than eternal victims is an important step towards the social empowerment and support of these women. For this reason, the literary narratives that reconfigure the victim as a survivor “play a pivotal role in reshaping [victimising] discourses” given their focus on survival as “an alternative that transcends the pervasiveness of victim” (Jean-Charles 2014, 40). Moreover, even though the representation of sexual violence in literature risks the objectification and re-victimisation of the survivor and even the normalisation of this violence when rape is tackled “for creative purposes only” and not as a “union of aesthetics and politics” (Jean-Charles 2009, 250), positive representations are also possible. This is the case of those narratives where “a woman [...] becomes subject *through* rape rather than merely one subjected to its violation” (Rajan 1994, 77), where strategies for survival are traced



(77) and where the author helps “shape public consciousness about violence against women” (Hesford 2004, 16).

A rape survivor herself, Gay has acknowledged a turning point in her life that pushed her to vindicate the importance of talking clearly about sexual violence and especially of rape survival. As she affirms in her acclaimed essay collection *Bad Feminist*, one of the reasons behind the normalisation of sexual violence against women is “that the right stories are not being told, or [authors] are not writing enough about the topic in right ways” (2014a, 133). In order to start solving this problem, in *An Untamed State* Gay offers a general critique against today’s rape culture and the patriarchal objectification of the female body through a protagonist that epitomises the traditional Haitian saying “kenbe fèm” (2014b, 239) (stay strong) due to her willingness to live and recuperate her subjectivity after her traumatic experience of sexual violence.

### ***3.3.1. “I Ached even though I Was Dead”: The Psychic Trauma of Captivity and Rape***

Mireille’s macabre story begins when she and her husband are waiting in a car for the “heavy steel gates” of the Duval family’s mansion “to open” so as to take their baby “to the ocean for the first time” (Gay 2014b, 4). However, when “the gates keeping [the family] safe” close behind them, all of a sudden, “three black Land Cruisers” surround their vehicle and a group of unknown men carrying “machine guns” and wearing “read bandanas across the lower half of [their] face” (5) appear. After violently breaking the windows of the couple’s car and attacking both husband and wife, these men take Mireille to a dwelling in the slums where she meets the leader of the gang, a young man called Laurent Charles, whom everybody refers to as the Commander. At first, although she recognises that the negotiations are going to be “more complex and far more costly”

than in other kidnapping cases in Haiti because of her “good family name” and her “prominent father” (25), Mireille defies her captors, convinced that she will be liberated soon thanks to his money. Ironically, through this observation the novel forecloses Sebastien’s refusal to pay the ransom for his suspicion about a never-ending extortion and the traumatic consequences that this decision will entail for the protagonist.

As Mireille’s narrative voice reveals, since the very first moment of her thirteen-day-long kidnapping, she is tortured, humiliated and sexually abused by the Commander and his men. These cruel and terrifying events change her completely on account of both the physical and psychological damage she endures. It should be noted that, unlike in Erdrich’s *The Round House* where the victim’s son, Joe, narrates his mother’s appalling attack and subsequent PTSD state, here it is the raped woman that directly describes the violent act and its traumatic after-effects. This choice, I argue, is related to the author’s intention to open her readers’ eyes to the cruelty behind sexual violence without any mediation. In order to do so, in a similar fashion to mainstream trauma novels, Gay renders her protagonist’s psychic wound both through the plot and narrative strategies such as repetitions, ellipses and linearity breaks.

Whereas at first, while waiting for the ransom to be paid, Mireille tries to kill time by recalling the good memories of her life back in the States and her childhood in Haiti, after being gang-raped, she tries to consciously suppress those happy recollections of what she calls “the before” (7). As Judith Herman explains in *Trauma and Recovery*, prisoners who try to actively resist their captors “consciously cultivate memories of their past lives in order to combat their isolation” (2015, 89). Nonetheless, “when coercion becomes more extreme and resistance crumbles,” just as thinking in a hopeful future turns unbearable for these subjects, the remembrance of a past that makes them yearn “for all that has been lost” also becomes painful (89). Precisely, Gay conveys

through her heroine a similar reaction since, even though her initial memories are positive ones, as she faces the reality that she may never be rescued and see her loved ones again, these recollections turn into a source of pain and melancholia for her. Hence, as a coping mechanism, Mireille decides to delete those memories: “I made myself forget for as long as I could [...]. The memory of my life, the weight of it, threatened to break my body more than any man could. I needed to be no one so I might survive” (Gay 2014b, 171). As these words demonstrate, Mireille’s suppression of her memories represents the metaphorical killing of her former self.

When she is liberated, this intentional forgetting results in her inability to remember who she was before her ordeal, in her being caught up in the traumatic dynamic of “knowing and not knowing” (Caruth 1996, 3): “I tried to concentrate on who I had been before I became no one. There was a name and the memory of it lingered on my tongue. I rubbed my forehead, wanted so desperately to remember the name so someone who knew who I had been might come for me” (Gay 2014b, 212). The same occurs with the rest of her family, whose names and identity she does not recognise: “There was a man who knew the name that had once been mine, a man with an easy smile and blond hair [...] that curled in his face in the morning [...]. I remembered a little boy who also had curly hair, both brown and blond” (212). This impossibility of remembering and articulating names could be thus understood as a mental ellipsis or gap which she will need to fill in with the passing of time.

On top of that, Mireille is completely disempowered by her captors, which makes her alter her state of consciousness in order to endure her terrible experience with these men. Like many victims of captivity who “go into a state of surrender” in which their “system of self-defence shuts down entirely” (Herman 2015, 42), Mireille stops resisting and is dissociated from herself. The consequences of this coping mechanism,

as Herman observes, are a sense of altered time, the impression that the event is not happening to the victim as if it were being observed “from outside the body,” alongside the development of feelings of “indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity” (43) to the point of renouncing “their inner autonomy” (84). In the novel, Gay vividly portrays how, after being gang-raped, her protagonist loses track of time (2014b, 198) and feels “that [her] body [is] not [her] body,” not only because it is appropriated by a group of strangers but also because her trauma makes her feel the need “to step out of [her] skin, abandon [her] body” (Gay 2014b, 106). Such a dissociative process also becomes evident at a linguistic level through Mireille’s change of pronouns—*she* has a husband *she* loves” (196; emphasis added), “[Michael] [t]ake *your* son and leave” (199; emphasis added)—to refer to herself and her family. In light of these responses and because dissociated subjects are usually equated with a “non-human life form” close to a “living dead” (Herman 2015, 84-85), Mireille’s repetitive self-descriptions as a dead woman (Gay 2014b, 208, 260, 269), as “no one” who feels nothing (148, 150, 176, 177, 183) can be interpreted as signs of her process of zombification. As a result of this transformation, like the Haitian zombi, Mireille has been dispossessed of her *tin bon ange* by a group of armed bokors.

It should be noted that, together with physical and sexual violence, the perpetrator can exercise total control over the captive through the destruction of the latter’s attachments to others. This occurs when he or she is deprived of any object of symbolic importance in relation to his or her people, prevented from communicating with the outside world and even made to believe that “closer allies have forgotten or betrayed” him or her (Herman 2015, 79-80). This is exactly what happens to Mireille, who, although allowed to talk to her family on the phone in order to convince them to pay the ransom, experiences the theft of her engagement and wedding rings alongside the milk

from her full breasts (Gay 2014b, 103), which can be understood as a purposeful break of the love and motherly bond with her cherished husband and child, respectively. Similarly, Mireille receives another psychological blow when she is led to believe by the Commander that her family, especially her father, has abandoned her:

Negotiations with your father have stopped. He refuses to pay and I have compromised too much already. I understand why he is so successful in business. He is a man of conviction. [...] I must say I admire his resolve—to sacrifice his own child, my goodness. [...] We are going to get to know each other very well as you become accustomed to your new life. (2014b, 186)

From this moment on, Mireille's own repression of her past and her present pain is aggravated to such an extent that she is no longer able to remember her and her family's names and to get up from the Commander's bed on account of her weak and depressed state (197-98). Thus, this last hoax by the Commander is the event that most affects Mireille's psyche during her ordeal.

As Herman also observes, in spite of all the damage provoked, far from becoming an enemy, once the captor is able to establish “a day-to-day bodily control of the victim” (2015, 77), he usually becomes a source of solace, bodily needs and even emotional support for the prisoner who “will try to find the humanity” in him (81). The novel illustrates this strange attachment between kidnappers and victims through Mireille's feelings towards the Commander, as this passage illustrates: “My legs faltered again and I had to hold on to the Commander. I mumbled something but couldn't form the right words. He swept me into his arms and carried me to his room, placed me in his bed like he was a good man. He covered me with a blanket like he was a good man” (Gay 2014b, 147). Although surprising, such a romantic tone—which gives a glimpse of the Commander as an individual with a certain degree of humanity—does not signify that Mireille is falling in love with the Beast of her macabre fairy tale. Rather, it shows that a dependence attachment towards her captor/bokor is growing in

her. Perhaps due to this peculiar bond and the absence of any other point of view, Mireille eventually comes to see Haiti through the eyes of her perpetrators. After all, according to Herman, due to the long contact with the captor, who becomes “the most powerful person in the life of the victim,” the psychology of the latter is usually “shaped by the actions and beliefs” of the victimiser (2015, 75). Especially interesting in this respect are Mireille’s conversations with the Commander and TiPierre about their poor families and dreams of a better future, which allow the protagonist to open her eyes to the inequalities of “a Haiti [she] ha[d] never seen or known” (Gay 2014b, 134).

Nonetheless, Mireille’s empathic ability to put herself into her perpetrators’ shoes does not prevent her from suffering from PTSD. After thirteen days of imprisonment, Mireille is liberated thanks to her father’s belated payment, but as is customary among tortured and raped individuals, “a lasting invisible wound” (Schwab 2010, 164) ties her to her perpetrators regardless of her release. So, whereas Mireille gives “the appearance of returning to ordinary time,” she psychologically remains “bound in the timelessness” (Herman 2015, 89) of the gangmen’s chamber due to her incapacity to integrate the traumatic experience. Unsurprisingly, owing to a severe process of acting out, she is haunted by the compulsive repetition—observable at the level of language, imagery and plot—of the traumatic event. For instance, just after her liberation, Mireille is portrayed through the eyes of other characters, especially her husband’s, as a non-rational (Gay 2014b, 221) and skinny woman who has lost her appetite (255), a depiction which points to a state of depression. Moreover, alongside an important sense of self-hatred, Mireille’s self-conception as a dead woman with a body as dirty as the “filthy clothes” (205) she wore for thirteen days, prevents her from touching her child “with any part of what [she] [has] become” (219). This detachment from Christophe originates in TiPierre’s “steal[ing] the milk from [her] body” by sucking her breast, an image which

strongly echoes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). This tarnished breast (a synecdoche of her raped body) prompts Mireille to avoid the baby until she is clean.<sup>77</sup> For this reason and because she cannot stand this sense of filthiness, in the months following her release she compulsively washes herself, "longing for a way to remove [her] [...] skin and cover [her] body with something better, unbroken" (272).

Likewise, the novel reveals how Mireille's is caught in traumatic re-enactment at a linguistic level through the recurrence of key sentences that point back to her past ordeal such as "don't hurt me" (254), "I became no one" (140), "I was dead" (208) or "I died" (351). Nevertheless, relating Mireille's reiterative utterances with her process of acting-out only would be erroneous inasmuch as repetition is both related to this paralysing process that replays "the past as if it was fully present," but it also can discharge the traumatised individual of emotion in a cathartic manner, thereby giving way to the working-through stage (Whitehead 2004, 86-87).<sup>78</sup> Given the retrospective account of her story, which, as we shall see in section 3.3.3., can be deemed as a trauma testimony, Mireille's reiterative discourse should be understood as a sign of both her acting-out and working-through stages.

Mireille also suffers constant fear and responses of hypervigilance—common symptoms among traumatised subjects as they tend to lose their trust in the rest of humanity (Brison 1999, 44; Herman 2015, 35). For this reason, as she recognises, "[e]very strange sound [makes] [her] tense" (Gay 2014b, 281), and the physical contact with others, including her husband, is a sensation she cannot tolerate: "Michael tried to

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<sup>77</sup> The novel shows that such a dreadful experience alongside the drying of the rest of her milk while waiting to be rescued is "the worst part" (Gay 2014b, 237) of her ordeal as the lack of milk implies the impossibility of nourishing her son, or to put it differently, a maternal failure.

<sup>78</sup> This ambivalent essence of traumatic repetition is key in the analysis of postcolonial trauma narratives since, as Borzaga explains, an understanding of "the past, present and future as a *unified tangle*," as often happens in non-Western cultures, allows for the view of any re-living of the traumatic experience not as an aspect separated from "the potential overcoming of trauma" but as one that coexists "with it in complex and unexpected ways" (2012, 78).

pull me in his arms but I backed away. I wanted to run again. I was terrified” (215). Furthermore, Mireille continuously experiences anxiety and paranoia provoked by the “fear of re-victimization” which survivors of physical assault typically experience when dealing with “potentially unpredictable situations (such as those in public spaces)” (Fuller 2015, 5). A good example of this response becomes appreciable when Mireille is approaching the departures terminal at the airport of Port-au-Prince and she becomes increasingly worried about the possibility that “one of [her] kidnappers, maybe more” may be there “waiting to take [her] again” (247).

On top of that, her paranoid behaviour ends up giving rise to hallucinations that make her mistake men around her for her captors. This happens, for instance, in the episode when, following her release and the re-encounter with her family, she is examined by a Haitian doctor, whom she confuses with the Commander: “My vision blurred. I saw the Commander standing between my legs [...]. I snapped my legs shut. When the doctor tried to force my knees open again, I jumped off the table and [...] threw [a] jar at him” (223). Through this passage, Gay portrays Mireille’s affected mind alongside a state of high alert or hyperarousal common among PTSD-affected subjects which, as Mireille admits years later, accompanies her “[f]or the rest of [her] life” (271). But perhaps the most poignant example of Mireille’s hallucinatory state is observable in the episode where, at her parents-in-law’s farmhouse, she confuses her husband, the man she loves, with the hideous leader of the gang whom she fears deeply:

I heard the Commander’s men laughing in the near distance and then I heard him [...]. “No,” I whispered. There were footsteps behind me. I started to walk faster. Someone called my name, a deep voice. I ran [...]. I could not tell if I was in Port-au-Prince or in Nebraska. [...] My name again, the footsteps, louder, closer. [...] A man, tall, moving toward me. I couldn’t think clearly. Panic began winding through me. [...] The Commander had found me. I knew it. I ran faster. [...] He told me to stop. I looked around for someplace to hide. [...] “You’re not safe in the fields,” the voice said. He sounded as scared as me. I did not understand. [...] I did not know how the Commander had found me so far away. [...] There was no place I could ever hide from [him]; I knew that [...]. Finally, I came upon one of the



outbuildings. [...] It took an hour to get me out of the shed. [...] It was Michael who followed me but in my terror, all I heard was the Commander. (300-303)

Thus, as these numerous references to the Commander indicate, owing to the compulsive repetition of her ordeal, Mireille's perpetrator ends up having a more prevailing presence in her life (even if it is an unwanted one) than her husband.

Besides such repetitive paranoid outbursts, Mireille has intrusive nightmares of her traumatic experience which, as she recognises, disturb her sleep: "I woke up screaming. My throat was still raw, torn, but I had become accustomed to this discomfort" (227). In the same vein, she is possessed by more traumatic "repetitions and returns" (Whitehead 2004, 12) when diverse stimuli trigger involuntary memories or flashbacks of her ordeal which interrupt the linearity of events. This surfacing of the traumatic occurrence in her present makes Mireille undergo moments of anxiety which the novel repetitively conveys through the image of a cage where she is locked while being choked by a tight leash around her neck (Gay 2014b, 231-233, 241, 253, 256, 259). Mireille tries to mitigate this feeling, for instance, by throwing to the fire her "filthy clothes holding those memories" (235) and especially, by consuming "handful[s] of [Valium] pills" so as not to feel or remember "what happened when [she] was taken" (269).<sup>79</sup> However, as Herman explains, "[t]he effort to ward off intrusive symptoms, though self-protective in intent, further aggravates the post-traumatic syndrome, for the attempt to avoid reliving trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life" (2015, 42). This is exactly what the novel renders through Mireille, since her attempts to repress her

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<sup>79</sup> In her memoir *Hunger*, Gay uses the metaphor of the cage entrapment to describe how she felt after being gangraped at the age of twelve (2017e, 7). Together with this image, like her fictional character, the author also refers to her personal breaking and her life splitting in what she calls the before and the after. Moreover, she mentions her attempts to "erase every memory of her" (14). For this reason, it is not farfetched to suggest that *An Untamed State* could have served Gay to render her post-rape and PTSD emotions through an alter-ego character (Mireille) before making up her mind to publish her memoir.

anxiety and intrusive traumatic memories not only prove unsuccessful but even impede her from re-establishing a normal relationship with her family for months.

Finally, just as survivors of traumatic events find it very difficult to regain their own voice after having been reduced to silence, to the status of the perpetrator's object (Brison 1999, 47), for a long time Mireille is unable to disclose—at least in full—her past ordeal to her family. As she explains, “[t]he most honest words locked themselves in my throat. I tried to push something out that might make sense but the harder I tried, the more words twisted themselves into tiny, stubborn knots” (Gay 2014b, 236-37). This incapability of speaking up her trauma, of creating an ungapped testimony with “the truest truth” (341) instead of an account full of ellipses like the one she recounts at home, prevents her from getting out of her existential hole—evinced by the continuous repetition of the words “I was no one” (140)—and therefore, from working through her PTSD. However, this void is not simply a consequence of her post-rape psychic damage. As I will demonstrate below, it is also a consequence of the huge blow against her hybrid identity that the betrayal of her compatriots and her father signifies to her.

### ***3.3.2. The Identity Trauma of the Failing Father(land)***

Just as Mireille's experience of captivity and rape has a negative impact on her psyche, the novel shows how this traumatic experience entails a deep blow to her identity as a daughter of Haitian parents in the diaspora. Although the term diaspora resists a specific definition, as Monika Fludernik explains, “it has been used by different (ethnic) groups to refer to their migration experiences to foreign parts where they have established a separate community” which retains strong affiliations with its homeland (2003, xi). Nevertheless, even when sharing common origins, “nobody's diaspora looks [...] wholly like their neighbour's” (xi). This statement becomes especially pertinent if brought to

the context of first and second-generation immigrants. Whereas the latter may not experience a clash of cultures inasmuch as they are born in their parents' host country, first-generation immigrants and the so-called 1.5-generation usually struggle to reconcile their original roots with the culture of the receiving nation and, more often than not, go through an arduous process of learning the new country's language as quickly as possible (Portes and Rumbaut 2006, 206-207).<sup>80</sup> Likewise, these diasporic subjects, especially if they are people of colour, tend to suffer discrimination and racism since their arrival. Last but not least, they can also experience an acute dislocation or uprooting from the homeland for quite a long time and sometimes forever.

The arduous experience of diasporic subjects and more specifically of Caribbean immigrants in the US has been portrayed in a myriad of novels like Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Kincaid's *Lucy* (1991), Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* or Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker*, to name but a few. Nonetheless, unlike the characters of the aforementioned works—who must deal with a difficult assimilation process and the trauma of leaving their country behind—in *An Untamed State* Gay characterises Mireille as a twenty-first century cosmopolitan and creolised second-generation immigrant through her memories about her life in the US and Haiti before her abduction. As demonstrated in section 3.2.2., Mireille has a clear cultural *métissage* which retains her Haitian roots (language, traditions and stories) notwithstanding her complete assimilation into the US society. She is a paradigmatic example of the millennial child of immigrant parents born in an era in which cultures and identities have become fluid and permeable, to the extent that the individuals who can move freely seem to live in “an all-inclusive, non-oppositional point of confluence,

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<sup>80</sup> The term 1.5-generation refers to people who immigrate to a new country before or during their early teens, bringing with them characteristics from their home country and having to assimilate to the new culture. Well-known examples of 1.5-generation immigrants in contemporary Caribbean novels are the protagonists of Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) or of Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

an overlapping of cultures” where “one cannot really distinguish what belongs to one culture and what belongs to another” (Dagnino 2015, 131). It is for this reason that Mireille can be regarded as representative of the current era’s dismantling of hierarchies between different cultures (Ateljevic 2013, 203) thanks to the emergence of “an intercultural dialogue” (205) which has favoured the articulation of a sort of global “cosmopolitanism beyond nationalism and colonialism” (204).

Despite this hybridity, the novel shows that, as happens with many contemporary Caribbean immigrants and their offspring, Mireille’s cosmopolitanism is not incompatible with the typical identity conflict that usually accompanies families in the diaspora. This identity issue is observable in Mireille’s memories of her childhood whereby she recognises that, although she always maintained her bonds with Haiti thanks to her annual summer holiday trips to the island, at first she disliked those temporary returns to her parents’ country:

Every summer, my parents took us to [...] the motherland, what my siblings and I called Haiti, always with a smirk. [...] At the airport, we would stand in line with all the other *dyaspora* and their unfathomably large suitcases. I found the whole affair mortifying and tried to stand as far away from my parents and their embarrassing luggage as possible. (Gay 2014b, 50)

As can be interpreted from this passage, not only did Mireille have a different degree of attachment to Haiti in comparison to her parents when she was a little girl, but she also felt a conspicuous embarrassment towards the country and her diasporic identity.

Moreover, as a girl born in the US to Haitian immigrant parents, in her first trips to the island Mireille has to deal with a cultural clash which can be observed in the feelings of uneasiness and shame provoked by the Haitian people’s manners at the airport of Port-au-Prince (50) or by her learning that, in order for the cistern in her uncle’s house in Cap-Haïtien to work, she must fill buckets with the public water pump in the street (189). Furthermore, due to her foreignness, Mireille and her siblings suffer

a certain degree of alienation and rejection coming from their Haitian cousins, who seem reluctant to play Monopoly with them on the assumption that, because “this game is in French” (189) and they are Americans, they cannot speak the required language. For all these reasons, with the passing of time, the continuous physical connection to her *patria* (fatherland) and her Haitian relatives makes young Mireille feel in the middle of two countries. This is an in-between position that makes her uncomfortable, as she recognises in the following passage: “[W]henever we [Mireille and her siblings] were done with our homework, we would jump on our bikes and head to a place where we weren’t Haitians in America and Americans in Haiti” (35).

This distressing double-consciousness as a Haitian and American subject also affects Mireille in the States, as can be observed in another episode related to her school days. As readers learn through her recollections of her past life, when the protagonist proudly carries to school a straw *chapeau* bought in Haiti during a summer holiday, she is teased by her American classmates, who had already made fun of her and her “wild hair” (155) on previous occasions. After such an embarrassing experience, when at home, Mireille puts her hat in the back of her closet “crushed by sneakers, a black sock, a softball helmet” (52). Because the Haitian hat metaphorically symbolises Mireille’s Caribbean cultural heritage, its hiding could be read as an attempt to cover-up her Haitianess so as to be accepted by the US society.

However, Mireille’s detachment from her roots does not last forever. As she grows, she learns to enjoy her connection with the island since, as she explains, there, she can relax spending “afternoons at the beach, swimming in the warm and salty blue of the ocean” (51). She even celebrates her engagement party in her parents’ luxurious beach house in the touristic port-town city of Jacmel, where a multicultural menu comprised of “Haitian delicacies,” “someone’s interpretation of American food” and

lots of champagne is offered (110). The decision to hold such a special celebration in Haiti symbolises adult Mireille's deeper attachment to her second home. Significantly enough, the engagement *soirée* and her subsequent wedding in Miami point to a merging of Mireille's Haitian and American selves, a unification which will become even clearer with the accomplishment of her interracial marriage and the birth of her mulatto baby, named after the key leader of the Haitian Revolution, Henri Christophe.

When analysing Mireille's ambivalent relationship with Haiti, it is fundamental to bear in mind that, in her adulthood, her pride for her Haitianness is based on her one-sided conception of the country. For this reason, when her WASP husband and acquaintances speak ill of Haiti, she gets angry for she feels they are just offering "their own desperate piece of information about my country, my people, about the violence and the poverty and the hopelessness, conjuring a place that does not exist anywhere but the American imagination" (Gay 2014b, 11). Of course, Mireille is not completely unaware of Haiti as a country of "starting contrasts," with "so much beauty" and "so much brutality" (97), where a small elite concentrates all the riches whereas most Haitians live in extreme poverty and oblivion (Munro 2015, 16). What the novel seems to imply and even criticise is that Mireille has a distorted image of the country inasmuch as the only Haiti she knows is the idyllic, prosperous areas of Port-au-Prince and her "father's castle in the sky" (Gay 2014b, 225) where she always spends her holiday. Such a positive conception of her second home obviously disappears with the kidnapping, during which Mireille comes in contact with a dark side of the country she had always avoided facing: "There are three Haitis—the country Americans know and the country Haitians know and the country I thought I knew" (11). Thus, when Gay's protagonist is kidnapped and raped by her Haitian compatriots, her paradisiacal bubble explodes, for she feels betrayed by her own people and therefore, uprooted from one of

her homes. In her own words, she feels “no one” (214) with “no place where [she] belong[s]” (259). This sense of identity void—symbolised by her “naked” hand devoid of the engagement and wedding rings stolen by the gang and that so well represented her cross-cultural status (235)—affects her so negatively that she decides to leave the country forever, only to come back one last time two years after the 2010 earthquake. Despite this brief return, as Mireille admits, Haiti “can never be home again” (355).

Mireille’s identity trauma is also aggravated by Sebastien’s refusal to pay the ransom, an action that creates “a fracture that could never close” (246) between them. This damaged relationship is clearly noticeable in the very moment when, following her release, Mireille is leaving her parents’ mansion so as to take a flight back to Miami:

My father [...] would not look me in the eye but he stood tall. [...] All I could see in his face were thirteen days spent in the company of seven men who undid me. His pride burned everything good between us and he stood, defiant still, letting me choke on his ashes. [...] As we walked out, my father [...] called my name but I didn’t look back. He called my name again, louder. [...] I heard desperation in his voice. I kept walking even though each step hurt more than the one before it. [...] I wanted my father to run after us, to try to explain himself, to tell me he loved me, to tell me anything at all, but he didn’t. He simply called out my name as if that were the *grande geste* I needed from him. (246-47)

This passage certainly reflects Mireille’s change of attitude towards her father, with whom she had always had a very special relationship as “his little shadow” (218). For this reason, when Sebastien refuses to pay the ransom, Mireille feels betrayed by the person who was supposed to save her. In this sense, because both her country and her father fail her, Mireille’s relinquishment to be “her father’s daughter” (248) could be interpreted as a concomitant reluctance to keep on being a daughter of Haiti.

### ***3.3.3.A Journey towards Recovery: Sorority, Self-Empowerment and the Re-Appropriation of the Violated Body***

Rape survivors usually have more acute and persistent levels of PTSD than other crime victims (Herman 2015, 57). This is not surprising, for the goal of the rapist is to “terrorize, dominate and humiliate his victim,” provoking a psychological trauma that renders her “utterly helpless” (58). However, as Gay herself has stated, “PTSD is not a sentence [because victims can] rise above it” (2018a, n.p.). Although as a sufferer of rape trauma Gay recognises that life after a traumatic event will never be the same, to her, “healing is to be able to survive” (2018a, n.p.). This is precisely what Mireille does in the story. Hence, through the healing journey of her courageous and resilient protagonist, Gay promotes a necessary shift in the conception of raped women not as eternal victims but as survivors who can heal through their own self-empowerment alongside the solidarity of other women.

After Mireille’s release, readers find two responses to her trauma on the part of the people around her: those coming from her parents and her husband on the one hand, and from a female community, on the other. Drawing on Herman’s observations about women suffering from rape trauma, it could be argued that the actions carried out by the former group disturb Mireille’s recuperation, whereas the latter one contributes to her post-traumatic growth. According to Herman, whereas a supportive response from family and acquaintances may mitigate the impact of the traumatic event, a “hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome” (2015, 61). This is so because, just as the connection with others is crucial for the construction of the self, the survivor’s reconnection with her people becomes fundamental for the reconstruction of the self that was shattered during the rape (61). For this reason, the assurance of safety and protection, as well as the restoration of the survivor’s trust on her family, lover and close friends is key to her recovery (62).



Following this idea, it becomes evident in the novel that Mireille's healing near her parents is unviable firstly, because staying in the city is an unquestionable stressor and secondly, because the cohabitation with her betraying father does not provide her with a sense of security.

Furthermore, as Herman notes, once safety has been re-established so as to rebuild a positive view of the self, the survivor needs the help of her people, who must "show some tolerance for [her] fluctuating need for closeness and distance and some respect for her attempts to re-establish autonomy and self-control" (2015, 63). The novel portrays Mireille as a woman who concomitantly needs the aid and the proximity of her husband when she feels vulnerable, weak or menaced, as well as her own space when she is overwhelmed by anxiety. For instance, when the couple rushes to Port-au-Prince airport to take a flight back to Miami, Mireille asks her husband for help—albeit in vain—so as not to go through the security checkpoint and be patted down by the security agent (Gay 2014b, 249-50). Once inside the plane, the experience of being touched by yet another stranger (the security agent) makes her lock herself in the "cramped bathroom" (252) and even fear her husband's knocks on the door.

Likewise, when settled at their home in Miami, Michael does not allow Mireille to go to work with the pretext of "keeping [her] safe" (262). This decision makes her more anxious and out of control, for she feels she is being "trapped" (261) in another physical and psychological cage. As Herman remarks, the psychic difficulties that raped women usually undergo "may be aggravated by the narrow tolerance of those closest to them" (2015, 64), something which she relates to society's judgement of the women who "withdraw or [...] express their feelings" (65). Accordingly, even if aiming to protect her, the survivor's loved ones who have absorbed these patriarchal socio-cultural values tend to disregard her "need to re-establish a sense of autonomy" (65), thereby

disempowering her once more. Particularly, Herman provides the example of husbands whose initial unsympathetic reactions make their raped wives get worse (65). This is certainly the case of Michael, whose egotistic behaviour propels Mireille to escape and take the road to her parents-in-law's farmhouse in Nebraska in search of more supportive family members.<sup>81</sup>

Through the memories recalled by Mireille during her captivity, readers learn that Michael's parents and especially his witch-like mother, Lorraine, did not accept Mireille at first because of her origins as these words articulated by Lorraine evidence: "I don't think you're going to last. My son is having a little fun. He's always wanted to go the islands" (Gay 2014b, 71). Nevertheless, the relationship between the two women changes when, some years before the kidnapping, Lorraine suffers from cancer and Mireille moves to the farm so as "to take care of [her]" in substitution of Michael, who "couldn't face his mother as her body fell apart" (121). For this reason, when Mireille arrives in the farmhouse, in contrast to her own absent mother, Lorraine turns into a fairy godmother that accommodates her, treats her wounds and feeds her with a savoury soup which, as an antidote, starts awakening Mireille from her zombification.

Moreover, Lorraine encourages Mireille to carry out different tasks such as helping her with cooking activities so she can "make [herself] useful" (280) and get distracted. By so doing, she triggers Mireille's healing process, for she makes her sense of helplessness and disempowerment progressively disappear, as evinced by the protagonist's willingness to reconstruct her marriage and her life in the following

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<sup>81</sup> It is worth noticing the fact that Mireille heads West in her escape, an area of the US which has often been related to freedom and rebirth. Although the act of fleeing can be taken as a way of escaping or hiding, to flee is more than an expedition tour; it is, according to Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, an enormous act of courage (1987, 37). These breaking-ups in form of quest motif have been recurrent in the US literary and cinematic traditions due to the foundational myth of the frontier and the Romantic sense of freedom and individualism which have frequently associated the notion of movement with the American Dream. Accordingly, besides an act of *marronage*, Mireille's flight to Nebraska and therefore, the West where the former frontier was, point to her future regeneration and post-traumatic growth.

months. Also, Lorraine confronts her son for adopting a selfish attitude which impedes him from truly understanding his wife's physical and psychological suffering (323). Although due to her worries about her little sister, Mona makes Michael go down to earth with a serious conversation as well, it is very revealing that Lorraine takes Mireille's side rather than her son's. After all, with this move, the novel is favouring a female alliance across national and familial divides which dismounts the generalised prejudice that a woman's worst enemy is another woman and promotes the transcendence of barriers in the fight against sexism and sexual violence.

Besides reprimanding Michael and making him change his attitude, Lorraine takes Mireille to an understanding and kind-hearted female doctor who, after diagnosing her with PTSD and gently exploring her, informs her of the need of urgent surgery to repair her vaginal canal. Following the intervention, thanks to the acceptance of the psychic and bodily sequelae that sexual violence left in her, Mireille looks for therapy, and learns, thanks to a sincere female expert that, whilst improvement is possible, she "will never be okay, not in the way [she] once was" (343). As Gay's protagonist recognises, the acceptance of her post-traumatic condition enables her to feel "lighter and cleaner and calm" (343) for once, which gradually allows for a recuperation of her focus on the present and especially of a new or regained "hope" (367) in the future.

Through the therapist's words, Gay leads readers to comprehend a crucial fact about rape trauma: although the survivor is never going to be the same person that she was before the traumatic event, because this occurrence continues to reverberate one way or another in her life, "the most important thing for [her] is to be at peace with what [she] endured and what [she is]" and to learn to "negotiate [the] world with [her] past" (2018a, n.p.). Certainly, as the novel shows, Mireille is no longer the woman she was before her ordeal as she is no longer able to bear children (Gay 2014b, 344) and she

carries the surgical and psychological scars of her experience. But different does not necessarily mean worse, as Gay demonstrates in presenting a more aware and stronger Mireille with a bigger family—made up by Christophe, a more attentive husband and a surrogate baby girl—that clearly encapsulates a successful negotiation of past, present and future.

As the above analysis demonstrates, Mireille is able to work through her trauma thanks to her own resilience and the aid of female kinship.<sup>82</sup> Yet, it is important to bear in mind that, despite her attempts to move on—as the recuperation of her sexual activity with Michael and her attempt to enlarge her family demonstrate—her healing process is only partial until she faces the country she left behind as well as the two men who caused her so much pain.<sup>83</sup>

Two years after the earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010, despite her fear of going back, Mireille gathers strength and flies to the island in order “to mourn, to help in some small way” (Gay 2014b, 345). Notwithstanding her return to the father/land, Mireille’s relationship with Sebastien remains damaged, as the following passage evidences: “I returned to Port-au-Prince [...] to tell my father everything that happened to me, the whole, filthy truth of my kidnapping, even parts I hadn’t told Michael. [...] I wanted my father to know I died and had only just started to live again. [...] I wanted to

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<sup>82</sup> Gay is not the only Haitian American author tackling female bonding as a healing tool for sexually abused women. For instance, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat already focused on the important role that two female communities—one made up by the Caribbean women who attend therapy with the female traumatised protagonist-narrator, and another one formed by her grandmother, her aunt and herself—have in the protagonist’s recovery from her trauma. Yet, whereas Mireille’s healing is partly prompted by the Western therapy of psychoanalysis in addition to the care of the women around her and her own resilient nature, Danticat’s heroine (Sophie Caco) partially recovers thanks to a therapeutic methodology based on the Afro-diasporic cosmology that is run by a black woman, “an initiated Santería priestess” (1994, 206).

<sup>83</sup> Mireille’s reclamation of her body and sexual autonomy actually starts when, while staying with Lorraine, she feels the need to escape and ends up in a bar where she starts flirting with other men. As she goes outdoors with one of them, in spite of her drunk and depressed state, Mireille recognises that “here, [she] could save [her]self” by saying “No” to the lustful stranger (296). It is true that until she is not surgically intervened and psychologically stable, Mireille cannot maintain sexual relationships. But her capacity to purposefully meet and be touched by male strangers at this point is a challenge that she needs to go through in order to recover a sense of autonomy over her own body.

tell him I would never forgive him” (351). Nonetheless, when at her arrival Mireille sees her father crying, she realises that he is just “an old man who made a terrible, weak choice” and who will have to live with it “for what [remains] of his life” (351). And so, because she understands that “he [does] not need to know the truth for [her] to feel more alive” (351), she eventually grants him feigned forgiveness, a kind act which makes her “free” for the first time after her kidnapping (352).<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Mireille’s decision to take an unescorted promenade out of her parents’ mansion in the early morning reflects a strong advancement in her recovery process, especially when she does not “shrink away” (354) after spotting a dark SUV with tinted windows like the one formerly owned by the gang. Thus, Mireille’s return to the locus where her ordeal started—the street where she was kidnapped—symbolises another step forward in the overcoming of her trauma.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, Mireille’s encounter with the Commander at the restaurant where he is employed in Miami some time after her empowering experience in Haiti can also be considered another key moment in her healing process. At this point, Mireille no longer feels afraid of her perpetrator and, fully enraged by his presence, she chases and hits him until he escapes: “He ran like a coward. He ran because he was no longer the man with a gun [...]. He only had his scar and the stained apron around his waist. He ran because his life was in danger” (360). Significantly, as this passage demonstrates, through her confrontation with the villain of her story, Mireille proves to be in possession of herself again. This recovery of her subjectivity allows her to get free from

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<sup>84</sup> Mireille’s (last) trip back to Port-au-Prince as a form of confronting her trauma echoes Sophie Caco’s return to Haiti and the canfield where her mother was raped by a Tonton Macoute. This event had haunted the latter’s mind all her life to the extent of violating Sophie through the virginity test and of killing herself years later. As Danticat makes clear in the final scene of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it is only when Sophie faces the locus of terror for the Caco women that she becomes whole again or “libérée” (1994, 223).

<sup>85</sup> As happens with her father, Mireille’s reconciliation with Port-au-Prince and Haiti in general is only superficial for, despite her willingness to go outdoors alone, she does not enjoy the country anymore as it is not “a second place to call home” but a place that just evokes “sorrow” (345).

the Commander/bokor's spell and eventually verbalise her trauma by means of a testimony without ellipses that she recounts to an implied reader or listener an indefinite time later. This narrativisation is the ultimate step in her working-through process. As Gay contends, talking about trauma has a curing effect for survivors because it requires "opening [the] wound, looking into the bloody gape of it, and cleaning it out" so that it can heal (2021, 37). Hence, Gay's heroine is revealed as an instrument whereby the author demonstrates that post-rape healing, although a difficult process, is possible.

### **3.4. (Post)Colonial Trauma and Male Perpetrators: Villains, *Viktims* or Both?**<sup>86</sup>

In the last years, scholars like Ervin Staub have argued that for a better understanding of perpetrators, it is necessary to pay attention to the individual life experiences and societal conditions that give rise to their victimisation of others. As she puts it, "if looking closely" to the people who have been victimised, it can be noted that, "under certain conditions [they are] more likely" to become victimisers themselves (2011, 239). Following this idea, in this section I will demonstrate that, behind Mireille's suffering, there are more or less direct perpetrators whose actions are a by-product of cumulative traumas derived from the structural violence and systemic injustice reigning in Haiti since colonial times.

#### **3.4.1. *Slumdog Criminals: Between Traumatic Victimhood and Villainy***

Although Haiti was the first colony of black slaves that had the courage to confront the coloniser and become the First Black Republic, the former Pearl of the Antilles is today one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the world. As Peter Hallward notes,

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<sup>86</sup> "*Viktim*" is the term in Haitian Kreyòl for the English word "victim."

just one percent of its population “controls more than half of its wealth, while the great majority of the people endure harrowing levels of poverty” (2010, 1). This scholar traces the structural basis for such a social polarisation in which the socio-economic power has always been in hands of a very small ruling class—the elite—in the legacy of colonial slavery and its after-effects in terms of class and race. According to Hallward, after the country’s independence, the natural successors of the European elite were the Haitian mulattoes and pre-war manumitted slaves whilst the new free slaves were left at the bottom the social pyramid (9-13). Today, the Haitian elite is made up of deeply conservative landowners and militaries still related to the Duvaliers’ dictatorship and a liberal bourgeoisie who speak English and French, live in “well-guarded villas” located in “exclusive neighbourhoods” and usually travel abroad. In contrast, the vast majority of the Haitian population—most of them descendants from the last slaves in the country—only speak Krèyol, always move on foot and live in total vulnerability (1-3). In sum, Haiti is a divided nation living in a quasi-apartheid situation, to the extent that the capital city is geographically divided between the shantytowns areas like Cité Soleil or La Saline, and the luxurious hilltop enclaves, especially Pétionville. Notwithstanding these differences, just as the poor live in a world of radical and permanent insecurity provoked by their precarious and vulnerable context, the Haitian upper classes endure a parallel but very different sort of insecurity: the gradual destruction of the status quo and the threat of the Haitian gangs.

Paramilitary-gangster groups have been active in Haiti for many decades, from the post-Duvalierism *Zenglendos* to the current gangs in post-earthquake Haiti, but in her novel *Gay* focuses on a particular group: the *Chimères*. From 1990 to 2006, Jean Bertrand Aristide from the Fanmi Lavalas Party was the only president in Haiti with the capacity to truly mobilise the poor. However, his attempts to destroy the elite’s status

quo, his increasingly authoritarian behaviour and his eventual fall materialised in a second exile, which demoralised and disillusioned his supporters. Among them, there were the Chimères, the organised gangs hired from the urban slums that composed Aristide's militia. While these paramilitary groups played a useful role in consolidating the Fanmi Lavalas's power, at the end of Aristide's mandate they progressively became more autonomous, to the extent of turning "into armed gangs with increasingly independent interests and leaders" (Fatton 2002, 148). According to Duramy, the wretched living conditions in the slums and the persistent youth unemployment in these communities exacerbate their inhabitants' anger and discontent and engender an environment "susceptible to civil unrest and gang activity" (2014, 31). This is especially so in those groups splintered from the Lavalasian Chimères and their opponents which recruit orphan children in the street for their criminal actions (31).

From the moment in which Mireille is taken to Bel Air, a mid-level slum of Port-au-Prince, the novel makes clear that her kidnapers belong to the poor Haitian mass. More particularly, once in the gang's house, Mireille's reference to the "faded poster for the Fanmi Lavalas political party, bearing the likeness of a man [she] didn't recognize" (Gay 2014b, 14), suggests that these men belong to the Chimères, or at least, that they are supporters of Fanmi Lavalas and the ideology behind it. This idea is reinforced by Mireille's reference to the Commander as "*chimère*, a ghost" (84) when he tortures her.<sup>87</sup> For this reason, and because the kidnapping takes place in 2008—four years after the end of Aristide's political career—it is not farfetched to suggest that the faded image of the man in the poster—probably of Aristide—not only conveys the ideology of the gang, but most especially points to how, with the end of Aristide's rule, these young

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<sup>87</sup> Even though Gay's privileged protagonist uses this word as an insult, its meaning—"ghost"—ironically points to the very source problem behind the gang's criminal actions: the invisibility and marginality suffered by the Haitian poor peoples who are excluded by the First World and, most sadly, by their privileged compatriots, embodied in the novel by Mireille's family.



men's hopes for social change also disappeared. It could be argued then, that Mireille's abduction puts her in contact with a part of the country she did not know or did not want to know. This dark side of Haiti is nothing but the *bidonvilles* or slums where her poorest compatriots live "desperate, angry, hungry, scratching" (97) under dramatic socio-economic circumstances.

Indeed, during Mireille's imprisonment, the Commander reproaches her—and by extension her upper-middle class family—with living a luxurious life in Haiti while ignoring the issues of the country: "[y]ou are complicit even if you do not actively contribute to the problem because you do nothing to solve it" (137). The problem to which the gang leader refers is the extreme poverty of Haiti and the worsening of this situation due to the elites' neglect; it is the negative consequences of the deterioration of living standards and the current scarcity of job opportunities in the country, which have led many citizens, especially unemployed youths, to see crime as their only way of survival and economic improvement (Duramy 2014, 33). Mireille becomes aware of this when TiPierre tells her about his childhood. As she learns from his account, after being sold as a *restavek* or a child slave to a wealthy family by her parents, in order to escape the abuses he suffered in the new house, at the age of sixteen he ran away to "the slums where he would be safe" (Gay 2014b, 148-49).<sup>88</sup>

It is easy to notice that TiPierre's testimony about this common modern-day slavery in Haiti contrasts sharply with Mireille's distorted image of the island as "a jewel in the middle of the ocean" (Gay 2014b, 90). Thus, it is evident that through the facing of TiPierre's traumatic life so heavily conditioned by his social milieu and his intention to raise his son in the US away "from all this" (148), Mireille realises that

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<sup>88</sup> "*Restavek*" is a Haitian word derived from the French phrase "*reste avec*" (stays with) and refers to an abusive practice in Haiti in which children of impoverished parents are sent away to become indentured servants for wealthier families who often mistreat them and provide them with little or no school education.

some Haitians have no options to survive in “this land of mad indifference” (36), except for crime and extortion. Moreover, through the character of TiPierre the novel proves how, together with the historical and cultural traumas of poverty and slavery, human trafficking is still an overwhelmingly present trauma in the country which moulds the actions of those who suffer(ed) or witness(ed) it (Munro 2015, 6). Accordingly, it is not surprising that abductions in Haiti are more than common. Although TiPierre’s terrible past as a *restavek* does not justify his criminal actions, Mireille’s kidnapping needs to be understood as the by-product of the uprooting practice of human commerce in Haiti’s post-slavery/post-plantation society.

Regarding the Commander, he is “a movie villain” (69) par excellence because not only is he the brains behind Mireille’s kidnap, but he is also the one who tortures the protagonist. Interestingly, the novel presents the popular trope of the villain with a facial mark through Mireille’s constant references to the “terrible scar beneath [the Commander’s] eye” (29). Unlike in Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* where the protagonist’s father—a former Tonton Macoute—carries on his face a scar made by his last victim, here, the narrative does not explain the origin of the Commander’s bodily mark.<sup>89</sup> It is as if the author were leaving it to her readers’ imagination to figure out whether this “more boy than man” (Gay 2014b, 67) was injured by another abducted victim or whether he was himself the target of a rival gang. Whatever the origin of this physical wound may be, what is most interesting about it is that it pulses, swells (187) and hisses (359) as if it were alive or not entirely healed, as if a deeper wound were trying to surface through the scar tissue. Because trauma “is the story of a wound that cries out” (Caruth 1996, 3), this more profound injury, as the novel suggests, is a psychic one related to the unresolved trauma of Haiti’s history of poverty and social

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<sup>89</sup> For further information about the meaning of the scar in Danticat’s novel, see Ibarrola-Armendariz (2010, 2011) and Martínez-Falquina (2017a).

injustice that the Commander's father—a chauffeur for a wealthy family who did other odd jobs too—passes on him through this lesson: to never forget how wealthy people choose their luxury in the hills of the city over the well-being of people like them (Gay 2014b, 191). This message influences the Commander forever for, from a young age, he becomes what Vamik Volkan calls a *reservoir* of traumatic images or ideas deposited by an older generation (1997, 2017) and lives with the transgenerationally-transmitted rage of being ignored and even repudiated by the rich, and with an intense desire for vengeance: “You people are all the same. You live in your grand homes looking down on us in the gutter. You think you control everything and can have anything. [...] One day all of you will live like the rest of us. You will know what it's like to live the way the real people of this country do” (131).

This anger is not a feeling that consumes the Commander only. As readers are shown through Mireille's childhood memories in Haiti, the sentiment is equally common amidst her unprivileged compatriots:

No matter where we went, our car was always mobbed at street corners by men and women and children, hungry and angry and yearning to know what it might feel like to sit in the leather seats of an air-conditioned luxury sedan. [...] I remember seeing a man with one leg and an enormous tumor [...] disfiguring his face and the way he slammed his hands against my window and stared at me with such disgust. I waved to him and he spit on the window [...]. He shouted something I didn't understand. (55)

After this episode that Mireille lives in the safe interior of the car, her sister Mona urges her to turn and “[l]ook straight ahead” (55). Mireille obeys, and indeed, this is what she does the rest of her life until her kidnapping takes place: to turn a blind eye to what is happening in her parents' country, that is, to “forget how brightly the rage and frustration pulsed off” (55) the impoverished peoples of Haiti. Such a selfish neglect of the country's problems is precisely what the Commander recriminates the social class to which Mireille belongs, and the reason why he wants to punish her and her father as

representatives of the Haitian privileged population. This character thus epitomises those victimised individuals turned into perpetrators as a result of their societal and family context/influence and their “exposure to [...] other people and sources of ideas and beliefs” (Staub 2011, 260). After all, he is a young man who, moulded by a life of scarcity, his father’s deep-seated resentment and the fall of his political beacon, decides to take action into his own hands with the intention of exerting justice.

It is worth noting that in the novel, Gay does not provide an essentialist discourse around the reality of Haiti and its population, and neither does she condone the Haitian gangs’ crimes. In fact, despite her denunciation of the egotistic position of the Haitian elite, she also seems to condemn the contribution of part of the Haitian poor population—the armed gangster groups—to the fall of the country. For example, the novel criticises the “easy” position adopted by the Haitian youngsters joining local gangs through Mireille’s description of the “long but well manicured” fingernails of one of the kidnapers (40), a sign that points to the little work these youngsters do for a living. In this sense, as the protagonist observes, the Commander and his colleagues are victims but also “complicit” (137) in Haiti’s current decline. Likewise, it exposes the futility of the gang’s nationalist discourse evinced in the insults “American whore” (195) and “*diaspora* with [...] resentment” (6), in their portrayal as consumers of US products such as “Nike sneakers” (49) or the TV series *Friends* (83), and even in the Commander’s escape to Miami. Therefore, this migration reveals the actual aim behind the Commander’s criminal actions, which is not—at least not entirely—the change of Haiti’s socio-economic situation, but rather, a more individual goal, achieving the Haitian Dream or the individual liberation from the transgenerationally-inherited yoke of destitution.

### 3.4.2. *The Haitian Trauma and the Emasculated Paterfamilias*

*An Untamed State* invites us to think responsibly about the rationale behind Sebastien's refusal to bend his will and rescue his daughter, which, as I shall demonstrate here, is related to a non-verbalised multilayered trauma. Although Mireille admits to know "very little of [her] parents' lives as children" because "they are not prone to confession" (Gay 2014b, 15), as she explains to the implicit narratee, they left Haiti because they "grew up poor. There were too many children and not enough of anything. They were often hungry. They were barefoot and were teased for having dirty feet" (14).<sup>90</sup> Despite this scarce information, Mireille's lack of knowledge about her parents' former lives brings to light the usual practice among immigrant Haitian families of omitting sad memories about the past in Haiti in order to avoid passing them on to the subsequent generations (Casimir 2001, 168-69). This purposeful ellipsis that the novel conveys through Sebastien's and his wife's unvoiced history or "nonhistory" (Glissant 1989, 62) reveals how deeply the legacy of unresolved traumas and silences rooted in a historical past marked by colonisation, slavery, poverty, political and social upheavals as well as immigration, haunt present Haitian families.<sup>91</sup>

Regardless of the Duval couple's miserable past, Gay encourages readers to reflect on the reasons why, while living in the US, they "spent most of their lives trying to [...] return to their island, their people, their food" (Gay 2014b, 31-32). With a significant focus on Sebastien, the novel hints at two concomitant motives for this

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<sup>90</sup> Although the year in which Mireille's parents left Haiti is not mentioned in the novel, since the plot is set in the late 2000s and because Mireille herself explains that her parents moved to the States at a young age—for example, Sebastien did "when he was nineteen" (16)—it can be assumed that they escaped from the island at some point of the Duvaliers' dictatorship, just as many Haitians did both for political and economic reasons.

<sup>91</sup> The silenced unresolved traumas in the Duval family are the result of a phenomenon in the Caribbean where the brutal dislocation provoked by the transatlantic slave trade and the plantation system led the surviving slaves to bury their memories under the submarine ground. Such a mnemonic ellipsis or *nonhistory* entailed, on the one hand, the absence of a collective memory (Glissant 1989, 62) and on the other, the transgenerational transmission of those unassimilated experiences as well as the fear of verbalising (hi)stories that could pass on that traumatic legacy (Sweeney 2007, 56).

desire. On the one hand, we are presented with the common mythologisation and ossification of the country left behind among displaced diasporas which leads them to create an imaginary homeland out of a set of altered memories “filled with gaps of information and provable history” (Suárez 2006, 18). On the other, we bear witness to the disillusionment provoked by his realisation that the US is not a land where everybody is created equal but a hostile country of exclusion and oppression where “everyone looked upon him with suspicion” (Gay 2014b, 145). Although apparently not traumatic, the structural violence behind racism results in daily and cumulative “micro-aggressions [which] [...] can build to create an intense traumatic impact” in the targeted individual (Craps 2012, 26). The same occurs with the cumulative trauma of migration with its losses, culture shock and adaptation struggle (Vokan 2017, 8). Thus, Sebastien is eventually pushed by three overwhelming sentiments—acute homesickness, dislocation and discrimination—to go back to Haiti with his wife and start his own construction company.

Throughout the novel, Sebastien is defined as a man who, back in the States, had to work “seventy hours a week, answering to white men who would never promote him even though he gave them more than twenty years of his life” (36). Whilst he “was always serious, always wearing suits and shiny shoes, rarely laughing, rarely home because he had to build and outwork and outthink the white men he worked with” in the host country, during the summer holidays in Haiti he “was a man who eagerly removed his shoes and rolled up his slacks to climb a palm tree to gather coconuts” (53). This change of attitude bespeaks the relief Sebastien feels when he is away from his daily life in the States and thus, from the shocking dislocation and grief that “a galaxy of erosive stereotypes” provokes in him as a black immigrant Other (Fanon 1967, 129). Moreover, Sebastien is depicted as a man of great ambition who rejects weakness, probably as a

result of the deep mark of his childhood trauma and anti-immigrant discrimination. This traumatic past and present show him “that the only way to survive this world is by being strong” (15), a mantra he passes on to Mireille:

My father [...] said we needed to be strong because as Haitians in America we would always be fighting; Americans wouldn't understand we came from a free people. He said they would always see us as slaves so we had to work harder, we had to be better, we had to be strong. [...] He said, “There is no room for emotion if you want to succeed in this country.” [...] [A]mbition is the only emotion that matters.” (155-56)

Such a portrayal of Sebastien as an extremely ambitious man helps readers to comprehend the reason why this character is incapable of “understand[ing] obstacles” and seeing failure (even in his negotiations with the gang) as “an option” (32). This ethos is observable in his tenacity to get a better life in the US by graduating in civil engineering and working hard to “reach higher and higher” (32) in his career as a builder of skyscrapers. Indeed, his fixation with the construction of these big buildings denotes a fervent wish to secure a sense of masculinity inextricably connected to money and success that he could never develop in his childhood and adolescence on account of his poor origins. Further, the erecting of these somewhat phallic constructions allows him to diminish the emasculating humiliation experienced in the host country where “he had to prove himself to the men he worked with, the men he worked for, the men who worked under him,” and where he was laughed at due to his accent (144).

It is important to bear in mind that the phallogentric and patriarchal culture on which the Western world has been founded has made men see “male power and privilege as an entitlement, if not an endowment” (Nurse 2004, 13). This leads a good deal of them to live with the constant fear of being perceived by their fellow men and women as effeminate or castrated individuals (14). Moreover, because in the West the white man has always occupied the peak of the social pyramid, he turned into the role model for the subordinated or “othered” black man since the colonial era. Thus, in order

to become powerful and therefore occupy a similar omnipotent location to that of the white man, as bell hooks notes, most black men “spend their lives striving to emulate white men” (1995a, 99). This is precisely what Sebastien does in the US and back in Haiti, where his search for and fulfilment of the Haitian Dream turns into a radical copy of the (white) American Dream, of the Rockefeller-like businessman, as this passage suggests: “Each time he hires a new employee, my father [...] tells [him] he will never pay a ransom, not for himself, not for any member of his family. [...] He wants the people who work for him to know the only money they will ever receive from him is money they earn through sweat and hard work” (Gay 2014b, 26).

Given that the economic and material domination of black men has long been associated with castration and emasculation (hooks 2015b, 58) and that men’s masculinity and perception of self-worth is most often defined in terms of their hard work and “the personal sacrifice” as the breadwinners for their families (Pleck 2004, 65), it is not surprising that Sebastien is obsessed with his fortune and status both in the US and Haiti. After all, because the social construction of men as breadwinners has been mythologised in the patriarchal societies where “having a job and earning a good income are essential mechanisms for men to gain power and prestige as well as to attract women” (Nurse 2004, 23), some men end up trapped in their own oppression to succeed in that duty (15). Such a nexus between Sebastien’s masculinity and his successful job is reinforced by his wife, who finds “attractiveness” in ambitious men (Gay 2014b, 32), a commentary that brings back the winning macho-like attitude with which Sebastien conquered her: “[S]omeday, he was going to build towers [...]. His towers were going to soar into the sky and nothing [...] would make him happier than having [her] by his side” (17). As becomes evident in the sexual imagery of this



passage, Sebastien's desire for a successful career runs parallel with his desire to stop feeling an impotent or insignificant man.

Nevertheless, as the omniscient narrator indicates, despite all his achievements in the US, Sebastien still had to cope with his co-workers' condescendence and discrimination, "indignities [that] choked him and filled his mouth with bitterness" (145). As a result of this bigotry and his longing for his country, he decides to go back to Haiti, where "he would always be a man among men" (144), "the triumphant son, returned" (36), the man who left "the island with nothing and returned with everything—a wife, children, wealth" (36). Sebastien's shameful past shaped by the two traumas entombed in his inner crypt—to use Abraham and Torok's term—, mostly the emasculating mark of childhood-poverty and the trauma that immigrants experience "when leaving their family and homeland behind and having to face a strange and hostile new environment abroad" (Fludernik 2003, xvi), does not justify the betrayal of his daughter. However, it offers a glimpse of the inner conflict that this character experiences with the kidnapping. As he reflects, "it wasn't about money. It was about so much more and there was nothing he could say to explain what he meant" (145). This "much more" which Sebastien conceals from his family is, as the novel insinuates, the loss of his money and secure position on the one hand, and of his power and manliness, on the other.

### ***3.4.3. Prospero and Caliban Strike Back: A Tempestuous Masculine and (Post)Colonial Power Relation on Haitian Soil***

Just as Sebastien, a man formerly emasculated by poverty and racism, wants to achieve his manliness through money, power and influence in a country where he is not discriminated against, the Commander is a youngster who attempts to revert a lack of

masculinity by-product of his poor and oppressed context as well. The difference between him and Sebastien is that he wants to attain this desire through the use of violence and guns. This aggressive manner of achieving manliness is by no means accidental since, as different scholars argue, gang male members constantly need to reaffirm or compensate their social alienation and fragility through violence and patriarchal attitudes which provide them with a sense of superiority and masculinity (Tanner 1994, 4; Mardorossian 2014, 5). In this respect, it is worth examining the novel's erotic scene at the gang's dwelling in which, under a process of dissociation, Mireille sexually plays with the Commander's "hard" gun (Gay 2014b, 139)—an object charged with phallic symbolism. The sole contemplation of the utensil which provides him with power and authority being loved by his female prisoner provokes in him a feeling of ecstasy:

I choked myself on that weapon, making soft, wet, strangled sounds. I could see how much the Commander appreciated the display, [...] He penetrated me with the gun. [...] I endured the pain. [...] When it was the right time [...] I told him he should put his gun away. [...] I told him he should become his gun. He liked this. [...] He was loud, made a sound from deep in his chest like a roar and then he was completely spent. (139-40)

As this orgasmic moment reveals, the connection and even merging of his male member and his gun in the sex act pleases the Commander enormously because it reaffirms his much desired virility and power which, in this case, he displays in front of Mireille.

Besides his use of violence and weapons, his establishing of a military hierarchy in the gang and his holding of the highest rank also evidence the Commander's endeavour to obtain respect, to be regarded as a leader, a man over other men, just like Sebastien. For this reason, when TiPierre disobeys the Commander by attempting to have sex with Mireille without his permission, the latter punishes his subordinate to show his authority and manliness in front of the rest of the crew. Hence, it could be contended that, just as Sebastien tries to reaffirm his masculinity through the control of

Port-au-Prince (which, as the capital of Haiti could work as a synecdoche of the whole country), so does the Commander with his guns and his men. Such a fight for power fosters antagonistic ties between the two characters which are worthy of exploration. In order to analyse the power relations on which this rivalry is founded as well as the role of Mireille in such a men's game, the metaphor of Prospero/Caliban from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) is a particularly useful tool.

Due to Prospero's subjugation of the island through his magical powers, with the passing of the centuries, *The Tempest* has lent itself to postcolonial readings that depict this character as colonialist. Postcolonial critics have extensively studied the master-slave relationship between Prospero and Caliban, and especially, the latter has received close attention from Caribbean or Caribbean-descendant authors and intellectuals as diverse as George Lamming, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Kamau Brathwaite, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Paule Marshall and Michelle Cliff to name a few. The focus on Caliban responds to his becoming a symbol of the dynamics at play in the Caribbean and the Third World based on "the class struggle, the emergence or the construction of the nation" as well as "the quest for a collective identity" (Glissant 1989, 119). In other words, the cause for the interest in Caliban by postcolonial scholars and authors lies in his rebellious nature, his confrontation with the master and his struggle for self-assurance and independence. Such behaviour has been interpreted as an early example of the decolonialist urge of the West Indies and other countries.

For instance, Lamming reads *The Tempest* as an allegory of the conflict for power between the European and the colonised African-descended man, and Caliban as the revolutionary symbol of Caribbean manhood and independence. In his famous work *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Lamming interprets the Haitian Revolution by using the Prospero/Caliban dyad—he compares Prospero with Napoleon and Caliban with

Toussaint L'Ouverture—in order to show how, in the former colony of Saint-Domingue, the African-descended slaves used the coloniser's weapons to claim the island and their identity, just as Caliban does. Hence, because like the island in Shakespeare's play, Haiti has always been characterised by the power relations between the unprivileged and the powerful affluent population, this literary text and most particularly to the Prospero/Caliban trope are particularly useful to analyse the antagonism between Sebastien and the Commander in *An Untamed State*.

Significantly, the novel does not present a confrontation between a European white coloniser/master *versus* an Afro-Caribbean slave. Instead, it includes two black men with the same origins but with clear opposing ideals that foster a conflicting relationship between them. Sebastien, the *prosperous* and influential father, is a whitened/Westernised diaspora who could stand for Prospero. Given the realist touch behind the novel, here Sebastien's power emanates from his economic and influential position in the country in lieu of magical knowledge as is the case with Shakespeare's sorcerer. Also, his superior status is observable in his hiring of domestic servants who unless needed, are “neither seen nor heard” in his palace-mansion (Gay 2014b, 90), and in the way he behaves with the plebs of Port-au-Prince when he returns to the island every summer. As the protagonist recalls, once out of the airport, “[Sebastien] would open his [car] window just a crack to throw out *gourdes*<sup>92</sup> and sometimes, American dollars” (54-55), a gift—pocket money for him—which recalls the present that Prospero gives away to Caliban when he first lands on the island—“water with berries” (Shakespeare, 1.2.334)—a minor offering considering his magical powers.

On his part, the Commander represents Caliban, the oppressed Other animalised and insulted by Sebastien/Prospero with words like “animals” (Gay 2014b, 22), “losers”

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<sup>92</sup> The gourde is the currency of Haiti. Today one gourde is equivalent to less than 0.015 US dollars.

(48) and “barbarians” (144). This is a dehumanising kind of language which evokes that used by colonial settlers and slaveholders and which, in *The Tempest*, Prospero professes against Caliban, who, in turn, wants to teach a lesson to the “usurper” of his land. After all, from the Commander’s nationalist point of view, as a former citizen of the US, Sebastien represents yet another occupation of Haiti which reopens the injury left by the US hostile intervention from 1915 to 1934.

Another correspondence between Caliban and the Commander can be found in the fact that the former is “all wound with adders” that “hiss [him] into madness” (Shakespeare, 2.2. 13-14), and the latter has a serpentine-like scar “slither[ing] across his face” (187) that pulses and inflates when he gets angry. The serpent-motif in both characters is very revealing owing to the infernal connotation of snakes and especially, due to the biblical association of this reptile with Satan and his attempt to overthrow God that John Milton greatly rewrote in *Paradise Lost* (1667). For this reason, I would argue that, as happens with Caliban in Shakespeare’s play, the Commander’s serpent points to his deceitful and revengeful attitude and most notably, to his seeking of a power he has always lacked but which he is willing to take by confronting Sebastien/Prospero, “the man among men” (Gay 2014b, 144).<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, even though Caliban’s mother (Sycorax) dies before Prospero’s arrival on the island, as Miriam Chancy holds, she somehow exists in the play “as a shadow person, a ghost whose invocation is laden with evil associations” and as Caliban’s “spiritual center in his quest for revenge” against the colonisers and the recuperation of the island (1997, 26). It is true that, in *An Untamed State*, the Commander’s mother is not dead like Sycorax, yet, after years of abuses from a wealthy employer like

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<sup>93</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, the line “And be thyself Man among men on Earth” (Milton, 3.283) reproduces God’s words in allusion to the future arrival of his Son, the God-become-man. In this sense, Gay’s connection of Sebastien with this intertextual reference could be interpreted as an allusion to his omnipotence over the rest of the population in Haiti. Thus, the Commander’s efforts to humiliate Sebastien could be regarded as a defiant move to snatch that superiority-ridden title from him.

Sebastien, she has become “more ghost than woman” (Gay 2014b, 198). Therefore, similarly to Caliban, the Commander is pushed to revolt against the “most successful” (36) and prosperous businessman in Haiti, not only for the sake of getting rid of the oppressing yoke of poverty to which Sebastien clearly contributes and claiming for the dominion of the island as a local Haitian, but also for the sake of his own mother’s memory.

Interestingly enough, like Caliban in *The Tempest*, the only way the Commander can confront and defy Sebastien is by using the language he has learnt from this powerful man and, in more general terms, the Haitian elite he embodies. Whereas for Caliban that language is Prospero’s mother tongue, with which he curses and plots against him, here it is the language of money, power and authority that the Commander uses to confront and humiliate Sebastien. An example of this power is the influence that this character has on the slums—“your father may think he owns the city, but I own *these* streets” (Gay 2014b, 134)—as becomes manifest in the episode where in her escape attempt, Mireille enters a bar to call her family and the female bar attendant informs the gang about her (138). And of course, the best token of that power is the Commander’s capacity to plot and order the kidnapping of Mireille with the aim of dispossessing Sebastien from his source of power and hegemony.

The problem is that neither the Commander nor Sebastien are willing to accept the conditions of the other. Consequently, as happens with Miranda in *The Tempest*, Mireille pays the price of these men’s hubris and their antagonistic relationship, for she ends up becoming the medium of their negotiations. In Shakespeare’s play, by magically forcing Miranda and the Prince of Naples to meet, fall in love and marry, Prospero uses his daughter as currency to recover his noble title. Unlike in *The Tempest*, in Gay’s novel Mireille marries an American white man with European roots because

she wants to, not for the imposition of her father. Nevertheless, her future and well-being are very much affected by her father's refusal to pay the ransom, a choice grounded on two important and intermixed aspects: Sebastien's fear of being "left with nothing of a life again" and therefore, not being able to "protect his family, his entire family" (Gay 2014b, 48), and his own pride and unwillingness to favour "men who had not worked an honest day in their lives" and were "so bold as to ask for a lifetime's fortune" (145).

In addition to her father's betrayal, Mireille also goes through physical/psychological abuse and especially, she is repeatedly violated by the Commander as a way to press Sebastien to pay him "what [he is] owed" (136). But Sebastien's reluctance to follow his enemy's order enrages the Commander, who understands this response as a clear act of defiance to his authority as a gangman: "I want your father to hear what is happening to you while he wastes time negotiating or not negotiating [...]. I am the one who does not negotiate, not him" (68). For this reason, just as Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda has been interpreted as a political move whereby this oppressed man tries to people "this isle with Calibans" (Shakespeare 1.2.351-352) and therefore, recover his former sovereignty over his land (Lamming [1960] 1992, 102), the Commander's accomplished and repetitive rape of Mireille can be regarded as a political tactic as well, as his words demonstrate: "Your father is unwilling to pay a reasonable ransom for the return of his youngest daughter. [...] It is a shame you will continue to pay for his sins" (Gay 2014b, 192). These offences to which the Commander refers are, of course, Sebastien's exploitation of the island for business matters and the neglect of his unprivileged compatriots, those who, like him decades earlier, are considered ungrievable individuals because they have nothing.

Although Shakespeare reproduces the colonial discourses about the native peoples of the New World as barbaric and lustful with Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda, as explained in Chapter 1, the process of colonisation of the New World went hand in hand with the conquest of the bodies of the female Other. Nonetheless, in *An Untamed State* it is not the European settler that rapes Mireille. Instead, it is Haitian black men that, by reproducing Haiti's long tradition of rape by whites and locals, want to demonstrate their rights over the country to the Westernised upper classes. For them this abuse is counter-violence, a "cleansing force" that rids them of the "inferiority complex" of the (neo)colonised (Fanon 1963, 51). Thus, from a Foucaultian understanding of the body as the locus where power relations are manifest (1978, 1979), Mireille's body can be interpreted as the battleground where the Haitian long-lasting class conflict between the rich and the poor—respectively embodied by Sebastien and the Commander—is disputed. To put it differently, Mireille's raped body metaphorically symbolises Haiti, a country "at war with itself" (Chancy 1997, 1) where "a debilitating class structure [...] pits Haitians against Haitians" (45) in an ongoing fratricidal conflict.

Finally, it is worth noting that, whereas Caliban remains on the isle at the end of the play, this is not the case of the Commander who, after the kidnapping, travels to Miami thanks to his dirty money in order to lead a better life, to fulfil the Haitian Dream. There, however, he will no longer be a man with the alleged masculinity provided by his former rank, his guns and his criminal deeds. Instead, he is a precarious worker, a busboy (one of the most underpaid jobs in the US) serving others, that has to run away when confronted by Mireille because, "he [is] no longer the man with his gun [...]. He [does] not have his knife or his kingdom or the men who served him" (Gay 2014b, 360-61). On his part, although Mireille/Miranda and her prince go back to the States and do not intend to return, Sebastien remains on the island and survives a 7.0-



magnitude earthquake followed by a tsunami. Whilst most of the country is destroyed, ironically, his buildings stay strong. This is not his case, though, for, as Mireille realises when she returns to Haiti to help, now he is a “smaller, older” man (347) who needs to justify the decision he took back in 2008:

I want you to understand I thought I was making the best decision for this family, because I love my family so much. [...] If I paid, I had no way of knowing if they would return you. I had to think about your mother, your sister, my sisters, the rest of our family. Paying for you would sacrifice them too. [...] I am responsible for many lives. [...] I truly believed that when the kidnappers realized there was no money to be had, they would set you free [...]. (349-50)

Hence, just as Prospero seeks the audience’s forgiveness for his deeds at the end of *The Tempest*, Sebastien—in a more indirect manner—also seems to expect his daughter’s absolution at the closing chapters of the story. But this redemption, this attempt to redress the consequences of his unspoken fears, comes too late inasmuch as Mireille, who recognises that it “would be much easier to forgive” the Commander than a betraying father (354), is unable to truly pardon Sebastien, her most painful perpetrator.

### **3.5. The Ubiquity of Sexism: Implicated (Fe)Male Subjects and Nation-States**

Implicated subjects are those individuals whose “actions and inactions help reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators” (Rothberg 2019, 1). As this section explores, Gay includes in her novel a bifurcated group of implicated subjects in relation to the country’s and Mireille’s parallel untamed states. As for the first theme, besides Sebastien’s contribution to the decay of the country, the novel presents his wife, Mireille and Michael as complicit in the neocolonial exploitation and unequal stratification of Haiti because all of them are beneficiaries—be it as tourists or returnee residents—of a system that generates deep inequalities, harm and trauma. Regarding the abduction and sexual violence suffered by Mireille, however, one of the clearest

implicated subjects is Haiti's society. For instance, when Mireille refers to different cases involving acquaintances and relatives (Gay 2014b, 24-25), it becomes clear that the kidnapping of women is common in the country, which demonstrates that the Haitian institutions are not doing enough to solve this problem. Moreover, as can be gauged from Mireille's account, because the people in her neighbourhood witness how she is attacked and kidnapped in the street stand and watch her "screaming and fighting [...] with indifference or relief that it [is] not yet their time" (6), it could be argued that they are in a way complicit in the crime perpetrated by the gang.

Similarly, not only do the bystanders of Bel Air who observe Mireille in the street not aid her, but some of them like the bar attendant even inform the gang about her escape, thereby becoming clear accomplices in the crime. Gay thus underscores a manifest indifference in the Haitian society as a whole towards an endemic human-traffic and rape culture in the country grounded on the subsistence of a patriarchal and (post)plantation cultural system which overlooks and does not prosecute such a systemic violation of human rights. This disregard becomes evident in the words Gay puts in her protagonist's mouth: "I wasn't going to stay in Haiti one moment longer than I had to. There would be no evidence collected, no trial, no justice and without justice, there was no crime" (234). Nonetheless, Mireille's compatriots are not the sole accomplices in her suffering, for other family members can be held responsible as well.

For instance, Mireille's mother, Fabienne, can be deemed complicit in Mireille's suffering owing to her astonishing passivity and her desire to "move on from this" (241) as if nothing had happened. Like Sebastien, Fabienne left the motherland when she was young, and although she enjoys the US, only during the summer holidays in Haiti does she "[laugh] nakedly, talking openly, easily, in a way that was so foreign to us [Mireille and her sister]" (54). These words evidence the reserved and even cold nature of

Fabienne with her family, especially her daughters, who admit that listening to their mother's and aunts' chats in those summers in Haiti "made [them] feel like [they] knew [their mother]" (54).<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, even though Fabienne is a happy and extrovert woman back in the homeland, unlike Sebastien, at first she is reluctant to return to Port-au-Prince because she "is terrified of being kidnapped" (27). Yet, when he assures her that "it [will] be different this time because they [are] together and ha[ve] money" and gangs "[don't] take Americans" like their daughters (144), Fabienne eventually "resign[s] herself to [Sebastien's] dreams" of becoming an important man in Haiti "as she had always done" (37). And so, after their return, while her husband's business grows, Fabienne lives a comfortable life in a mansion with servants while she overlooks the harsh reality of her homeland. Her sardonic rhetorical question about everybody's consumption of Valium in Port-au-Prince because "[h]ow could they not?" (225) hints at how sedated the privileged live in a country where the majority of the population struggle to survive. As the omniscient narrator shows, however, with Mireille's kidnapping Fabienne realises that her life of comfort in Haiti is a dream that she had constructed over a lie delivered by her husband: "They didn't take Americans. That was how [she] had slept at night, knowing her daughters would always be safe [...] in Port-au-Prince. And now, she knew her husband had lied to her. So many years, following him to so many places, and he had repaid her with such staggering deceit" (144). The problem is that, regardless of her awareness of Sebastien's ambitious and even selfish nature, at the critical moment when her daughter's life is in danger, Fabienne does not intervene against his decision not to pay until she becomes desperate and exhorts him to "[e]nd this, now" (146).

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<sup>94</sup> Together with the traumas of child-poverty and her acute "longing for home" for half a life, Fabienne's silence and coldness especially when living in the US could be related to the shadow that her husband's towers cast on her since the moment she decided to learn "to want for what he wanted" (32).

But how can a mother react so late under such circumstances? Why does Fabienne not become the orange-tree protective motherly-figure from the tale she used to recount to Mireille since the very moment she learns about the kidnapping? I argue that with Fabienne's belated reaction to the suffering of her own daughter, the novel exposes Haiti's patriarchal and male chauvinistic society in which marital unions follow the model of a male breadwinner and a female caregiver. This patriarchal division of roles makes Haitian unprivileged and privileged women economically dependent on—and therefore subordinate to—their husbands, who are the ones making decisions in the household (Duramy 2014, 39-40). This is the case of the kind-hearted but terrified young women that live with the Commander and his crew, and of Fabienne, whose comfortable life is completely subordinated to Sebastian's money and power. Hence, it is not surprising that, as a result of her internalisation of these gender roles, she finds it hard to face her husband at first.

Nevertheless, as a mother, Fabienne cannot allow her husband to sacrifice Mireille, no matter the intentions behind his attitude. In fact, she becomes so enraged by Sebastien's immutable position that she even imagines herself "tear[ing] his eyes out" (Gay 2014b, 144)—an action which could signify the symbolic castration of her husband—and spitting "on his bleeding face" (144). It is true that at the end, because she loves him, Fabienne does not attack Sebastien physically. Instead, she becomes strong enough to exhort him to "bring [her] child home" regardless of the "panic rising through her spine" (146), a feeling that wraps her owing to her stepping out of her subordinate stage as the Angel in the House. In this regard, by presenting a subjugated mother who rebels against her husband in defence of her daughter, Gay suggests that deep-rooted patriarchal codes can be beaten if women summon up enough courage to face and challenge them.

It is important to note, however, that Fabienne's reaction following Mireille's release—that is, her support of Sebastien and her wish to move on as if nothing had happened—provokes a fracture in the bond between her and her daughter, although not as “impassable” as that with Sebastien (247). With this rupture Gay tackles the mother-daughter relationship, a distinguishing and recurrent trope in the works of many Afro-Caribbean women writers. Some remarkable novels that tackle this issue are Kincaid's *Lucy, Annie John* (1986) and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) as well as Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In them, mothers become an “other,” an enemy because either they embody or “advocate colonial habits” (S. Alexander 2001, 7) or they are absent mothers whose detachment is provoked by traumas related to their (post)colonial contexts. But what is mostly important in these works is that this absence negatively affects the protagonists. Contrarily to the young male self, defined by the independence from the mother, the female self, and therefore, her identity, is characterised by the bonding and identification with the female parent. Hence, as Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn put it, “if a daughter's relationship with her mother is unnaturally served, for whatever reason,” the girl will develop neither a secure sense of her own individually nor the concomitant ability to form connections with others” until she finds “a necessary replacement” (1991, 220-21).

In the works of some Caribbean female writers like the ones mentioned above, the disruption of the mother-filial bond implies traumatic consequences for the heroines that go from their unwillingness to become mothers themselves or their inability to continue with their gestation. In the case of *An Untamed State*, although it is evident that the story focuses on the father-daughter relationship—a bond that develops between them probably because Fabienne “was never one for affection” (Gay 2014b, 172)—Fabienne's initial passivity with regards Mireille's abduction and the subsequent

support of Sebastien negatively affect the protagonist, who considers her mother's position as "more than [she] could forgive" (247). According to Simon A. James Alexander, the absence of the natural Caribbean mother sends "a daughter in search of another mother(land)" (2001, 25) and this is precisely what happens to Mireille, who, owing to her mother's failure as a protective presence, takes shelter in an American motherly and nurturing figure that replaces Fabienne: her mother-in-law.

Considering that in Caribbean writing the biological mother has traditionally been connected with the motherland, Mireille's seeking of a refuge in an American surrogate could be interpreted as a repudiation of Haiti as her home. Likewise, the lack of Haitian allusions in her adopted baby's name—Emma Lorraine—is yet another sign pointing at this rupture of the umbilical cord that joined Mireille with her Haitian mother/land. Thus, it seems apt to claim that despite Fabienne's love for her daughter, Mireille's disconnection from the *matria* or motherland points to Fabienne's quasi-unforgivable implication in her physical and psychological pain.

The last implicated subject in Mireille's suffering is her husband, "Mr. America" (Gay 2014b, 87), the white man with European ascendancy who also represents the US and more broadly the West in this narrative. In an article in the *New York Times* entitled "Dear Men: It's You Too," Gay encourages men to be supportive fellows for women rather than becoming "so overwhelmed" with the question "[w]hat can I possibly do?" if they want to help in the dismantling of today's worldwide rape culture (2017, n.p.). In other words, she asks men to be just the opposite of Mireille's husband until he becomes his squire.

Michael is an engineer with an easy life who adores his wife but who fails to avoid her kidnapping and to rescue her when he does not feel legitimised to contradict Sebastian's decisions because, as the latter argues, "[he] know[s] nothing of this

country” (Gay 2014b, 23). Further, as the novel shows through his stream of consciousness, Michael fails Mireille when he feels unable to kill TiPierre the night he and Mireille’s cousin end up in Bel Air looking for her. This repetitive failure “from the moment [Mireille] was taken until the night she was returned” alongside the “weakness” to “avenge her” (331), makes Michael feel an “impotence” that consumes him gravely (331). Such realisation of his lack of power, which impedes him from being the rescuing knight of his “pretty pretty princess” (62), the US sheriff or agent in world affairs who imposes order in what he calls a “hellhole” (262) country with slum areas akin to “the Wild West” (181), entails a big blow to Michael’s masculine and American ego.<sup>95</sup> This shock is so deep that the only thing that matters to him is “what [he] went through” (324) in Haiti.

The impotence to which Michael refers also points to his dysfunctional marriage, which comes as a consequence of Mireille’s psychological state and her dealing with Michael’s disregard of her psychological needs. Indeed, Michael’s egotistic unwillingness to understand the outcome of Mireille’s ordeal even if she does not “tell [him] what she’s been through” (300), as well as his continuous complaints for not knowing what to do (289), for taking care of the baby alone (325) and for Mireille’s physical deterioration (232, 299), do not help in the protagonist’s recovery, as she makes clear: “I can’t fix me and us at the same time” (322). This lack of empathy preventing Michael from recognising the seriousness of Mireille’s injuries could be considered this character’s biggest failure to his wife. Interestingly, through such a representation of Michael as a selfish white husband unable to understand what his

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<sup>95</sup> In *Framing the Rape Victim*, Mardorossian posits that victimhood is incompatible with the image of the US because “the trope of the victim [...] cannot be reconciled with the American nation’s foundational identification with heroism” (2014, 33-34). For this reason, the image of the American hero(es) turned victim(s), as happened for instance in the Vietnam War and the 9/11 attacks, is an unpalatable and even traumatic concept for the US citizenry. Michael’s multifaceted failure in Haiti precisely becomes an extremely shameful, if not traumatic, experience for him as it entails a huge blow to the American Exceptionalism he represents.

violated wife is going through, the novel clearly remarks one of the big problems related to sexual violence in the Global North: the need for an education in emotions and gender values to reinforce men's empathy towards sexually abused women.

Fortunately, Michael eventually realises his unfair attitude towards Mireille thanks to his conversations with Mona and his parents' reprimands, which leads him to do "the fighting [he and Mireille] need done" (336). From this moment on, he becomes a more supportive husband by helping Mireille reconnect with baby Christophe (338) and by accompanying her to Port-au-Prince after the earthquake (344-55). Thus, it could be concluded that with this change of attitude alongside his former reluctance to kill a man, the novel presents Michael as the only male character not irreversibly determined by his circumstances.

A last observation that is important to note in relation to Michael is that, through this character, Gay exposes how the patriarchal use, abuse or disregard of women is not a chronic gender and social issue only in Haiti, but a problem going on more broadly, as her dedication "for women, the world over" encapsulates. She does so by penning a novel which recognises the accountability in the suffering of women of both the Haitian poor and privileged citizenry, and the white and non-white individuals educated in the First World like Sebastien and Mireille's unsympathetic husband. It seems apt to claim, then, that *An Untamed State* demonstrates the globality of sexism and patriarchy. This is something that becomes clear in the confrontation between Fabienne and Michael after Mireille's liberation, when Michael asseverates that what happened to his wife in Port-au-Prince "never would have happened [...] in Miami, or anywhere else in the States," and Fabienne accuses him of being "quite selective about the merits of [his] country" (244).<sup>96</sup> Fabienne is certainly right, for women abductions and rapes do also take place

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<sup>96</sup> As Mardorossian observes, rape in the Third World is regarded as a human rights violation and a political issue, whilst in First World nations it is seen as a personal problem that affects women



in the US among rich and impoverished women whose testimonies are often, to a greater or lesser degree, questioned or underestimated. Accordingly, *An Untamed State* can be said to underscore the lack of acknowledgement of a ubiquitous rape culture while it denounces the historical sexual use and abuse of the female body as a terrain where men dispute their political games, be it in the First World or the Caribbean.<sup>97</sup>

Hence, it could be concluded that *An Untamed State* is a hybrid novel of generic and cultural interconnections akin to the rhizomatic relations of the Caribbean, which results in an interwoven textual tapestry or relational narrative whereby Gay brings to light the intertwined gender, social and racial dynamics behind the ongoing scourge of sexual violence in Haiti. In particular, what *An Untamed State* brings into play is that these aspects are concomitantly related to unspoken historical/collective traumas which continue haunting the Haitian citizenry and pushing them into an aquatic spiral, a whirlpool of direct and indirect violence which does not enable this insular country to heal. The novel does so through the recovery of manifold Haitian (hi)stories moulded by multilayered traumas which break traditional dichotomous discourses, especially those around victims and perpetrators, and through the exposure of the responsibility of First World nations like the US as well as the Haitian locals and diasporas in the current

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individually. In her view, the reason for this disparity is that the conception of sexual violence as a “barbaric act” and a weapon of war in the former countries “works to ensure that rape in the [Western] setting [...] loses legitimacy as an issue that requires social rather than an individualised response” (2014, 16). Needless to say, this perspective reinforces old discourses based on stereotypical constructions which consolidate the imperialist image of the US and Europe.

<sup>97</sup> Although it is not the case of Haiti’s rural and other disadvantaged areas, in Port-au-Prince there exist a few women’s organisations and solidarity groups mainly run by female activists “that respond to rape survivor’s immediate needs by providing medical assistance and counselling” (Duramy 2014, 133). This is the case of shelters like KOFIVI and URAMEL as well as the international NGO AVSI. However, as Duramy notes, the number of organisations addressing women’s rapes in Haiti is inadequate owing to the limited resources and the “widespread presence” of sexual violence affecting women and girls across the country (133-36). Likewise, even though a decree against sexual aggressions was adopted in 2005 by the Haitian government—what Duramy defines as “a significant step toward compliance with international human-rights standards” (25)—rape and gender violence are still a ubiquitous problem in the country. One of the main reasons is the lack of legislation against domestic violence alongside sexual abuse and exploitation of girls owing to the “customary belief that the law should never interfere in family matters” (125).

“untamed state” of the country. Thus, even though Gay is not able to offer a solution for the violence suffered by her Haitian (American) fellow women, as a writer, she arguably creates a tool—a literary and political artefact—which exposes this urgent theme, attending to its terrible consequences and providing an integral and pluralistic blaming which brings the opportunity to rethink each individual’s position or responsibility in it.





Figure 3. Installation at Crystal Bridges Museum by African American artist Hank Willis Thomas entitled *A Place to Call Home (Africa-America)* (2009).

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE RETURN TO RELATIONS: COMBATTING THE TRANSGENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF RACISM AND MISOGYNOIR IN TONI MORRISON’S *GOD HELP THE CHILD***

#### **4.1. Toni Morrison: The African American Literary Moses**

The expressive culture of Africa has traditionally been associated with the phenomenon of orality, ubiquitous and essential in the diversity of African cultures. This is so in spite of the fact that long before the transatlantic trade many African societies had developed “elaborate indigenous writing systems” (Irele 2011, 21). In any case, when the orally-ridden cultural identity of the transplanted African slaves travelled with them to the New World, “the encounter with writing turned into a decisive factor in the fashioning of a black modernity and a new distinctive idiom of self-expression” (35).

Early black writing emerged during the second half of the eighteenth century, in the era of the Enlightenment and the war between England and its rebellious colonies. Taken in full, it contributes to vindicating the extension of the “all men are created equal” maxim in the US Declaration of Independence and to requiring that African Americans must be extended the same human rights than white citizens (Gould 2011, 39-41). Later on, in the period between the mid-eighteenth century and the US Civil War, this committed African American literary production demonstrated that blacks could produce serious and significant literature, with poems like those written by Phillis Wheatley—the first published African American woman (Carretta 2010, 20)—or slave narratives such as Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), Frederick Douglass’s *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) or Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

As regards the world of fiction, this latter period witnessed the publication of the first African American novel *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter*, published by William W. Brown in 1853 (M. Graham 2004, 1). This was soon followed by Frank J. Webb’s *Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) and Martin R. Delany’s *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-62). All these literary productions have been defined as “a literature of fusion” that mingles facts and fiction as well as slave narrative, pastoral, satire, gothic mystery and novel of manners. Moreover, they fuse “black and white character, speech, and behaviour” and both African and American beliefs (C. Mulvey 2004, 27).

Following the end of slavery and the US Civil War, in response to the extremely dark and agitated social and cultural terrain provoked by postbellum segregation and

lynchings, African American authors like Frances E. W. Harper, Sutton E. Griggs and Charles W. Chesnutt published fictional texts aimed at a dual audience. This was a tool of social analysis and denunciation of the prejudices, stereotypes and racial mythologies behind the discrimination of blacks (Fabi 2004, 36-38). Non-fiction works about the condition of African Americans also became numerous and essential in the fight for equal rights at the turn of the century. Of great significance and influence for coetaneous and future generations of scholars and writers were the works of W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

Yet, it was not until the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s that African American literature truly shined both in the US and worldwide. The artists and intellectuals of this cultural, intellectual and artistic movement that came by the hand of the Great migration from the southern to the northern states of the country focused on the idea of the “New Negro.” This concept served as a “metaphor for a rising, black, cultural and intellectual consciousness” (Stephens 2010, 214) fraught with racial pride and interested in the return to the African roots, especially in relation to folklore, music and rhythm, as illustrated in the works of Langston Hughes, Claude MacKay or Zora Neale Hurston. This phase is considered the Golden Age in African American literature. Later, the 1930s-1950s period—defined by two major wars, the Great Depression, the urbanisation of the rural black immigrant and the Cold War—saw the rise of a new literature which was more politically engaged and reliant on social realism. Good examples of this kind of fiction are Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> It is important to note that Ellison’s novel ranges from realism to surrealism. In fact, as Maryemma Graham argues, in this narrative Ellison uses what this scholar considers an “appropriately” modernist style because he “privileged textual concerns over ideological ones” in order to provide an “inventive, regenerative vision of black culture” (2004, 2).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement inspired by the Civil Rights mobilisations brought “another renaissance that appreciated the aesthetic and performative intersections of literature and music” and defended a “black political power, racial pride, and cultural authenticity” with complete independence of the mainstream white North American and European influences (Jarrett 2010, 7). This artistic trend led to an increase in the African American cultural production provoked by the rising interest in black life and culture after the 1960s. As Maryemma Graham remarks, only in 1970 more than twenty-five African American novels were published by authors like Sharon Bell Mathis, Louise Meriweather, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Al Young (2004, 3). Besides, it was around this time that the work of African American writers began to be accepted by academia as a legitimate genre in the canon of US and North American literature.

As Graham notes, the contemporary African American novel—from the 1970s until today—does not fall “in the traditional opposition between literature and politics” (10). Rather, it functions as a cultural artefact “in designing its own system for interpretation” and challenging the readers’ understanding through its “high degree of technical proficiency” (10). This is the case of novels written by Walker, Morrison, Terry McMillan, Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Maya Angelou and a new generation of writers influenced by the former ones like Colson Whitehead, Jesmyn Ward, Tayari Jones or Ta-Nehisi Coates. Interestingly, the novels by these writers serve an ideological and social purpose as they vindicate their value as artistic productions.

Until her death on 5 August in 2019, Toni Morrison, novelist, short fiction writer, essayist, book editor, lecturer and Nobel Prize Laureate, was the paradigmatic example of contemporary African American writer. Morrison—whose real name was Chloe Ardelia Wofford—was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, into a family of storytellers and

musicians who allowed her to develop “an early appreciation for language, folk wisdom, and literature” (Andrews et al. 2001, 295). As different scholars have noted, in growing up in a poor steel town of immigrants, Morrison’s formative influences were rooted both in a racially diverse community and her parents’ lessons about racial politics. In fact, given her father’s deep suspicion and hostility towards white people and her mother’s optimistic wish that race relations in the US would improve over time (295), it is no wonder that Morrison’s novels reflect a complex and interesting combination of pessimism and hope regarding racism in the US.

After finishing a BA degree in English with a minor in Classics at Howard University in 1953, and earning an MA in English in 1955 at Cornell University, Morrison taught English at different universities until 1964, the year when she got divorced from her husband, with whom she had two sons. Subsequently, she was earning a living as a textbook editor for four years until 1968, when she was employed by Random House in New York City as a senior editor. There, she played a vital role in bringing Black literature into the mainstream since she was assigned to working, almost exclusively, on black writers. This allowed her to foster the careers of a new generation of Afro-American authors such as Angela Davis, Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara or Gayl Jones (Gillespie 2008; Andrews et al. 2001).

Despite the difficulties involved in raising children as a single mother while working full time, Morrison also managed to write at night after her sons were asleep (Andrews et al. 2001, 296). Her efforts resulted in the publication of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. From this date to 2019, the year of her death, Morrison published eleven novels—*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), the trilogy made up of *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1997), and her last novels *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015a)—



two plays, two short stories, nine co-authored children's books and a plethora of books and essays on literary and social criticism. Moreover, her career has been acknowledged globally throughout the years. Of special significance were the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1977 for *Song of Solomon*, the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Significantly enough, in 2012, former President Obama invested her with the highest civilian award in the US, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Morrison's fiction has been defined as "historical and timeless" (Furman 2014, 4) because her plots and settings evoke periods of US history that render "an African American epic" (4) since the times of slavery to the new millennium. Taken together, her novels examine the black experience in a span of more than three hundred years, from pre-Enlightenment colonisation and settlement, the last decades of slavery and the Reconstruction years, the period between and after World War I and II, to the mid- and post-Civil Rights movement years, ending in the supposedly "post-racial" 2000s. In these works Morrison recreates the marginalisation experiences of African Americans in the US and explores how these individuals deal with their blackness and the idea of freedom within a society that privileges white identity while discriminating everything related to the black Other.

Throughout her oeuvre, Morrison reflects on African American "double-consciousness" (Du Bois [1903] 2007, 8) engendered by a historically white supremacist society. At the same time, she faces African Americans with their own responsibility in the conscious or unconscious perpetuation of a racist world. In order to render the physical and psychological abuse experienced by blacks in the US, Morrison focuses not only on the collective memories of the trauma of slavery and the colour-caste hierarchy, but also on more contemporary forms of racist physical and social

aggressions against black individuals which often result in black-on-black violence within the African American community. It could be argued that, as the themes tackled in her novels demonstrate, Morrison's works are just not art for art's sake but, instead, they are political instruments. Indeed, Morrison always defended the idea that "the best art is political" and any artistic expression can be "unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (1983, 345). For this reason and because, as she puts it, jazz and blues—two historically subversive and political musical genres for blacks—are no longer exclusively African American productions, she regards the novel as the best healing and resistance tool for African Americans (340).

Owing to Morrison's concern with the socio-political function of her literature, she conceives readers as a community, a society or village (Ryan 2007, 151) and her writing as "village literature" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 120) for "all sorts of people" (121). According to Judylyn S. Ryan, through her works Morrison teaches that reading community to interpret "the racialized gaze that has informed the discursive practices, interpretive habits, and moral competence" of the US society "and that has been the root cause of particular failures of democracy" in the country (2007, 151-52). In this sense, and as Morrison herself recognised, her writing "is sublimely didactic" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 74), an educational endeavour that Ryan relates to Morrison's aim of promoting an interpretative ability that fosters her readership's "ethical competence and [...] agency" (2007, 152). This socio-political and educational goal behind her literature is a key to understanding Morrison as a teacher-writer, as a biblical prophet or "literary Moses" who is sent to deliver her people from centuries of suffering and of not "knowing themselves" (Denard 1993, 227). Such a prophetic role is observable in all her novels where, on the one hand, she bears witness to and criticises the challenges that African Americans have historically faced and, on the other, provides warnings and

guidance to stop “all the confusion and denigration that plagues America” (Watson 2020, 47). For so doing, as Ryan notes, “Morrison frequently constructs an ideal narrative audience that is teachable” (2007, 156).

In order to fulfil her socio-political and educational endeavour, Morrison relies on a strategic use of narrative technique and language. One of her usual procedures is the inclusion of an authoritative narrator that speaks for a community. On many occasions, this narrative authority is constituted through textual strategies such as comments, judgements or generalisations beyond the diegetic world, a direct address to the implied reader or allusions to other authors or texts. These techniques allow Morrison to engage in cultural, social and intellectual debates from within her fiction. As she put it once, “to have the reader feel the narrator without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book” is “what’s important” (1983, 341). In sum, Morrison’s writing “expects, demands participatory reading,” which is, according to the author, “what literature is supposed to do” because this artistic expression is “not just about telling the story; it’s about involving the reader” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 231). Hence, it could be argued that, through her texts, Morrison creates a collaborative relationship with her readers who, as active extra-diegetic agents, must work on the ethical and political matters channelled by her fiction.

Such a peculiar inclusion of the reader in her novels is based, as Morrison explains, on the black oral and musical tradition integrated in her fiction, which makes her feel “something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change [...]. In the same way that a musician’s music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience” (1983, 341).

This sense of orality highlighted by the author is related to the feature of call and response—an important structural device in African American folklore, observable in slave works songs and gospel music—and is an element that engages the reader in a collaborative construction of texts with the author.

Another characteristic in Morrison's literary style which enhances the sense of orality is the creation of polyphonic plots. The use of multivoicedness is a literary technique which enables her to forge a fictional universe where both major and minor characters are allowed to express themselves. In every novel from *The Bluest Eye* to *God Help the Child*, Morrison includes a myriad of characters, prompting the reader to see their complexities and circumstances by means of narrative strategies such as direct dialogues, reported speech, free indirect style or interior monologue. Hers is a complex way of writing. Yet, as Ryan argues, it avoids the risk of "othering" by giving access to everyone's (hi)stories and motivations and therefore, by creating a "democratic narrative universe" where "an exchange of multiple gazes among the characters and readers can take place" (2007, 159).

Yet another trait of Morrison's writing is that it is clearly double-voiced, that is, similarly to the works by Louise Erdrich and Roxane Gay—who, as explained in Chapters 2 and 3, have mixed or hybrid cultural backgrounds—Morrison's fiction and style emerge from a complex array of aesthetic traditions of Euro-American and African-American origins. From her Western upbringing she mostly borrows Greco-Roman myths, popular European legends and fairy tales alongside motifs and narrative strategies from Anglo-American authors, namely William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and even William Shakespeare. For instance, her polyphonic plots are influenced by modernist writers like Faulkner and Woolf, coincidentally the authors examined by Morrison in her MA dissertation (Andrews et al. 2001, 295). From the

African and African American cultural traditions Morrison includes myths such as that of the Flying Africans alluded in *Song of Solomon*, folkloric orality, the African-American musical traditions, primarily spiritual blues and jazz, as well as alternative approaches to history, religion and ancestry and philosophical ideas of time and cosmology usually opposed to Western ones.

In *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition*, Justine Baille posits that through “a process of appropriation, mastery and inversion,” Morrison takes from European and American literary forms what is needed “to be reshaped and decoded in order to recover the presence of blackness in the narrative of American nation building” (2013, 4). An example of this enterprise was provided by Morrison herself when she recognised that the Greek chorus she studied at university reminded her of “what goes on in Black churches and in jazz [...]. The chorus being the community who participates” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 176). Similarly, she equated this theatrical device with the oral storytelling in the African American tradition (176) and admitted that, in a similar vein to the classical Greek legends and the African griot reciting the story of the black people to a hearing audience, she also wanted her novels to appear “oral, meandering, effortless, spoken” (Morrison 1983, 341). Hence, this mixture of cultures conspicuously allowed Morrison to fulfil her aim of infusing her works with orality and sound. Finally, the last characteristic in Morrison’s hybrid style is her resistance to closure, “to shut doors at the end of books” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 177), a strategy that she borrows from Faulkner’s and Woolf’s fiction and that she also relates to the interweaving of black literature and African American music, in particular jazz, a musical genre with “no final chord” (155). Paradigmatic examples of this narrative choice can be found in novels like *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *A Mercy*.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, many critics have observed the presence of Magical Realism in her works. This nomenclature has been used to refer to the supernatural or non-rational elements in Morrison's works which this author never understood as such. In fact, Morrison first felt uncomfortable with this label (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 226) because, like Erdrich and other ethnic writers, she places the believable and unbelievable in a non-hierarchical balance which allows her to represent elements from African American cosmology. This way of understanding the world, one which "is perceptive as well as enchanting," is what she learnt at home, where "people talked about their dreams and visitations with the same authority that they talked about what 'really' happened" (226). Being part of her roots, as Morrison admits, she always felt the need to deploy this non-rational realism in order to "explain hopelessly unscientific things" (226). Accordingly, visitations or surreal happenings and motifs appear in most of her novels, as is the case of *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Love* or *A Mercy*, where they are juxtaposed to a realistic tone, too.

Another feature that distinguishes Morrison's writing is the recurrence of themes, narrative techniques and other textual strategies—albeit with variation—across her novels, which gives a sense of a dialogical relationship among them. For instance, in *Jazz* and *Love*, Morrison returns to the exploration of female friendship and bonding that she had begun in *Sula*. In *Tar Baby* and *God Help the Child*, she tackles and expands the impact of passing, internal colourism and the influence of the Western beauty canon on black women that Morrison had already elaborated in *The Bluest Eye*. Likewise, *A Mercy* renders the world of slavery that the author had introduced to her readership with *Beloved*, although, this time, the plot is set in the seventeenth century and it also includes a Native American slave. In a way, such recursive variations allow Morrison "to position her characters, readers and the-society-as-readers to discover that

the (recurring) past is a reservoir from which the future can be drawn and redrawn in more expansive and enabling ways” (Ryan 2007, 160).

Hence, alongside a distinctive poetic or lyrical prose which results in “densely lyrical narrative textures” (Gates and Appiah 1993, xi), Morrison’s literary style—e.g. the presence of multiple voices that become enmeshed and confusing for the reader in works like *Beloved*, her jumbled and oftentimes unreliable or fallible narrators and her intricate plots full of surrealist or non-rational happenings—have led numerous critics to conceptualise her writing as postmodernist and challenging for readers (K. Davis 1998; Palladino 2008; Wyatt 2017). However, in her last novel, *God Help the Child*, Morrison presents “a more simple prose” (Ervin 2015, n.p.) with a greater sense of order and a more straightforward and even “colloquial” style (Anrig 2015, n.p.). Moreover, the focus on the present times and the presence of lifelike characters, together with the absence of magic or supernatural elements, make this novel the author’s most realistic one in her career (Ulin 2015, Rifkind 2015, Gay 2015). In this sense, this work may be considered as yet another example of the realist turn in the fiction of some US ethnic female authors since the advent of Transmodernity.

*God Help the Child* is a trauma novel set in the 1990s and 2000s. It revolves around a young female black protagonist, Lula Ann Bridewell—later on called Bride—who suffers an identity crisis when her childhood trauma returns to haunt her in her adult life after the desertion of her boyfriend, Booker Starbern. This early trauma is related to her mulatto mother, Sweetness, and her physical and emotional detachment from baby Lula Ann, provoked by this mother’s phobia about being exposed as an African American descendant. Before the return of the repressed childhood ghosts while living away from her mother, Lula Ann depended on her beauty and the commodification of her exotic blackness as the way to be accepted in contemporary US

society, where skin colour still remains a powerful basis of stratification. Yet, this artificial armour proves helpless as a curative tool, so that the protagonist ends up embarking on a self-healing quest for communal love and her African American roots.<sup>99</sup>

Arguably, through the protagonist's self-objectification and embracing of the Euro-American perception of beauty to please the white gaze, the novel highlights the pervasive effect of Western beauty standards on African American women, a recurrent idea in Morrison's fiction already presented in *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*. In contrast to these novels, as I contend in section 4.2., *God Help the Child* is formally a less challenging narrative which allows the author to transmit to her readers, including millennial ones, a clearer and more direct message about the destructive effects of racist and sexist oppression in contemporary US. Attending to this change in Morrison's writing, the rest of the chapter particularly explores the novel's portrayal of the ongoing negative impact that the trauma of racism and the colour line has on contemporary black individuals, which tends to materialise in the form of self-loathing as well as intra- and inter-racial aggressions. Through a study of the three main characters' actions, I attempt to demonstrate that their questionable behaviour is not a fortuitous occurrence, but a result of the cultural trauma derived from corrosive stereotypes related to blackness in the US society of the 2000s. Further, I aim to prove that through this novel, Morrison sends the optimistic message that the (self-)destructive power of racism and colourism for African Americans can be fought, but never individually.

Accordingly, section 4.3. examines the novel's underscoring of contemporary black parents' involuntary inheritance and transmission of the African American trauma to their children, who, in turn, can develop long-lasting psychic and identity marks that may lead them to victimise other people. Firstly, I examine Sweetness as a woman

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<sup>99</sup> Hereafter the name Lula Ann will be used to refer to the novel's protagonist as the girl living with Sweetness until she leaves the family apartment forever. The name Bride will be used in all other cases.



whose abusive behaviour and emotional aloofness towards her daughter is rooted on the transgenerational trauma of the colour line she inherited from her family. By so doing, I seek to demonstrate that the novel presents this character both as a perpetrator of the girl's suffering and as a victim of an extant colour-caste system that heavily conditions her actions. But as I shall prove, Sweetness's unmotherly demeanour is not merely motivated by the trauma of systemic racism, for it is in truth the result of a situation of intersectional oppression that she experiences as an Afro-descendant working-class single mother.

Additionally, although recent research on the novel deems Lula Ann's trauma as an individual condition originated in her mother's detachment (López Ramírez 2017; Wyatt 2017; Martín-Salván 2018; Gallego 2020), I intend to go further and specify that it is actually the combination of a "bonding trauma" (F. Ruppert 2008) and the African American one passed on by Sweetness that turns the protagonist into a victimiser. For this reason, in this section I also study Lula Ann's social victimisation of a teacher and her own self-harm through her relegation into a contemplative object as two consequences of a concatenated (individual and collective) trauma. The section ends with the scrutiny of Booker so as to prove that, in his case too, the coalescence of an individual psychic affection—"perennial mourning" (Volkan 2017)—and the trauma of systemic racism drives him to hurt himself and others, including Lula Ann.

Finally, section 4.4. focuses on the protagonist's journey through the Californian roads towards healing and a complete transition from girlhood to womanhood fostered by the help of the community—mostly female—and by the return to her African American roots. As I shall conclude, through the novel's ending Morrison highlights the difficulties of growing up and being an African American parent in an ongoing white supremacist society as she remarks the necessary skills and weapons that black

youngsters require to survive and fight back contemporary forms of racism, from racial violence to misogynoir.

#### **4.2. *God Help the Child*: A Turn to Millennial Young Adults and the Closure of a Literary Cycle**

Since its publication, *God Help the Child* has been depicted as “a sparse novel” if compared to other epic and more lyrical works by Morrison like *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved*, which offered “a richer plot line, fleshed-out backstories, and a great character depth” (Wardi 2020, 89). Some critics and reviewers (Akins 2015; Rifkind 2015; Ibarrola-Armendariz 2019) have characterised this brief, later novel as a decaffeinated text with a rushed story stripped “of much of the temporal detail that tethered readers to specific times and places of such books as *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Home*” (Rifkind 2015, n.p.). It has also been perceived as a work which “carries the shape of a far grander book, where the characters are more fully explored and there is far more at stake,” but which only remains on the surface due to its brevity (Gay 2015a, n.p.).

Despite such responses denoting a certain level of disappointment towards Morrison’s last narrative, it is a fact that the author had been showing a move towards minimalism for a while, as seen with *A Mercy* and *Home*, less complex novels under two hundred pages each. However, it would be unfair to dismiss the simplicity of Morrison’s late novels as the result of literary and stylistic exhaustion at the end of her career. In fact, in an interview Morrison recognised the new direction which she had taken as a crafter of stories: “Some writers whom I admire say everything. I have been more impressed with myself when I can say more with less instead of overdoing it, and making sure the reader knows every little detail. I’d like to rely more heavily on the reader’s own emotions and intelligence” (2014, n.p.). In this sense, as Walton Muyumba

points out in his review of *God Help the Child*, “what one might call [Morrison’s] late style” is based on the author’s distillation of “her fictions to their atomic elements” (2015, n.p.). Significantly, Jean Wyatt regards the brevity or concision of this novel as reflective of the urgency with which Morrison wanted to spread the main message behind this narrative” (2017, 171).

Besides a conspicuously concise style, another feature that characterises Morrison’s last novel is her less lyrical, imagistic, fractured and labyrinthine prose, which is now made up of apparently simpler sentences whose significance can be grasped in a first reading. Further, although it is true that Morrison brings the memories of events that some characters lived in the 1990s, most of the action in *God Help the Child* takes place in post-9/11 US and follows “the straight arrow of the quest genre” (Wyatt 2017, 172). Precisely, this straight or linear plot facilitates readers to follow the events experienced by the characters more directly than in previous works such as *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon*.

Arguably, together with the novel’s brevity, its linearity also responds to Morrison’s goal of sending a clearer didactic, moral and socio-political message to her readership. It is worth mentioning that this is the first time that Morrison sets one of her stories in the 2000s, a “slippery” changing time for the author, who had to delay the developing of the novel and finish it after publishing yet another narrative—*Home*—about a past era (2015b, n.p.). Nevertheless, as Morrison admitted in an interview, when she realised that some of the earlier themes she had tackled in previous works “were still bubbling up and surfacing” today, she “just needed a new language, a new collection of people in order to express it” (2015b, n.p.). Those themes are child abuse and suffering as well as the significance of race, colour and class in new millennium US. Interestingly, *God Help the Child* includes very realistic details of the first years of

the twenty-first century that are observable not only in her characters (e.g. her protagonist is a successful and empowered black businesswoman), but also in the messages the novel provides in relation to today's consumerist society, the commodification of the black female body, the fallacy of colour-blindness in the US, the ongoing institutional violence against African Americans or the shallowness of the US neoliberal ethos. Thus, I interpret the narrative simplicity of this novel as a strategy whereby Morrison can spread her criticism on such contemporary topics in a clearer, less intricate manner than in previous works so that her urgent message can be comprehended by a broader audience, including millennial young adults.

Another change in Morrison's style that can be observed in the novel under analysis is the much less obvious presence of the magical realist elements that critics have often identified in her earlier novels. Perhaps Morrison's awareness of some young African American people's unwillingness to "hark back to those embarrassing days when [blacks] were associated with 'haints' and superstitions" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 153) prompted her, at the dusk of her career, to create her most realist novel. It is true that in the text only one particular supposedly supernatural event occurs to the protagonist. This occurrence is Bride's physical reversion from an adult woman to a young girl, a non-rational event that none of the other characters seems to notice. Although reviewers like David Ulin interpret Bride's gradual turn into her prepubescent self as a "loose" element of Magical Realism in the novel (2015, n.p.), as I will argue in section 4.3.2., this shift works as a sign of the belated outburst of Bride's repressed childhood trauma of parental rejection on account of her skin colour. This reading of Bride's physical change as a trauma-related hallucination, as I will show, bespeaks a purposeful minimum expression of magical or non-rational events in the story in order to make the plot more credible and therefore accessible.

*God Help the Child* also evinces another shift in Morrison's style in the less complex crafting of its polyphonic plot if compared to her previous novels. For instance, at some points in *Beloved*, Morrison includes different voices on the same page through dialogues and free indirect speech, which sometimes makes it difficult to discern who is speaking. In *A Mercy*, she resorts to two first-person narrators and a heterodiegetic omniscient one that relates the lives of several characters through their particular perspectives and distributes them in different chapters. This allows readers to have access not to a single account of events, but to a variety of versions which compete with and complement each other. Yet although this time Morrison facilitates the comprehension of the events, it is the reader that has to make an effort to decipher the narrator's identity in each case. Significantly enough, in *God Help the Child*, Morrison organises the different speakers in chapters as well, but she entitles each section with the name of the homodiegetic narrator whose first-person account the reader is about to follow so as to indicate who is speaking more clearly. Only four chapters include an anonymous omniscient heterodiegetic narrator that is also recognisable for his or her third-person reports. Through this directness, Morrison facilitates her readers' comprehension of the events occurring to all the characters. As I argue, here is where her strategic realistic turn lies.

*God Help the Child*, which is divided into four parts, opens with the first-person account of Sweetness, who excuses her tough love—or lack of love altogether—towards her daughter during her childhood owing to the girl's dark skin colour. At the very beginning, with her use of the second-person pronoun “you” (Morrison 2015a, 3), Sweetness appears to be addressing an absent narratee—apparently, the implied reader—in a sort of confession or testimony. But this presence will gradually disappear from her account, giving readers the sense of being in the presence of an interior

monologue. This brief first chapter is followed by a second one where Bride is similarly blaming another person—Booker—for having abandoned her for no obvious reason. Like Sweetness, she addresses the implied reader only at the very beginning, so her account turns into another interior monologue like her mother's as readers follow her words. Given the subjectivity of Sweetness's and Bride's accounts and the element of suspense introduced through the opening of the story in *media res*, the reader is demanded to pay attention to the other accounts that will appear later on. These testimonies will complement the ones provided by mother and daughter and will make readers realise, as will be further explained in section 4.3., that the novel presents the two characters as ambiguous or partially reliable narrators whose accounts need to be quarantined until other voices are read.

In general terms, the first-person reports that appear in the novel are recounted in the present tense except for the moments in which the characters/narrators recall the past. This simultaneous narration of events or *isochrony* where story time coincides with discourse time (Genette [1972] 1980, 87; Fludernik 2009, 33) is most observable when Bride is hit by her ex-teacher, Sofia Huxley, after confessing to her that she was the little girl who put her in jail. Full of rage after spending years in prison, Sofia attacks Bride, whose narration is interrupted and followed by a temporal and textual ellipsis marked by a long dash, which demonstrates that the narrating I and the experience I coincide here:

“I guess you don't remember me. [...] Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—”

I search through the blood with my tongue. My teeth are all there, but I can't seem to get up. I can feel my left eyelid shutting down and my right arm is dead.”  
(Morrison 2015a, 21)

Another instance that proves that the novel is narrated at the same time that the action takes place can be found in the episode where Bride and her co-worker,

Brooklyn, meet after the incident with Sofia. Here, the reader is shown that the former is not listening to Bride as she is immersed in negative thoughts about her while pretending to listen to her words: “She knows I know she’s lying. [...] [W]hy would she tell me such fucked-up lies? [...] A quarter of her face is right, the rest is cratered. [...] I shouldn’t be thinking this. But her position at Sylvia, Inc. might be up for the grabs. How can she persuade women to improve their looks with product that can’t improve her own?” (25-26). Through this narrative strategy the novel reveals that, although Bride trusts Brooklyn as a friend, in truth, she is a deceitful and self-centred person unable to become an active listener when Bride needs her most. Therefore, through Brooklyn’s isochronic account, the novel hints at the core of the story: Bride’s distorted vision of the world is a consequence of her traumas and will accompany her until she enrolls in her formative and restorative journey.

The use of the first-person present tense and isochrony in these terms is very innovative in Morrison’s oeuvre, since no other novel of hers includes this narratological strategy.<sup>100</sup> It is important to bear in mind that, although first-person present tense narratives already existed in past centuries, primarily in the form of epistolary novels, in general terms, it has been an uncommon feature in fiction until the last decades of the twentieth century (Hansen 2008, 317). In contrast to the widely used past tense narration, as Monika Fludernik points out in *Towards a ‘Natural’*

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<sup>100</sup> Although Morrison makes a limited use of first-person present tense narration vis à vis homodiegetic narrators in *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*, her deployment of this sort of narrative voice in these texts clearly differs from the use she makes of it in *God Help the Child*. In *The Bluest Eye*, whilst Claudia—one of the main characters—recounts her memories about the story of Pecola, her childhood friend at that time, in first-person (singular and plural) present tense, in this narration discourse time does not coincide with story time like in *God Help the Child*. In *A Mercy*, the first-person tense is both used by Florens, the protagonist, because she is a black slave unable to produce the grammatical structures in past tense that she needs to tell her addressee, the Blacksmith, the story of her past, and by her unnamed slave mother from whom Florens was separated when she was a girl. This second first-person homodiegetic narrator mostly uses the past tense in an evident case of interior monologue, yet she succinctly resorts to the present tense when she tells her daughter that she loves her and that, precisely for this reason, she gave her to another slaveholder who, unlike their former master, had no sexual interest in her. Even though this character’s monologue arguably resembles that of Sweetness in *God Help the Child*, it clearly diverges from Bride’s and Brooklyn’s isochronic accounts of their own actions.

*Narratology*, since the 1970s, “the number of present tense texts has risen dramatically” (1996, 188). Some examples of the first-person present tense that make this formerly unconventional narrative technique more widespread nowadays are J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988) or Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991) and *Glamorama* (1998).

According to John Harvey, one of the reasons for the current popularity of first-person present tense fiction may be related to the immediacy that characterises today’s world, dominated by the present tense through the torrent of news updates in the written, visual and social media as well as the capitalist concern with instant values, prices and prospects (2006, 84-86). In addition, the rise of these almost impressionistic narratives could be connected to the fact that our era is the “age of the image” (86) on account of the influence of the visual media—film, television—and, in the last few years, the proliferating streaming platforms. Precisely the importance of cinema and, most especially, of TV in postmodern times could explain the quasi-cinematic aesthetics and immediacy-related narrative strategies used by many contemporary writers (Harvey 2006, 86; Schaefer 2020, 25-27). This seems to continue being the case in the transmodern era as evinced by *God Help the Child*, a novel about a millennial protagonist that the author seems to address not only to her long-standing readership, but also to a new generation of younger readers who are avid consumers of visual contents on TV or online. Perhaps for this reason, Morrison chose the deployment of present-tense narration for the chapters including the accounts of Sweetness, Bride and Brooklyn. However, as Per Krogh Hansen reminds us, first-person present tense “most certainly promotes unreliability,” since it favours “absolute focalisation and the non-hierarchical intermingling inclusion of imagination and registration [i.e. observation or report] of events” (2008, 328-29). Accordingly, *God Help the Child* requires a careful



and sceptical reading of each first-person perspective in isolation and the necessity to complement each account with other versions of the same event, a crucial lesson that Morrison provides in the so-called post-truth era.

Another narrative strategy that could be related to Morrison's adaptation of her style to a broader audience is the use of the third-person omniscient and seemingly neutral narrator that recalls the voice-over narration in films. This all-seeing and all-knowing voice recounts the adventure in which Bride enrolls when she decides to look for Booker with vivid details and, in a more condensed manner, this voice also recounts Booker's life from his traumatic childhood to his splitting up with Bride. As a traumatised youngster haunted by the death of his younger brother when both of them were children—as I shall explain in section 4.4—Booker seems unable to control his own life, a fact that the novel renders through his inability to offer a first-person account of his personal story in contrast to the rest of the characters. Only his poetic, subjective and jazzy writings are sometimes expressed in the first-person, in a sort of interior monologue with long sentences and scarce graphic pauses, all of which points to Booker's troubled mind and to music as his coping strategy.

Significantly enough, once the two lovers make amends and get off the stage, the omniscient narrator disappears and, just as it had started, the novel ends with Sweetness closing the story with her best wishes for Bride's pregnancy and the words "God help the child" (2015a, 178), the title of the novel. Yet, despite its closing circularity, the narrative shows an important change. Whereas at the beginning both Sweetness and Bride are alone and detached from others, at the end, it is only Sweetness that remains isolated and full of regret while apostrophising her daughter and wishing her "good luck" (179) as a future mother. In light of this scene, it could be argued that the novel textually conveys what Sweetness recognises at some point in the story—"[w]hat you

do to children matters. And they might never forget” (43). After all, the text invites readers to understand Sweetness’s complete isolation and static position in a nursing home as a deserved punishment—in a poetic justice sense—for having provoked Bride’s long-termed suffering with her unmotherly behaviour.

It should be noted that, despite the aforementioned shift to a simpler and more linear style, alongside the adaptation of her narrators in the fashion of films and TV series, *God Help the Child* retains some of the characterising features of Morrison’s writing, especially the double-voicedness of her novels. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains, since African American authors “learn to write by reading [...] the canonical texts of the Western tradition,” their texts “employ many of the conventions” of Euro-American works (1988, xxii). But such a repetition is one with a signifying difference, with “a distinct and resonant accent” related to “the various black vernacular literary traditions, which are still being written down” (xxii-xxiii). This bicultural mixture of Euro-American and African American elements is observable in all the works published by Morrison, and *God Help the Child* is no exception to this.

For instance, the novel includes the element of call-response, which demands the active participation of readers by means of the narrative structure and voice, as well as elements of orality and African American music. Particularly, the presence of blues and jazz can be noted in the allusion to Billie Holiday’s song “God Bless the Child” (1956) in the novel’s title, Louis Armstrong’s trumpet (Morrison 2015, 114) or the popularly-covered song “Stormy Weather” (152). Also, as Wyatt argues, “the novel itself could be read as a blues melody” sung by an abandoned woman full of sorrow for a lost love (2017, 183-84), and “the never-ending improvisations of jazz” is evoked in the syntax of Booker’s poetic writings (174). Indeed, the absence of periods and full stops in these

written pieces echoes Morrison's words about jazz as a music genre where "there is no final chord" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 155).

Other elements from the African American tradition in the novel are the sense of orality, encapsulated, for example, in the characters' direct monologues, and the intertextual relationship between this novel and some of Morrison's previous works. Those readers acquainted with her narratives may easily recognise various connections with *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *A Mercy*, *Home* and, most especially, *The Bluest Eye*, with which it shares the themes of child abuse and the dire effects of colourism and the white beauty canon on black girls and women. Interestingly, intertextuality creates a dialogic connection among all these novels which, in turn, evokes some kind of circularity, in the sense of a literary cycle being completed.

Regarding the traits from the Euro-American tradition, the most observable ones are the references to Western stories such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Montgomery 2020) or European fairy tales like "The Ugly Duckling," "Hansel and Gretel" and "The Sleeping Beauty," as different critics have pointed out (López Ramirez 2017; Montgomery 2020). Such influence can also be found in the mixture of popular genres from the Western literary canon, mainly the Bildungsroman, the romance and the road novel. Similarly to Erdrich's *The Round House*, *God Help the Child* revolves around the psychological and moral maturation process of the protagonist. For this reason, it can be regarded as a formative novel. It should be noted, though, that whilst this novel contains some of the main features of the coming of age novel (a young girl, the escape from the oppressive home or the maturation journey) as popularised in the Western culture, it also follows some conventions of the African American version of the Bildungsroman, which has traditionally depicted and exposed the effects of growing up in a country where racial prejudice is ubiquitous (S. Graham 2019a, 134; Raynaud 2004, 106). Some

of those generic traits are the inclusion of an autodiegetic narrator and a third-person omniscient one combined with internal focalisation (Raynaud 2004, 117), the “subversion” or “negation [...] of the American Dream” (109) and the importance of the African American family, especially grandmothers (108).<sup>101</sup>

Returning to the Western influences on this novel, as previously enunciated, *God Help the Child* is also a romance. Just as Western romances include a quest for the self and for love, Morrison’s plot revolves around Bride’s quest for identity, “self-realization and self-forgiveness” (López Ramírez 2015, 116) as well as for love and acceptance. In fact, the novel presents typical ingredients of the romance genre, including adventure, love, a hero(ine), and the archetypical journey with the stages of separation, initiation and return. This journey—a metaphorical and physical one—resembles that of Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* and even Frank Money’s in *Home* since, for the three protagonists on the move, travelling becomes the means of healing their wounded identity. Precisely due to the importance of Bride’s road trip for the development of her personal and cultural identity, I would contend that, together with the genre of Bildungsroman and romance, the novel shows traces of the road narrative. Significantly, and in contrast to *Song of Solomon*, *Home* and other famous Euro-

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<sup>101</sup> The African American Bildungsroman has traditionally depicted a journey from childhood—usually not an age of innocence but a “time already plagued with torments inherent in the condition of being black in America” (Raynaud 2004, 106)—to maturity precociously triggered by the protagonist’s discovery of US society’s racism (106). Thus, the successful fulfilment of his or her process of personal growth towards adulthood is related to the development of a capacity that allows him or her to “know and muster the mechanism of racism, to understand the workings of his/her oppression rather than fall prey to it” (109). On some occasions, the African American Bildungsroman depicts the impossibility of achieving this goal due to the individual and cultural damage provoked by the historical and lingering effects of racism, as is the case of Wright’s *Native Son* and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (S. Graham 2019a, 134). But on some others, notwithstanding a certain degree of ambivalence at the end, there is some sense of optimism for the protagonists despite the hardships they face growing up in a country that continuously reminds them of their Otherness, as is the case of Walker’s *The Colour Purple* or Sapphire’s *Push* (S. Graham 2019a, 135). These more optimistic novels tend to have a didactic purpose, which is no other than showing that the “positive development of the [black] individual against the combined odds of racism, poverty, and violence” (Raynaud 2004, 109) is possible, most times thanks to the black family (108).

American and African American stories about road trips, *God Help the Child* focuses on an African American female car traveller.

The modern road genre is deeply-rooted in the tradition of the picaresque and the pilgrimage or journey narratives such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (Mills 2006, 4) as well as "the characteristic journeys of American history" which as Janis Stout held in 1983, influenced US fiction "by providing images and framework of values associated with movement and direction" (quoted in Mills 2006, 4). Yet, whilst, at first, road stories in US fiction used to celebrate white automobility—as is the case of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*—, since the second half of the twentieth century, narratives of people of colour like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Home* or Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2002) became more numerous. These narratives about non-white protagonists have entailed a remapping of the road, a traditionally white and masculine space which, since the last decades of the twentieth century, has also been renegotiated by the incorporation of female characters as protagonists of ground-breaking road stories (Paes de Barros 2004, 4) both in literature—e.g. Erika López's *Flaming Iguanas* (1997)—and cinema—e.g. *Thelma and Louise* (Scott 1991) and *Nomadland* (Zhao 2020). *God Help the Child* is an example of this remapping and renegotiation of the American road, for it is an automobility story intimately tied to the protagonist's search of identity as a black woman, and the healing of her psychic wounds produced by her mother's emotional detachment from her during her childhood. In this sense, the novel proves a clearly innovative narrative in Morrison's fiction, where the American highway had been renegotiated from a racial vantage point but not from a gender one.

Finally, considering that trauma is overwhelmingly present in the story—as all the characters that appear in it are victims of some kind of early-life violence which left

scars on their psyches and shaped their adult identities—*God Help the Child* can be considered a trauma novel. As will be further developed in the following sections, and similarly to Erdrich’s *The Round House* and Gay’s *An Untamed State*, trauma here is rendered not through (post)modernist experimentation, but in a quite simple, realist and linear manner. This narrative simplicity in the representation of trauma proves, one more time, that not all trauma narratives display the effects of psychic, collective and cultural wounds in the manner theorised by many literary critics reliant of the Westerncentric classical or first-wave trauma theory. In fact, and in clear contrast to *Beloved*—the epitome of formal experimentation in a trauma novel—*God Help the Child* could be regarded as a good example of the inappropriateness of a universal theory in the study of trauma novels since, as these two contrasting works penned by the same author demonstrate, there is not one particular way to represent trauma in fiction. And what is more, as I will hereafter demonstrate, *God Help the Child*’s apparent simplicity allows for its better recognition as a contemporary ethnic trauma novel and encourages readers to reflect on the damaging consequences of racism, for this scourge can turn racialised victims into victimisers, too.

#### **4.3. Transgenerational African American Trauma, Victimisers and Broken Family Bonds**

Sociologist Kai Erikson argues in “Notes on Trauma and Community” that trauma can result from a single event as well as from “a constellation of life experiences,” including a prolonged exposure to danger or “a continuing pattern of abuse” (1995, 185). Morrison’s works especially focus on how the collective and cultural trauma of slavery—what as explained in Chapter 1, Joy DeGruy calls Post-Traumatic Slavery Syndrome (PTSS)—, segregation and the contemporary forms of racism have chronically affected

African American peoples and given rise to defective relationships and intra-racial violence, including abusive parenting.

In *Quiet as it's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Brooks Bouson observes the way in which Morrison's narratives portray the impact of the shameful effects that the corrosive racist stereotypes and the discourse repertoires have on the psyche and identity of both the African American individual and family structure. In order to do so, as Bouson explains, Morrison explores the transgenerational transmission of the victimisation and shame historically suffered by African Americans, thereby bringing to light the disruptive symptoms of PTSD (or, more correctly, PTSS) on black children, such as the development of "a scapegoat identity" and self-esteem problems (2000, 8). One of the best examples of transgenerational trauma and its negative consequences on children offered by Morrison came in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. As I shall prove in the following section, just as Morrison underscored the negative consequences of the transgenerational African American trauma in her debut novel, she closed her literary cycle with a more contemporary example of the passing of this collective and cultural trauma on the millennial generation and the sequelae of this inherited unresolved trauma.

#### ***4.3.1. Colour Line Trauma, Intersectional Oppression and Embittered Motherhood***

*God Help the Child* opens with Sweetness addressing readers straightforwardly so as to excuse herself for having given birth to her "midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison 2015a, 3) daughter, Lula Ann. This mother confesses she wishes her daughter "hadn't been born with that terrible colour" (5) and denies her responsibility: "It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and I have no idea how it happened [...]" [S]omething was wrong. Really wrong" (3). Sweetness, who is a light-skinned or high-

yellow citizen just as her husband Louis, admits that, after her labour, she became so scared of her blue black baby that she considered the idea of giving her away to an orphanage and even of suffocating her. Incapable of doing it, she decided to keep the girl, whom she did not touch, breastfeed or allow to call her “Mother” or “Mama” (6).

The novel also provides examples of Sweetness’s disdain for her daughter when she pejoratively relates Lula Ann’s blackness with “[t]ar” (3) or when she uses racist rhetoric rooted in primitivism discourses to compare her curly hair with that of the “naked tribes in Australia” (3). Likewise, Sweetness depicts Lula Ann with the derogatory label “pickaninny” (5) and she even dehumanises her when she describes her eyes as “witchy” and “crow black with a blue tint” (6), adjectives that give a sense of uncanniness, monstrosity and terror. Such a choice of words denotes an internalisation of corrosive old racist stereotypes and discourses about blacks as animals and even subhuman beings on the part of Sweetness.

As readers learn, Sweetness had “ways to punish [Lula Ann] without touching the skin she hated” (31). For this reason, the day when she slapped the girl for staining her bedsheet with her first menstrual blood, the latter felt great joy for being “handled by a mother who avoided physical contact whenever possible” (79). In light of such behaviour, the name Sweetness that Lula Ann is forced to use to refer to her mother is a sobriquet that turns ironic for two reasons: firstly, due to this character’s emotionally and physically abusive demeanour; secondly, because the name keeps an inextricable relation with both white and brown sugar—an image which conveys the duality of this mulatto woman—and with the plantation economy of the South. Like the dreadful Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*, life at the apartment rented by Sweetness is for Lula Ann anything but sweet, it is a sour experience full of suffering.



Although all the above signs can make Sweetness be regarded as a purely evil perpetrator, the novel makes clear through the few sections where this character elaborates her own version of her relation to Lula Ann's childhood that her unmotherly behaviour towards her own flesh and blood is not provoked by an intrinsic wickedness. Rather, this emotional detachment from her daughter derives from Sweetness's repressed self-loathing for being a partly black woman and her fear that Lula Ann may bring up her passing for white as a way to escape the daily humiliations and social and economic indignities that accompany racism. In other words, her behaviour is the result of a traumatic experience.

It is very telling that Sweetness is trying to hide her African American heritage in the 1990s, a decade when slavery was more than over and different laws had already been passed to protect African Americans from racism and discrimination. In fact, such behaviour exposes an uncomfortable truth occurring in today's US: that despite appearances, the social reality for blacks in the country is far from equitable as discriminatory practices persist. According to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the end of the Jim Crow era did not mean the ceasing of systemic racism in the US. Instead, what he calls the "new racism" was established in this country where today, in spite of some advancements in equal rights, "Blacks and Whites remain mostly separate and unequal in many areas of social life" (2015, 1362). The reason why there exists a tremendous degree of racial inequality in the so-called post-racial US is the rise of a new racial doctrine that Bonilla-Silva names "color-blind racism" (2006, 2015). As this scholar puts it, "this ideology, which acquired cohesiveness and dominance in the late 1960s, explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (2006, 2), although the idea of race lies below as a subtext. Thus, "[w]hereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks' social standing as the result of their biological and moral

inferiority,” according to Bonilla, colour-blind racism is characterised by whites’ rationalisation of the status of contemporary people of colour “as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and [their] imputed cultural limitations” (2).

Although it has been sufficiently proved that the notion of race is a socially constructed category that awarded European (white) settlers with systemic privileges over non-Europeans (non-white), Bonilla-Silva insists on the idea that, inasmuch as the imposed racial structure and its resulting inequality have benefited the dominant white group, these aspects have been maintained to defend the collective white interest (9). It is no wonder then, that historical racial principles are still perpetuated in the US regardless of the passing of time. In fact, this Afro-Puerto Rican scholar identifies the Jim Crow racism which defended “a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era” and the current colour-blind racism which “serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era” (3) as two political tools for the maintenance of white privilege and supremacy. The only difference between them is that, whereas in the Jim Crow system racial inequality was enforced through means that are considered illegal today, colour-blind racism produces systemic inequalities through “subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial” practices that seem almost invisible (26). Concrete examples of these indirect exclusionary practices are residential restrictions through the increment of rents, lower wages leading to an inferior economic, social and educational position or the over-representation of black individuals in Federal and State prisons (2-3).

As an African American woman whose light skin rewards her with acceptance, Sweetness seems well aware of the fallacy of colour-blindness in the US when she remembers the indirect discriminatory practices that she had to face in the 1990s:

It was hard enough just being a colored woman—even a high-yellow one—trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the nineties when Lula Ann was born,

the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but [...] many landlords [...] made up reasons to keep you out. But I got lucky with Mr. Leigh. I know he upped the rent [...] from what he advertised. (Morrison 2015a, 6)

Shocked by the conception of such a black baby when “nobody in [her] family [is] anywhere near that color” (3), and abandoned by her husband, who accuses her of infidelity, Sweetness cannot help but to feel ashamed of Lula Ann and fearful of losing the immunity which allows her to live with “a little dignity” (4) in a society where racism is still endemic. Certainly, this awareness of “skin privileges” (43) propels her to adopt a colourist attitude—one of the symptoms of PTSS as explained in Chapter 1—and develop an attitude of disdain and disgust towards her own daughter.

But what is most outstanding about Sweetness are some of the ideas about race and discrimination that she mentions in her initial monologue, especially her references to “quadrooms” (3) as well as the possibility of being “spit on in a drugstore” and forced to “let whites have the whole sidewalk” (4). Such statements denote that Sweetness is talking about a past time she “heard about” (4)—a time prior to the Civil Rights movement—when the negative consequences of the one-drop rule, namely racism and segregation, were more visible and legally accepted. Yet, although Sweetness’s words may sound odd or anachronistic, through these allusions to some racist practices carried out in the Jim Crow era, the novel arguably hints that Sweetness is chronically stuck-up in a past she never experienced fully on account of her age. Thus, I argue that this condition could be related to an unspoken trauma inherited from her family—the cultural trauma provoked by structural racism and the colour line in the US—which she represses by passing for white until her daughter’s birth reactivates it.

In order to understand the origin of Sweetness’s trauma, it is necessary to pay attention to her family history. As this character briefly explains in her monologue, many decades earlier, her grandmother had decided to abandon her three daughters and

pass for white (3). Perhaps as a reaction to this behaviour, Sweetness's mother, Lula Mae, chose to do the opposite and embrace her blackness, a decision that, according to Sweetness, entailed a high price for her progenitor. Particularly, the result of Lula Mae's determination to "remain" black was a life of humiliation, segregation and servitude, since she had to work as a housekeeper for a rich white family who ordered her to wash them "while they sat in the tub [...] and God knows what other intimate things" (4). These stories, passed on to Sweetness by her mother, work as carriers of the cultural trauma that African Americans have long suffered due to the stigma of racial othering. They shape Sweetness's identity and push her to repress her black roots by passing for white like her grandmother did.

To fully apprehend this traumatic inheritance, it should be remembered that the legacies of violence not only haunt the actual victims, for they can also be passed on across generations. The only difference is that, whereas direct victims of trauma live with the scars of memory—like gaps, distortion or intrusive flashbacks—"the recipients of transgenerational trauma live with a 'postmemory' that comes to them secondhand" (Schwab 2010, 125). Drawing on Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's theory of the crypt and the transgenerational transmission of trauma, Gabriele Schwab notes that when an individual inherits the non-integrated psychic or collective trauma of the previous generation, he or she may "display symptoms that do not emerge from their own individual experience," but from "the ghost, that is, the unfinished business" of the older generation (2010, 40). This is exactly what happens to Sweetness, who inherits the colour line trauma from her family and, later on, represses it or, using Abraham and Torok's terminology, buries it in her internal crypt.

Although "[c]rypts engender silence," one way or another, gaps, unspeakable secrets and concealed pain or shame "continue to affect and disrupt the lives of those

involved in them” (Schwab 2010, 49). For this reason, regardless of Sweetness’s attempt to bury her family history and African American lineage, as can be traced in her language, the phantom of her black identity continues haunting her even after years of separation from her daughter. As Abraham and Torok put forward in *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (1986) and *The Shell and the Kernel*, despite all the efforts made by individuals to bury their traumas in the crypt, these silenced or secret histories are inscribed in cryptic forms into their discourse and stories. In particular, the repressed or silenced emotions become traceable or readable both in traumatised individuals’ silences and in their cryptic or hieroglyphic language, which includes detours and incoherences. For instance, Schwab highlights various rhetorical figures that often “perform the work of crypts in language” such as anagrams, puns, homophony, metaphor, metonym and semantic ambiguities among others (2010, 54). Specifically the last three can be found in Sweetness’s account when she equates Lula Ann with tar, a picanniny, a crow and a witch, metaphors suggestive of a sense of dirt, inferiority as well as bad omen and danger, respectively. Hence, through her language, the novel points to Sweetness as a character fraught with stereotypical prejudices towards blacks as a consequence of the cultural trauma of racism and the colour line inherited from her family. Accordingly, as her words, her obsession with Lula Ann’s skin, her feelings of embarrassment and her fear of being exposed indicate, the birth of the girl acts as a catalyst that re-activates Sweetness’s repressed trauma.

This return of the engraved phantom leads Sweetness to feel disdain for Lula Ann and to be an abusive mother, which she justifies as a manner of providing the girl with the strict education she requires for surviving in a world where her notable blackness “is a cross she will always carry” (Morrison 2015a, 7). Nevertheless, Sweetness starts and ends her first intervention in the novel by repeating several times the words “It’s not my

fault” (3, 7). This sentence makes the reader—who had started reading this story in media res—think of this as being an example of the dictum *Excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta*. It could be argued then, that the novel presents Sweetness as an unreliable character/narrator since the very start, a depiction which is reinforced when the novel introduces Lula Ann’s account of her childhood in the following chapters. With the protagonist’s intervention, readers will verify Sweetness’s unmotherly and emotionally detached behaviour to which the protagonist would respond by making “little mistakes deliberately” in an attempt to be slapped by Sweetness and “feel her touch” (31). Nonetheless, given that Sweetness is clearly affected by the colour line trauma, somehow the novel invites readers to consider the idea that it is indeed not her fault entirely.

As all the aforementioned examples demonstrate, in *God Help the Child* Morrison subverts gender hierarchies and cultural expectations of what it is to be a mother as she has frequently done in her fiction.<sup>102</sup> In this and other previous novels, she situates black mothers in a position of power to teach, protect and empower their offspring in a racist, sexist and class-defined world. She also examines the consequences of a deficient mothering and motherhood on account of the negative influence of the continuous intersectional oppression she endures. In fact, her fiction presents numerous mother-child relationships and more than a few mothers who do violence to their own children. Some of these narratives—like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved* or *A Mercy*—challenge the traditional characterisation of motherhood by presenting female progenitors performing actions towards their offspring such as physical and emotional abuse, infanticide or abandonment that readers may find morally reprehensible. However, these

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<sup>102</sup> See the analysis of Andrea O’Reilly (2004) and Laurie Vickroy (2002) on Morrisonian mothers for further information about the ways these female characters, usually affected by a socially induced trauma, challenge traditional expectations of motherhood, especially when they take unilateral decisions for the sake of their children’s well-being that have tragic consequences for them.

works invite readers to understand that neither Pauline, Eva Peace, Sethe nor *minha mãe* are bad mothers for the sake of being evil. Rather, they are victims of their oppressive contexts where gender, sex, race and class issues intersect. In other words, they are victims who victimise their children, either as a consequence of their own traumas or in what they consider an ultimate gesture of protection from their racist, sexist and classist milieu. Accordingly, it is difficult to judge the choices of these characters, given that they have been shaped by the reality of being black, women and poor in a society where these three factors entail marginalisation and pain.

This is also the case of Sweetness, for she is both “oppressor and oppressed” (Gallego 2020, 49), a dual identity that once more serves Morrison to place the reader in a difficult position to judge the unethical action carried out by a black mother tyrannised by racism and white supremacy. As Sweetness is a victim, readers cannot clearly blame her for her abusive behaviour, primarily because, despite her acknowledged regret for “the way [she] treated Lula Ann when she was little,” she defends herself from any ethical judgement by inviting the implied reader to understand that “[she] had to protect [her daughter]. She didn’t know the world” (Morrison 2015a, 41). This world is the 1990s US society, where blacks, in Sweetness’s words, “could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school” or “be the last one hired and the first one fired” (41). Yet, regardless of her supposedly good intentions, as López Ramírez contends, with her emotional aloofness and authoritarian motherhood, Sweetness does not help Lula Ann face the contemporary US racist society in which they are both framed, as she “does not foster a positive racial identity in her daughter so she can resist racist practices” (2015, 114). On the contrary, as the novel shows later on, Sweetness’s imposition of “the societal cultural norms, values and expectations of the dominant

culture” (114) on her daughter makes this decision a damaging lesson for the girl in such a crucial time in her identity formation.

In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O’Reilly explains how, in the African American tradition, mothers and motherhood are valued and regarded as central pillars in their culture who allow for the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of the individuals of this community (2004, 4). Likewise, she highlights black mothers’ historical responsibility for providing “education, social, and political awareness, in addition to unconditional love, nurturance, socialization, and values” to their offspring and the other children in their communities (47). As this critic puts it, “in loving her children the [black] mother instils in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify blacks as other and object” (11). Moreover, O’Reilly identifies the role of African American mothers as a crucial one since, just like all the women within this community, “they are the culture bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential [for] the empowerment of black children” and therefore, for each successive generation (12).

Noticeably, in *God Help the Child*, Sweetness does not follow the model of African American motherhood described above, but quite the opposite. In lieu of self-reliance, self-love and self-defence, she transmits to her daughter the seed of the internal colour line and a fearful and submissive position towards racism and white supremacy. As López Ramírez argues, the problem of Sweetness’s motherhood is her lack of focus on “meeting Lula Ann’s cultural and emotional needs,” for “[s]he is more concerned about her daughter living up to the standards, norm-abiding ideas, consensus values and expectations of the white-dominated racist society” (2015, 155) than intent on connecting her with the African American values and foster her self-esteem.



Nevertheless, as I argue, Sweetness's unsuitable parenting is the inevitable result of three important factors that must be taken into account in the analysis of this character.

The first one is, evidently, the haunting of the colour line trauma. The second one is related to Sweetness's effort to protect herself and Lula Ann in a society where working-class black single mothers are doubly othered and discriminated against. Indeed, after the desertion of her husband, who considers Lula Ann "a stranger—more than that, an enemy" (Morrison 2015a, 5) due to her dark skin, Sweetness has to face the perils of being an abandoned black wife as she needs to deal with welfare clerks that treat her and Lula Ann as beggars. When Sweetness finds a night job at a hospital and Louis reconsiders his attitude and starts sending them fifty dollars per month, she is able to afford the housing that her racist landlord Mr. Leigh offers to her and to live with a little dignity again. Yet, Sweetness's condition as a working-class and now-exposed African American woman leaves her and Lula Ann in a vulnerable position and this requires her to do everything possible to protect themselves from their racist, sexist and class-defined society. For this reason, it is crucial to understand Sweetness's actions, which are embedded in a network of intersectional oppressions, partly as a response to her irrational fear of standing out and being expelled from the relatively safe life that she has made for herself despite all the obstacles she has to face as a humble, black, single mother.

Finally, the third factor behind Sweetness's defective parenting suggested by the novel is related to the broken transmission of traditional knowledge and particularly empowering black mothering. This comes as a result of the colourist culture that prevented Sweetness's mulatto grandmother from passing such an essential legacy on Lula Mae and Sweetness. Certainly, the absence of traditional wisdom makes Sweetness's mothering a damaging one for Lula Ann, inasmuch as her teachings are

infused by feelings of inferiority, shame and self-loathing. Similarly, Sweetness's detachment from the African American community on account of her desire to pass for white prior to Lula Ann's birth blows apart any chance of providing the right kind of education that her daughter requires. For all these reasons, Sweetness is not the empowering maternal figure needed by the protagonist, who, as will be explained in the following subsection, suffers the dire and debilitating consequences of her mother's internalisation of the colour line and her unsuitable protective teachings even during her adulthood.

#### ***4.3.2. Bonding Trauma and the White Armour: Where Individual and African American Traumas Meet***

Bride's voice opens the second chapter of the novel, where she addresses readers to let them know that she is "melting away" (Morrison 2015a, 3) since her boyfriend broke up with her using the spiteful words "You not the woman I want" (8). This split-up sinks the protagonist into a state of self-doubt and reflection about her love affair at which she looks back with rage: "Glad he was gone because he clearly was using me since I had money and a crotch. I was so angry" (9). The money Bride owns is the result of her hard work at her own cosmetic line at Sylvia, Inc., a beauty company. Precisely, in her monologue Bride addresses her younger self in order to show off her success—"How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful?" (11)—and ponders whether her ex-boyfriend would have preferred her younger self. What she is sure of is that her confession about her promise to visit and give some presents to Sofia Huxley—a former teacher incarcerated on the charge of molesting her pupils—is the crucial factor that started the quarrel with Booker and resulted in him running off. However, as Booker "confided nothing" about his life and

inner feelings (11), Bride believes that the reason why he flees is nothing but his selfishness and unwillingness to accept her “doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him” (12).

As readers learn through Bride’s narration, her desire to visit Sofia is related to a feeling of remorse, given that she was the person who falsely accused the ex-teacher just to make Sweetness proud of her. This action could be regarded as a victimisation of a supposedly innocent white woman who must spend fifteen years in jail; alternatively, it could be understood as a revengeful act in response to the suffering provoked by a system that privileges whites and degrades Lula Ann/Bride as a black Other. Somehow, the psychological influence that the court episode still has in adult Bride is traceable in her language, as seen when she talks about her relationship with Booker using legal terms: “I had spent those six months with him in a holding cell without arraignment or a lawyer, and suddenly the judge [...] dismissed the case or reused to heat it at all. Anyway I refused to whine, wail or accuse. He said one thing; I agreed. Fuck him” (9). It is worth highlighting these words because, although since the very start Bride is depicted as an independent, narcissistic, superficial and cold business woman who appears to have overcome her traumatic childhood, soon the above and other discursive signs allow readers to realise that this is not quite true. In fact, the novel makes evident the continuity of Bride’s childhood ghosts in her adult years when Booker’s abandonment and Sofia’s violent response to her apologies makes her re-enact them. This, in turn, gives rise to Bride’s psychological and physical somatisation of that trauma.

In her monologue, Bride recounts how her accusation of Sofia when she was eight years old made Sweetness smile like never before (31). More surprisingly, once out of the court, Sweetness held her hand for the first time and gave her little earrings of fake

gold as a present for testifying “against the Monster” (50). These are the only good memories Bride keeps of her mother because the rest of them have to do with Sweetness’s physical and emotional detachment, an extremely painful situation that provokes a childhood trauma in Bride that she tries to repress when she leaves her home at sixteen. But this multilayered trauma, where the effects of racism, an unmotherly mother and a shaming lie meet, returns to haunt Bride when she feels abandoned and rejected one more time.

In *Trauma, Family and Bonding Constellations: Understanding and Healing Injuries of the Soul*, psychologist Franz Ruppert explains that the bond created between mother and child through direct physical contact, including the mother’s eyes, her voice, her smell and the specific taste of her milk, “is the primary form of bonding for humans” (2008, 35). According to this scholar, “[i]t is via the mother that the child experiences herself [or himself]—I am here, I have a body, I have needs and feelings” (35). It is as if the mother and the newborn formed “a psychological and emotional dyad in which they are mutually oriented and interwoven” (37). In short, the bond with the female progenitor provides the “foundation of psychological patterning for every human being” (35). However, if this original connection is missing or seriously disrupted by rejection or abuse during an individual’s childhood, as Ruppert argues, this person will be likely to have unstable and disturbed psychological and emotional foundations years later (39).

Although Ruppert considers that the worst psychological blow for the child is the lack of bonding with the mother, he also posits that if the need for a secure, supportive and stable emotional attachment cannot be satisfied by the progenitors in general, inasmuch as they “systematically neglect, reject, hate, beat” the infant, this situation can equally have “a momentous and catastrophic effect” on his or her psyche

(154). According to this scholar, such parents' negative attitudes are primarily related to their "physical and emotional needs" and unresolved feelings of hate or fear that they project on their child (154). In short, Ruppert points to the traumatised or psychologically-affected parents as the cause of what he calls "bonding trauma," a condition affecting neglected or abused children which concomitantly makes them seek "something that is not available [...] because of the emotional vacuum in the parent[s]" and become flooded by their progenitors' "deep feelings of fear, rage, shame and depression" (155). Nonetheless, bonding trauma is especially problematic when the emotionally absent parent is the mother since, despite such a painful rejection, the child always "clings to her with all his [or her] feelings" (155). This makes him or her grasp not love and care, but the mother's "emotional chaos" out of which this infant will form his or her identity (155). Besides, when traumatised mothers cannot open their hearts to their children, cohabitation becomes a continuous source of stress for these women. This situation makes the child "live with the implied reproach" of having "ruined his [or her] mother's life" and, evidently, gives rise to continuous and irreconcilable frictions unless the mother deals with her repressed trauma (155).

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison offers a good example of the effects that the absence of a solid maternal bond between Sweetness and Lula Ann have on the young girl. Whilst the former projects her fears and her self-hatred on her daughter and repudiates her because, like a mirror, the little girl reflects the inconvenient truth of her black-heritage, Lula Ann tries her best to cling to her mother to the extent of lying at court just to receive some proof of motherly attention. Interestingly, this is not the first time Morrison shows a black mother rejecting her own daughter as a result of the projection of her own shame and self-hatred owing to her African American roots. In *The Bluest Eye*, influenced by the feelings of dislocation after moving far from her

family to fulfil her role of wife, the white beauty canon in the films that Pauline, Pecola's mother, sees at the cinema and the contempt of the white locals—including the doctors in charge of her labour—makes her desire that her baby be born white. Nevertheless, she gives birth to a very dark girl, which makes this character perceive the newborn as ugly and redirect all her love and care to the white little girl of the Fishers, the family for whom she works. Pecola witnesses her mother's bonding with the white girl when, in the kitchen of Pauline's employers, she accidentally drops a blueberry pie and Pauline reprimands her with "words [that] were hotter and darker than the smoking berries" while she comforts the weeping "pink-and-yellow" Fisher girl with sweet words ([1970] 2007, 109). Thus, scorned by her mother, her father and the rest of the society, Pecola comes to believe that she is not loved because, contrary to white girls like Shirley Temple and the daughter of the Fishers, she does not have blue eyes (a metonymy for whiteness). Eventually, her self-contempt and craving for an unachievable physical trait make Pecola go insane.

Just like Pecola, Lula Ann is also rejected since the very moment of her birth, as evinced by Sweetness's description of her "as an abject excretion" of her body (Martín-Salván 2018, 611) and by her reactions to the unexpected black skin of the baby. Lula Ann additionally shares with Pecola a surviving strategy common among children affected by the absence of maternal bonding, which is their withdrawing to themselves in order to cope with their loneliness (F. Ruppert 2008, 43). This strategy is observable in Lula Ann's yearning for her mother's love in silence while spying on her behind the door, or in the fact that, in order not to infuriate her, she does not let Sweetness know that their landlord recognised her when she witnessed him sexually abusing a little boy.

Overall, Lula Ann's self-imposed silence aimed at pleasing her mother accompanies her throughout her childhood, to the extent that the girl never tells her

teacher about her classmates' racist bullying so as to avert being "suspended or even expelled" (Morrison 2015a, 56). This was a fear infringed by her mother's lesson about "mak[ing] no trouble" (7) owing to her vulnerable position as a black individual. Moreover, although, in contrast to Pecola, Lula Ann does not go mad as a result of the scorn of her parents and her neighbours, she ends up committing perjury to make her mother proud. After all, as Sweetness puts it, "[i]t's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites" (42). This act, albeit terrible, could be psychologically justified by Ruppert's observation about the "unbearable emotional conflict" that a mother's rejection entails for the child, who "will fight with all possible means" against this painful situation (2008, 156).

It is true that after the trial, the relationship between mother and daughter changes. However, their attachment is weak and does not last long because in her adolescence Lula Ann becomes rebellious, which leads Sweetness "to be even tougher" (Morrison 2015a, 178). This situation evidences that, regardless of Sweetness's temporary mother-like behaviour and Lula Ann's brief sense of being loved for the first time in her short life, as usually happens in cases of absent maternal bonding, the frictions between mother and child tend to remain (F. Ruppert 2008, 155). As a result of such a toxic relationship, at the age of sixteen Lula Ann decides to escape her oppressive home and starts calling herself by the name of Bride—ironically, a name that evokes whiteness.

By leaving her past life behind, as Bride retrospectively admits, "I built up immunity so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win" (Morrison 2015a, 57). And so, in order to create a protective barrier in her psyche, she decides to exploit her beauty and black skin by wearing white clothes and accessories only as advised by Jeri, a white male stylist who convinces her of the economic and social benefits of selling the exoticism behind her "licorice skin" (33). As this character states,

today “[b]lack sells. It’s the hottest commodity in the civilized world” (36).<sup>103</sup> For this reason, Bride’s self-imposed exoticism achieved through the enhancement of her dark skin with the white colour of her clothes brings positive results including “adoring looks” (34) and success in business. Her apparent social acceptance makes Bride become just as obsessed with white as Pecola was with blue eyes, which, in turn, leads this character to internalise “whiteness to such a self-denigrating degree that she becomes white in her appearance, mind and even daily habits” (Akhtar 2019, 67).

Bride’s fixation with whiteness, evidenced by her fascination with the different shades of white, is a “white mask” in the Fanonian sense of the term (1967) which clearly reflects this character’s subordination to the ongoing colourist US culture as a way to feel worthy. As Jasmin Wilson argues, “colorism is [...] the motive behind Lula Ann’s eventual reinvention, as she redefines herself by becoming the ‘other side of the coin.’ Where she was dark and undesirable, she becomes fashionable, classy, exotic, mysterious and cosmopolitan” (2020, 32). Accordingly, it could be argued that *God Help the Child* shows Bride as the fetish, the fashionable, which is another manifestation of colourism’s obsession with dark skin. Black skin here is a commodity, a product consumed or even devoured by a white prominently misogynist society. After all, the admiration that Bride provokes in others is not related to her personality or capacities, but rather, to the sexual connotations historically linked to the female black body. In other words, this acceptance derives from what bell hooks refers to as the

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<sup>103</sup> These words that Morrison puts in Jeri’s mouth echo Patricia Hill Collins’s opinion about US contemporary society where, as she notes, “Black popular culture [has become] a hot commodity” since the 1990s (2004, 122). It is undeniable that following the turn of the century and, most especially, from the election of President Obama in 2008 onwards, what Jaleel Akhtar calls “the new black” (2019, 1)—or successful blackness—became more visible and engendered an optimistic sentiment in relation to equal rights. However, as Morrison demonstrates in *God Help the Child*, this is the big chimera of the twenty-first century US, for the hierarchy of colour still remains the major barrier for equality in the country. With his allusion to the popularity of blackness in the contemporary world, Jeri, who represents the white male gaze that has historically fetishised the black female body, gives Bride the illusion of equity. Nonetheless, his embodiment of what Akhtar calls “the [white] power to represent and engage in the commodification and objectification of the non-white or people of color” (2019, 7), evinced in his moulding of Bride as an exotic commodity, points to the opposite case.



“commodification of Otherness” (2015a, 21) which is manifested in the fact that Bride is merely regarded as a sexual body, a contemporary Hottentot Venus, a spectacle for whites who visually consume her because she reminds them of “whipped cream and chocolate soufflé” (Morrison 2015a, 33).

In this respect, as Mar Gallego contends, the text invites readers to reflect on the way in which Bride “intentionally turns her darkness into her greatest asset” as a necessary “self-validating strategy” both in the hegemonic white society and in the African American community (2020, 51). Yet, contrarily to what Bride thinks, she is precisely accepted by society when she turns herself into an object of contemplation for the white gaze. Her social approval is not caused by her own self-reconfiguration as subject in the US society. Instead, it is the result of her own relinquishing of choice and objectification as an exotic woman. Thus, through Bride’s self-objectification—a form of unconscious self-victimisation—the novel underscores the persistence of the dire consequences of the colour line in the States, positing that the self-exploitation of the black body with the aim of being socially accepted entails a step backwards in the African American community’s fight for equal rights.<sup>104</sup>

It is important to note that, besides transforming herself into an object of contemplation, Bride’s new-found self is based on superficiality and a life of materialism and luxury. This is evinced by her Jaguar, her expensive clothes as well as her consumption of cocaine and her numerous non-genuine relationships with shallow lovers interested in her money and body. Similarly, Bride’s relationship with her supposedly best friend Brooklyn—who wants to steal her job and boyfriend and who,

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<sup>104</sup> Morrison had already spread this message in the 1980s through Jadine, the black model protagonist of *Tar Baby* whose seeming integration into white society is based on her exoticism and the disregard and rejection of any viewpoint that is not white/Euro-American. In order to prophetically guide and prevent the new generations of readers from making the same old mistakes again, with Bride, a millennial black woman, the author attempts to renew her former claiming by contextualising Bride, an updated Jadine, in the current era.

following Sofia's attack, describes Bride using a racist rhetoric when she compares her face with that of Ubangi people and orangutans (Morrison 2015a, 26)—is a superficial and even fake friendship built up on a foundation of silences, lies and envy.<sup>105</sup> This relationship is an inauthentic one because, firstly, neither of them knows details of each other's past lives and, secondly, because unlike true friends, they are dishonest with each other. Whilst, at first, Bride makes Brooklyn believe that she was attacked by a man, Brooklyn is not interested in listening to Bride's worries as she is more preoccupied with scaling the corporate ladder at Sylvia Inc, (26). Ironically, the name of the bar picked by Brooklyn to chat with Bride after the attack—Pirate—points to the deceitful nature of this character, a key trait that Bride's own self-centredness prevents her from noticing (45).

In addition, Bride's superficiality makes her a selfish person who has “no idea about what occupied” her boyfriend or about his past because “[she] talked; he listened” (62). However, as I shall explain in the following section, Booker strives to deal with a childhood trauma about which Bride knows nothing due to her lack of interest in someone else's life. Once Booker leaves her, Bride starts wondering about his destination and his reasons for dumping her. This abandonment—yet another one in her life—liberates the childhood phantoms that she had repressed in her inner crypt so as to forget about her father's abandonment and her mother's emotional detachment. In this respect, it is interesting to pay attention to the strange comparison of the suffering provoked by parental neglect as something worse than being “whipped like a slave” (38) that Bride utters when she refers to Booker's desertion. Such a hyperbolic statement articulated by an African American character, although grotesque, is by no means accidental. From the perspective of Abraham and Torok, Bride's seemingly

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<sup>105</sup> See Na'Imanh Ford (2020) for an insightful reading of the peculiar relationship between Bride and Brooklyn that complements the analysis provided here.

exaggerated language cryptically denotes how painful her bonding trauma and PTSS-related wounds were for her during her childhood and how, in spite of her attempts to conceal them behind her white armour, these injuries left perpetual scars on her just like the whip marks that remained in the black slaves' backs.

Yet, Booker's abandonment is not the only reason why Bride's past phantoms return. When she is on the floor receiving Sofia's beatings in lieu of defending herself, Bride realises that she "reverted to the Lula Ann who never fought back" (32). This lack of courage and strength that she relates with her childhood is also the attitude she adopted towards Booker's flight, when "[she] shook it off and pretended it didn't matter" (32). This reflection on her recurring cowardly position makes Bride feel not only "too lonely" (38) but also ashamed of herself.<sup>106</sup> Interestingly enough, the regression to her weaker past self also manifests when Bride appears to hallucinate her progressive turn to a prepubescent Lula Ann with no menstrual period (95), "virgin earlobes" (51), hairless armpits (52), lighter weight (81) and a "completely flat" chest (92). This delusion could be interpreted as a symptom of Bride's re-enactment of her trauma as this is a common condition among traumatised individuals.

Notwithstanding her wealth, beauty, popularity, Bride sinks into depression and starts abusing painkillers and alcohol—more PTSD/trauma indicators—to stop feeling that "[her] life is falling down" (53), as she admits: "What's going on? I'm young; I'm successful and pretty. Really pretty, so there! Sweetness. So why am I so miserable? Because he left me? I have what I've worked for and am good at it. I'm proud of myself, I really am, but [...] [I] keep remembering some not-so-proud junk in the past" (53). These words evince clear symptoms of a process of acting-out of Bride's repressed bonding and African American traumas, which is only soothed through the

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<sup>106</sup> As explained in Chapter 1, vacant self-esteem (DeGruy 2017) and racial shame (Bouson 2000) are symptoms of PTSS or African American trauma.

protagonist's compulsive covering of her face with the white foam Booker left at her home as well as her use of the shaving utensils he did not take with him:

Slathering the foam on my face I am breathless. I lather my cheeks, under my nose. This is crazy I'm sure but I stare at my face. My eyes look wider and starry. My nose is not only healed, it's perfect, and my lips between the white foam look so downright kissable [...]. I don't want to stop [...]. I use the dull edge and carve dark chocolate lanes through swirls of white lather. I splash water and rinse my face. The satisfaction that follows is so so sweet. (35)

As this passage reveals, due to the profound sense of deficiency instilled in Bride by her mother on account of her skin colour, the foam over her face allows this character to imagine herself as a white woman and, therefore, to experience temporal relief. In fact, she feels ecstasy, a sort of orgasmic trance, when she contemplates her white image in the mirror because, thanks to the foamy white mask, as the above starry eye/I pun suggests, she feels beautiful, like a star.

Nevertheless, the foam does not suffice to stop the symptoms of her resurfaced traumas and Bride's resulting depression. Aware of the fact that the pieces of the life that she had "stitched together"—through her "personal glamour, [...] creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protected her from any overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love" (79)—are now torn apart, she realises that there is no room for the weak girl "too scared to defy Sweetness" (7). In other words, after the two blows she receives in a matter of hours, Bride understands that she must "stand up for herself" (79), no matter what. Hence, in order to face the main cause of her anxiety—the weakening sense of continuous abandonment and rejection—and heal, Morrison's protagonist plucks up courage and decides to search for Booker to find out the reasons why he left her. Precisely, the following section focuses on the motivations behind Booker's flight, which as I shall explain, are also related to a concatenated (individual and cultural) trauma.

#### ***4.3.3. Black Lives (Don't) Matter: Institutional Violence, Perennial Mourning and Tainted Love***

Bride's love interest, Booker, remains a mysterious character for more than a half of the novel, thereby creating a dramatic sense of suspense with regards to his desertion and treatment of Bride. Booker's chapter—the fifteenth one in the narrative—starts in media res with the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator who recounts this character's beating of a paedophile who was exposing himself near young children in a park. This disturbing opening is very much related to the childhood trauma that haunts Booker—the focaliser here—and that the narrator presents a few pages later. In this chapter, readers learn that Booker is an African American postgraduate who, as a child, suffered a huge psychological blow: the kidnapping and murdering of his older brother, Adam, by a white man. To Booker, Adam was his soul mate, “a flawless replacement” for his twin brother who “did not survive birth” (Morrison 2015a, 115). As a consequence, this macabre event leads Booker to feel lonely in spite of having a family that loves him.

In contrast to Bride's family and upbringing, Booker is not a repudiated and physically or emotionally-abused only child. Instead, he is a young man raised in a stable environment by parents who instilled in their seven children (self-)love, respect, self-reliance and critical thinking. At the same time, these progenitors also protect Booker and his siblings from the imposition of visual culture through their decision to ban TV at home. Moreover, unlike Sweetness's apartment, the Starberns' house is a warm and animated place, at least until Adam disappears. As the narrator recounts, while Adam is absent for months, the Saturday morning conferences where the Starbern children were required to answer two questions—“1. What have you learned (and how do you know?) 2. What problem do you have?” (112)—and the splendid breakfasts that followed, automatically stop. As a result of grief and Booker's father's refusal to play

“his beloved ragtime, old-time, hazy records” (114), the house turns into a silent and cold space where happiness has been abruptly halted.

On top of the fact that Booker has to cope with Adam’s traumatic disappearance, he and his family have to deal with the institutional racism of the local police who, after their numerous pleas for an investigation, “immediately searched the Starbern’s house—as though the anxious parents might be at fault” and “had a police record” (114). Once the officers discard their biased hypothesis around the two black parents and, most especially the father, as suspects in the disappearance of their own son, they drop the case fast because Adam was just “another little black boy gone. So?” (114).<sup>107</sup> Clearly, the intention of the novel with such a depiction of the law enforcement’s intervention in Adam’s case as well as Booker’s sardonic reflection about little black boys in free indirect speech is to offer a conspicuous critique of the racism reigning in institutions that are supposed to help all US citizens, irrespective of their skin colour.

Despite the police’s finding of Adam’s rotting corpse a few months after having dropped the case, the white perpetrator is not caught and tried until six years later, which means “six years of grief and unanswered questions” (119) for Booker and his family. The problem is that, regardless of the sentence, Booker’s grief accompanies him everywhere he goes, just like the rose tattoo he gets done in memory of his dead brother denotes: “Reenacting the gesture he’d made at Adam’s funeral, [Booker] had a small rose tattooed on his left shoulder. [...] The tattoo artist didn’t have the dazzling yellow of Booker’s memory, so they settled for an orangish kind of red” (120-21). The rose embodies Booker’s attempt to memorialise Adam privately or, as Jaleel Akhtar puts it, “to incorporate and inscribe him onto his own body” and close his mourning process

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<sup>107</sup> Even though, as suggested by the narrator, Adam’s murderer was “an equal-opportunity killer” (118) whose victims were non-white as well as white boys, it becomes evident in the novel that institutional racism plays an important role in the slow legal process around Adam’s case because the perpetrator was a white man and Adam, a black boy. In this respect, the racist violence suffered by Booker and his family is not simply physical, but also institutional.

(2019, 82). Nevertheless, the wrong colour and the fuzziness of the ink as time goes by—even Bride confuses the flower with an “orange-red blob with a tail” (Morrison 2015a, 10)—clearly indicate that there is something wrong with Booker’s coping with the death of his favourite brother. Indeed, the problem that the tattoo hints at is Booker’s permanent incorporation of his mental representation of Adam, which, like the tattoo ink, may become blurry over the years, but never goes away. This near-pathological condition makes Booker unable to close his mourning process, thereby turning into a “perennial mourner,” an individual who keeps alive “an illusion of continuing communication” in the form of an inner dialogue with the mental representation of a deceased person (Volkan et al. 2011, 57).

Booker’s inability to speak with his own voice like the rest of the characters in the novel is arguably a sign of his condition as a perennial mourner. At the level of plot, this affection is principally noticeable in his personal attachment to his old skateboard—an identical one to the board Adam was using the day he disappeared—which works as a “linking object” containing memories of Adam. Linking objects have been defined as “externalized versions of introjects” which “serve as a symbolic bridge to the mental representation of the deceased” (Volkan et al. 2011, 57). As Vamik Volkan explains, through such special belongings which perennial mourners keep and only use or contemplate on certain occasions, these individuals think of themselves as able to “bring back (love)” or “kill (hate) the lost person” (2017, 21). Somehow, this cherished object works as “a repository where a complicated mourning process is externalized” (22) due to the affected individual’s ambivalent feelings of love, melancholia and anger provoked by the death of the cherished person. Accordingly, when perennial mourners hide the precious item in a closet or drawer in order to keep it safe, they are hiding “their complicated mourning process” in that very place (22). Yet, all that perennial

mourners need “is to know where the [linking object] is and that it is safely tucked away” so as to maintain the process of mourning (22).

In *God Help the Child*, Booker’s keeping of his skate in his old bedroom proves his problematic perennial mourning because, years after Adam’s burial, when as a university student Booker goes back to his parents’ home and realises that not only is his closet being used by one of his sisters but also, that the skateboard kept in it is gone, he becomes extremely furious with his family. This episode brings to the fore how Booker’s never-ending mourning makes him an egotistic and enraged person, for, as evinced through a passage in free indirect speech, he does not understand why his parents and siblings continue with their lives as if nothing had happened: “How could they pretend it was over? How could they try to forget and just go on?” (Morrison 2015a, 117). What Booker fails to see, however, is that his family, like many past and contemporary African American ones, just want to entomb their grief—provoked by Adam’s death and also by institutional bigotry—in order to keep on with their lives in a context where blacks still endure police brutality, vigilante violence, mass incarceration, sexual violence, enduring poverty and social neglect.

It could be argued that, at first, Adam’s death provokes an individual trauma in Booker that he cannot work through. In order to fight his melancholia, Booker takes refuge in music, particularly by playing a trumpet he had purchased following his father’s refusal to play his records during Adam’s absence. He also starts shaping “unpunctuated sentences into musical language” that express his questions and thoughts (123). Likewise, his life as a university junior student offers him some “relief and distraction,” but soon “his mild cynicism morph[s] into depression” (121). Nonetheless, the superior education he receives, especially his modules on Economy, Politics and African American Studies, leads him to connect his individual trauma with the collective African American one related to the past and present abuse perpetrated by the



US society against the black community, a historical oppression which, according to him, has its roots in materiality and money (110). This belief is a suspiciously partial truth from someone well versed in the aforementioned studies. Accordingly, I regard Booker's awkward position towards racism as a self-induced idea that allows him to repress the traumatic realisation that pure hatred based on skin colour exists.

Interestingly, when his childhood trauma evolves into a compounded one, Booker changes his mind about the private memorialisation of his brother, which leads him to propose his parents and siblings the creation of a sort of memorial dedicated to Adam so as to commemorate him in a more public manner, a suggestion they reject. Due to this reaction, Booker becomes enraged and leaves his home by “shut[ting] the door on his family” (125), since he feels they do not understand that his proposal is a call for a democratic response for mourning and a demand for justice both for Adam and the black community. Behind this wish to carry out his impossible project, there seems to be what David McIvor refers to as the people's need for democratic practices to memorialise the deceased and work through social loss as well as “the damages of disrespect and the complexities attendant to public history and identity” (2016, xiii) as is the case of racial wounds.<sup>108</sup> Drawing on McIvor's observation, Akhtar argues that public “memorials are sites of remembrance and resistance because they bear symbolic witness to struggles for justice and call for action and responsibility, social awareness and mobilization to fight for rights” (2019, 86). Accordingly, this critic believes that the shortage of memorials and monuments addressed to the black community, who suffered and still suffers abuses, exclusion and violence perpetrated by their white neighbours,

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<sup>108</sup> McIvor defines democratic mourning as the group of “rituals of grief in response to experience of public loss or trauma” such as flowers, flags as well as speeches and eulogies and of “an ongoing labor of recognition and repair—of recognizing experiences of social trauma and cultivating civic repertoires of response” (2016, xii). The Black Lives Matter movement is, according to this scholar, a recent example of democratic mourning (xiii). Since the novel under analysis is set in a time prior to the aforementioned movement, Booker's efforts to mobilise the community around the death of his brother and the humiliating investigation process conditioned by the boy's colour could be deemed as an anticipatory attempt to create a movement for public mourning related to the racial (physical and institutional) violence suffered by black people in the US.

indicates a lack of justice and also perpetuates a continued history of abuse and violence against them (87).

Following the aforementioned reasoning, it could be assumed that Booker's effort to mobilise people and memorialise his brother is driven by a need to protest and expose how types of injustice like racism still linger in the US institutions and society. Yet, owing to his inability to fulfil his desire of drawing attention to his people's suffering, which, in a way, could contribute to liberating them from the transgenerational legacy of the African American trauma, Booker sinks in feelings of rage and familial distrust which prevent him from working through his double trauma. This layered wound arouses in him a need of avenging his brother by turning into a vigilante of child abusers and molesters like the one he punches at the beginning of the chapter. In sum, Booker's traumas make him turn into a perpetrator of sorts.

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, hooks explains that "rage is the perfect cover-up for depression" and identifies the origin of many black males' continuous rage in a chronic state of depression provoked by the ever-present sense of powerlessness resulting from the lingering effects of racism in the US (2004, 91). In this sense, ever-present rage—one of the symptoms of PTSS as explained in Chapter 1—is yet another sign that points to Booker's cultural trauma. The same occurs with his decision to remain unemployed and devote his time to playing music and writing down his thoughts, for as hooks explains, black men's depressive state leads many of them, including professional ones, to shut down emotionally and refuse "to make any effort to succeed in life" (86). This sort of "self-sabotage" is the outcome of a severe lack of self-esteem (92), precisely another PTSS-related symptom. Nevertheless, Booker's melancholy and despondency temporarily dissipate when he meets Bride, for this new love allows him to feel "the disintegration of the haunt and gloom in which for years Adam's death had clouded him" (Morrison 2015a, 132). Bride's beauty and skin colour,

which Booker poetically regards as “obsidian-midnight” darkness (133), thrills him and even makes him become “as emotionally content as” when Adam was alive (132). To Booker, his relationship with Bride is flawless on account of the good sex and Bride’s “lack of interest in his personal life” (133). She does not know anything about his childhood trauma, his in-existent relationship with his parents or his substantial income thanks to the financial gift that he inherited from his grandfather. In contrast, Booker knows most things about Bride’s life, which enables him to become aware that behind her “façade of complete control” (134) and success, there is a woman with a painful past. It is precisely Bride’s bonding trauma and her intention to move forward that leads Booker to misread their relationship as one where two hurt people help each other to lick their wounds, instead of one based on their self-centredness and superficiality due to their traumatic experiences.

Despite this apparently successful affair, when Booker discovers Bride’s presents for Sofia, his psychic and cultural traumas are re-activated, which makes the couple’s “fairy-tale castle [collapse] into the mud and sand on which its vanity was built” (135). Hence, as a manner to repress the painful memories of Adam’s murder and the humiliating investigation process more effectively, Booker feels the need to flee once again, but this time he takes refuge in the house of his lonesome aunt Queen Olive, the relative who, after travelling “all the way from California to attend Adam’s funeral,” had been the only person trying to help Booker with his “anger-mixed sorrow” that day (117). With his flight, the novel makes evident that, as an adult, Booker victimises himself through his inability to stop his perennial mourning after so many years as well as his family and the child molesters he encounters. He also hurts Bride, with whom he keeps an uneven relationship. In their love affair, he occupies a higher position, as evinced by his decision not to share information about his own life with Bride and by

various sexist micro-aggressions such as his mansplaining about racism and his ownership-related references to Bride as “baby” and “you my girl” (11).

I relate Booker’s seemingly sexist behaviour towards Morrison’s protagonist with hook’s observation about the black man’s tendency of seeking a woman, a feminine female “as defined by sexist thinking, who subordinates her will to his, who lives to please him” (2004, 113) as a consequence of the patriarchal society in which he has developed and especially, as a way to compensate his PTSS-related sense of powerlessness and emasculation (53-54). Likewise, Booker’s decision to withdraw his feelings and life information from Bride seems to respond to what hooks identifies as a common malady among many African American men. As she puts it, “black males, like other group of men, have found that lying or withholding truth is a form of power” (121) over others, especially women. This privileged position that Booker assigns to himself, yet again, bespeaks the subordinate role that Bride has in their relationship.

However, as I shall explain in the following section, after Bride’s embarkation on a curative and self-empowering journey to Booker’s destination (Queen’s house)—an address she discovers thanks to an invoice from the pawning establishment where he left his trumpet—the protagonist reclaims a subject position by confronting Booker and demanding him to respect her as an individual as well as a woman. This argument and Queen’s motherly kind of love contribute both to the couple’s healing from their respective traumas and their eventual reconciliation.

#### **4.4. On the Road to Healing: Community, Othermothers and New Mothers**

Morrison’s fiction presents the journey as a recurrent motif that works as “a healer of identity crisis” (Liashuk 2020, 132) as well as individual and collective traumas. This is

the case of novels like *Song of Solomon* or *Home*. As Xenia Liashuk observes, in Morrisonian voyages,

a character experiences the status of being a stranger in an unknown place, which might be seen as an allegorical reflection of how an individual perceives oneself when he or she starts opening up those aspects of their identity which have been previously suppressed or negated. Going to a remote place far from civilization might be taken for alienation from the surface of everyday [...] and immersion into the deeper levels of consciousness, where the superficial gradually dissolves into nothingness, leaving space to the essential. (132)

In *God Help the Child*, just in the midst of her depression, Bride decides to track down Booker after paying for his pawned trumpet and discovering a second address where she may find him. Yet, as commented by the omniscient narrator that recounts Bride's road journey, "[t]he reason for this tracking was not love, she knew; it was more hurt than anger that made her drive into unknown territory to locate the one person she once trusted, who made her feel safe" (78). Significantly enough, this disappointment is not only related to Booker's flight. Bride also becomes upset with herself because, as she realises after the revelation that Booker is a musician, "[h]ad she been interested [in Booker's life] she would have known that [the horn] was what caused the dark dimple on his upper lip" (74). Clearly, Bride's allusion to Booker's face mark is a metonymic manner of referring to the basic personal details of his ex-partner's past and present life that she has always ignored due to her self-absorption.

It is true that at first sight, as scholars like Wyatt have argued, Bride's odyssey seems a love quest considering that this is a girl-meets-boy story where, following the lovers' separation, the girl "sets out to find [the boy], and in the end succeeds" (2017, 172). Actually, Bride's and Booker's love story echoes the ancient Greek love quest of Psyche and Eros, a couple united by the oracle who separates and reunites after the epic journey on which the former—who knows nothing about Eros's real identity—must

embark so as to find her lover, of whom she expects a child.<sup>109</sup> In spite of the evident intertextual influence of this Greek myth in the novel—clearly observable in the female hero, her lack of knowledge about her lover’s life, the escape of the latter, the heroine’s search as well as the couple’s eventual reunion and formation of a family—Morrison rewrites the legend by including a female protagonist who wants to reunite with her partner so as to scold him and ask for an explanation. Thus, in contrast to Psyche’s journey, Bride embarks on a quest for self-hood, self-reliance and knowledge to comprehend “her relationship and its abrupt ending and thereby understand more about herself and her life” (Wyatt 2017, 183). But also, by tracking down Booker through the Californian highways, Bride finds restorative acceptance and a sense of community offered by generous helpers.

#### ***4.4.1. A Road of her Own but a Quest Shared with Others***

Regarding Bride’s self-discovery journey, it is important to bear in mind that the novel frames it in the tradition of the road narrative at the same time as it reverses this genre from a gender perspective. From the early frontier narratives to new millennium fiction, the road has been one of the most preeminent US literary tropes. As Deborah Paes de Barros argues, “[t]he road is resonant within the concept of nation building; it concerns

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<sup>109</sup> This Greek myth starts with Psyche, a very attractive female mortal whose beauty enchants Eros, the god of love. Unaware of this fact, Psyche and her family plea to the oracle in order to find a good husband for her, a petition which is responded with the matching of the young girl and an unknown lover (Eros), with whom she will have to live in a kingdom where all her needs are attended to. In return, Psyche must neither look upon her new partner when he visits and loves her in the dark of the night nor ask him where he spends his days. Soon Psyche becomes pregnant—Eros does not know about the child in her womb—and although she lives a happy life, she is urged on by her sisters to defy the agreement. So one night she decides to look at her partner, but, as she contemplates him, she accidentally spills some oil from the lamp on Eros after wounding herself with one of his arrows, which automatically makes her fall in love with him. This accident awakes the god, who flees as the result of Psyche’s violation of his trust. Following the escape, Psyche wanders the Earth in search of him until she finds Aphrodite, who gives her a series of trials that she must pass to find him. Thanks to the assistance of animals, inanimate objects and other gods, Psyche accomplishes all the tasks, but, after the last trial in the underworld, she falls in a deadly sleep. Eventually, Eros appears to wake her up from the spell and to take her before Zeus so that she can be turned into a goddess. The story ends with the couple’s marriage and the birth of their baby (Apuleius [1566] 2009, 135-86; Murdock 1990, 58-60).

evolution and becoming and is consequently compatible with the Enlightenment idea of progress” (2004, 2). Moreover, the road trip has usually been related to the archetypal journey of the hero, a character in modern America who enrolls in an automobile voyage “with its call to adventure on the open road, its initiation ties of trials, threshold crossings, conflict, return, and resurrection” (Primeau 1996, 7). In this sense, the road “becomes a linear space, across which heroes proceed with fixed purpose and endless innocence and optimism” (Paes de Barros 2004, 3). Hence, as travel has usually been deemed “a way to discover one’s real self in a release from everyday constraints [...] and a chance to repair any number of internal mechanisms [...] through interaction with others (Primeau 1996, 5), the modern road is “the opportunity [for the hero] to start over” and discover his “inner resources and potential” (69). In sum, and as Ronald Primeau puts it, motion on the road is always therapeutic (70).

It should be noted, however, that the mythic and optimistic American road is a space that has generally been occupied by men owing to a social system of gendered notions of mobility founded on the dichotomy of masculine activity/feminine passivity. For this reason, whereas the public space, including highways, streets and paths, has always been related to masculine self-discovery, for many centuries, women played the role of the Angel in the House who awaits the man at the point of the arrival. Nevertheless, although women occupying public spaces have traditionally been considered “erratic misfits” or tramps (Ganser 2009, 76) as well as promiscuous, loose, fallen women (Enevold 2003, 77)—a stigma that, to some extent, continues today in the scrutiny of those testimonies by women sexually harassed or abused when walking alone—research suggests that an increasing number of women who desire to challenge themselves, to become self-sufficient and self-determined are taking the courage to travel on their own (K. Butler 1995; Jordan and Gibson 2005).

This turn from passive object to active subject fostered through several feminist waves that have encouraged women to control their own body, life and space started to be rendered in literature in the nineteenth century (Ganser 2009, 90) and became more popular in the 1990s and 2000s with narratives such as Erika López's *Flaming Iguanas* or Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012). In these stories, "women symbolically contest the notion of the road as a masculine space" by countering "physical as well as symbolic borders and enclosures," thereby questioning and revising "crucial gendered paradigms of mobility that traditionally structure society and influence women's socio-cultural positions" (Enevold 2003, 187). As women have traditionally been associated with the domestic space, the growing fiction of female mobility on the road arguably entails a break from old patriarchal conventions and the patriarchal system as a whole.

As I see it, *God Help the Child* is another literary example of the feminisation of the road. Particularly, with this novel Morrison reverses the road narrative tradition as a masculine space—a motif which she had already included in *Song of Solomon* and *Home*—by presenting her female protagonist as the owner of a Jaguar driving on the highways of California. In an individual sense, Bride's road trip is a quest for healing, self-empowerment and the recovery of a voice as well as for the connection with the community and her African American roots. But in a more collective sense, it also represents the journey of a people, of the African American community whose identity is founded both on historical movements—e.g. the boat voyages across the Black Atlantic, the marronage flights of the escapist slaves or the Great Migration from the rural south to the urban north—and on cultural ones like the mythical journey back to Africa in the Flying Africans folktale that Morrison used as a narrative framework in *Song of Solomon*. Indeed, as Gallego notes citing Henry Louis Gates Jr., most female



African American classics revolve around the journey of a young black woman searching for her true self (2020, 61). Undoubtedly, this is the case of *Bride*. Yet, it should be borne in mind that her road trip in search for Booker is the second part of a longer journey that had started with her crossing of the threshold between Sweetness's oppressing apartment and the unknown outer world, an action which echoes the starting point of the hero's quest.

In *The Heroine's Journey*, Maureen Murdock presents the female quest with a theory that derives from Joseph Campbell's monomyth. Specifically, she relates the first stage in the heroine's journey to her physical and psychological separation from the mother archetype in general, and her own mother in particular (1990, 17). As she puts it, it is the heroine's desire not to be like her mother (or the values she represents) that prompts her to cross the threshold of the family home and try to find her place in the world (19). Following these remarks, *Bride's* separation from Sweetness and her subsequent life journey could be regarded as an example of the heroine's quest as theorised by Murdock.

As this scholar further explains, on her way, the heroine encounters obstructions both in the outer world and "in the inner world of the psyche" (1990, 47). Surely, "the most challenging dragon of all [...] is the societal reptile" which tempts her with "games of [...] manipulation disguised as requirements for power and achievement" (48). Consequently, under such a powerful spell, in order to find an identity founded on success, the heroine begins to take steps to assure her advancement in the world and turns into "an assertive, independent" woman who "enjoys the reward of her efforts: money, a new car, clothes, a title" (62). These achievements, Murdock holds, come as the result of the heroine's rejection of the feminine and a merging with the masculine (11) or, in other words, the development of a quasi-masculine identity "as she measures

her self-esteem, self-definition and self-worth against male standards of production” and living in order to become successful in society (64). Precisely, in *God Help the Child*, once Bride becomes independent from her mother, she starts this new stage—“the illusory boon of success” (Murdock 1990, 61)—signalled by her competitive and materialist behaviour, her disposable partners and even her acquisition of a Jaguar, all of them motifs traditionally associated with masculinity and power in the Western world. It could be argued that, away from her mother, Bride learns to be successful according to a masculine model when she accepts to play the rules of a man (Jeri) and a corporation linked to the objectifying female beauty canon.

According to Murdock, with the passing of time, the heroine’s superficial lifestyle makes her feel “out of sync with herself” (1990, 7), a new phase of initiation and “descent [...] to the dark night of the soul” (87) which can be identified with a moment of illness, of depression, desolation and despair (72). Such psychological decline is characterised by overwhelming feelings of confusion and grief, alienation, disillusionment and the sense of being abandoned (88). This psychic decline makes the heroine enter a period of voluntary isolation in order to alleviate the sadness provoked by her rising awareness of “having an abundance of ‘things’” but lacking self-love, self-respect, or connection to her inner core” (121). In the novel, a similar affection can be identified in Bride’s behaviour following the two psychological blows—Booker’s abandonment and Sofia’s attack—which not only shatter the psychological protective shield between her traumas and herself, as her intrusive memories and depressive state demonstrate, but also make her aware of her empty and lonely life regardless of her successful career.

The beginning of the second half of Bride’s quest—corresponding to the heroine’s initiation phase—starts at the moment when, in a similar fashion to Psyche’s tracking

down of Eros, Bride aims at receiving an explanation from Booker and recovering her true self by taking the road to Whiskey and finding her partner. Narratively, the novel marks this second departure through the effacing of Bride's voice and the introduction of an omniscient third-person narrator that concomitantly offers a panoramic view of the protagonist's road of trials and her inner thoughts through free indirect speech:

The highway became less and less crowded as she drove east and then north. Soon, she imagined, forests would edge the road watching her, as trees always did. In a few hours she would be in north valley country: logging camps, hamlets no older than she was, dirt roads as old as the Tribes. As long as she was on a state highway, she decided to look for a diner, eat and freshen up before driving into territory too sparse for comfort. (Morrison 2015a, 80)

Interestingly, the novel does not present the road and its surroundings in the romantic manner promoted in some road narratives like *On the Road*. As the above passage indicates, Bride does not find any sign of hospitality in the landscape along the road because her journey to rural California, an unknown and modest area to her, implies a level of discomfort that she never experienced in her urban and posh world. After all, this setting represents the archetypal road of trials in the hero(ine)'s quest.

Like Psyche, Bride finds different obstacles on her way, from a bigoted waitress working in a diner with a Confederate flag who makes her believe that Whiskey is near and that she will arrive before dark, to the car accident Bride has in the dark, "narrow and curvy" (Morrison 2015a, 82) road to her destination and which results in a twisted foot and a damaged car. But, as usually happens in the female and male monomyth (including Psyche's quest), the protagonist is helped by some aides, in this case, a white hippie family living in the woods in the Thoreauian "Spartan-like" manner ([1854] 1997, 83) from whom Bride will learn to selflessly care for others. At first, Bride feels uncomfortable with these new people due to their purposeful lack of commodities and their attentive care, which they provide for "free, without judgment or even a passing

interest in who she was or where she was going” (Morrison 2015a, 90). But gradually, she lets the family help her with her physical and psychic healing.

According to Murdock, at the stage in which the heroine is affected by depression, sadness and despair, she needs “the support of the positive feminine, a mother and a sister figure” (1990, 121). In *God Help the Child*, alongside Steve, the hippie father, who takes Bride to the doctor and handles the reparation of her automobile, the most important helpers are the female members of this peculiar family. The mother, Evelyn, who becomes a temporary surrogate female parent for Bride, not only provides her with food, but also helps her with her baths and clothing. She gives Bride some flannel shirts and jeans, a replacement of Bride’s all-white wardrobe which indicates a change in Morrison’s protagonist.

The other female helper—a sister figure—is embodied by Rain, the young girl adopted by Evelyn and Steve. Rain’s rescuer role lies on how her traumatic past of prostitution, physical abuse and life on the streets after being forced out the house by her pimp mother prompts Bride to recognise herself in this little white girl rescued by the hippie couple and bond with her: “Bride fought against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself. Listening to this tough little girl who wasted no time on self-pity, she felt a companionship that was surprisingly free of envy. Like the closeness of schoolgirls” (101). As the omniscient narrator’s account demonstrates, Bride’s attention to someone else’s suffering evidences her turning into a more active and empathic listener, something which Rain appreciates because, in order to work through her own trauma, she desperately needed to verbalise it: “My black lady listens to me tell how it was. Steve won’t let me talk about it. Neither will Evelyn” (105). Hence, at this point, the novel invites readers to notice that, thanks to her surrogate mother and sister or, in

other words, female bonding, the protagonist's self-centredness starts dissipating during her six-week stay in the woods.<sup>110</sup>

Alongside the index of an incipient empathy for others encapsulated in Bride's new skill of active listening, the clearest sign of the protagonist's gradual transformation at this stage can be observed when, as Rain recounts in her direct monologue, Bride risks her adored body "without even thinking about it" (106) to save the girl from the birdshot of a racist redneck. Thus, through such an act of self-sacrifice, the novel shows readers that, at the end of her stay with the hippie family, Bride has fostered not only "new capacities that enable her to begin to move away from the identity of an abused child" (Wyatt 2017, 186), but also a sense of generosity and an ability to care for others that she hitherto lacked. In this sense, like the meteorological phenomenon after which she is named, Rain brings Bride a sense of renewal and, therefore, she can be considered the first instigator of the protagonist's healing and maturation process.

After Bride's total recuperation from the injuries provoked by the car accident and her resuming the trip, the novel also conveys her current transformation through her Jaguar, now repaired with "another model's door" (Morrison 2015a, 17). This modification of the formerly luxurious automobile is very revealing, since it symbolises the incipient changes undergone by her owner—including a degree of humbleness—and presents Bride as a character with scars or inner and external reparations, who, despite all the obstacles encountered throughout the journey, keeps on moving towards her final destination.

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<sup>110</sup> According to Gallego, Morrison always "hints at the importance of female bonding" because sorority is "crucial for a healthy development of women's psyches from early childhood, as it helps them to make sense of the changes they undergo and of the world around them" (2020, 62). As this critic demonstrates in different articles, Morrison does so either by including the positive impact of female bonding for her fictional women as in *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child* (Gallego 2011, 2020), or by tackling "the danger of isolation as one of the greatest risks run by girls and women in a racist and sexist society" as in *The Bluest Eye* (Gallego 2020, 62).

#### ***4.4.2. Back to the Roots: The Curative Power of the Ancestor and (Other)Motherhood***

Once Bride arrives in the rural town of Whiskey, she encounters the last aide—yet another feminine figure—in her quest: Booker’s dear aunt Queen. For Morrison, a key feature in African American literature is the presence of ancestors, referred to as elders, a “sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide certain kind of wisdom” (1983, 345). According to her, “the presence or absence of that figure” determines “the success of the happiness of the character” (343) in an African American novel. Precisely, in Morrison’s fiction, solace comes from the ancestor (345), who is key to the development and success of her protagonists. As she affirms, “nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (344), that is, a connection with the African traditional roots embodied by the ancestor.

In *God Help the Child*, notwithstanding her mother status, Sweetness never works as the Morrisonian ancestor that the culturally-orphaned protagonist requires, for she never wanted to be part of the black community and has not inherited traditional values and wisdom from her African American family due to her grandmother’s abandonment. In contrast, Queen is the actual ancestor that Bride needs as signalled by the quilt that the former keeps. As Olga Idriss Davis notes, quilts are both a cultural symbol of “the African tradition of folk art and embroidery” and “a political symbol of resistance” (1998, 68) as they were knitted and used by African American slaves to break their silence, express their experience and even to escape the plantations. Hence, given that Queen’s quilt is an image inextricably related to the African American history and community, we can regard her dwelling as what Morrison calls home—a “race-specific yet nonracist” place (1998, 5)—in opposition to the racially hierarchical house represented by Sweetness’s apartment. Similarly, Queen’s authentic golden earrings—

which, in contrast to the fake ones that Sweetness gave to Lula Ann after her testification at court, symbolise this woman's "true self and old age wisdom" (López Ramírez 2017, 186)—are one more hint of the validity of this character as the ancestral-wise presence that Bride necessitates in order to heal and grow. In other words, Morrison shows readers that in order to overcome her phantoms, Bride must leave behind the Western and superficial way of life with which she had tried to cope with her traumatic childhood and take refuge in an "othermother," a surrogate black mother who allows her to return to the African roots and value the importance of the black community.

Stanlie James defines othermothering as the "acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (1999, 45). Particularly in the African American community, this way of assisted motherhood is common. Collins links black othermothering with the traditional West African societies wherein all the women—from biological mothers to female members of the community or village like grandmothers, sisters, aunts or cousins who assisted them by sharing mothering responsibilities—nurtured and took care of all the children. In this sense, West African mothering "was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men" (1997, 328). Instead, this practice was understood as a communal duty of which the whole group was in charge. As Collins further explains, othermothers were key not only in supporting bloodmothers but also in assuming a parental responsibility for the offspring of black parents sold or killed under the institution of slavery (330). Thus, thanks to the retaining of the West African cultural practice of othermothering, black slaves working in the US plantations fostered "a distinct tradition of African American motherhood" (O'Reilly 2004, 6) in which the customs of

othermothering and community mothering remained central and were regarded as crucial for the survival of the black people and their roots.

Yet, othermothering did not disappear after slavery. As hooks affirms, “many people raised in black communities [in the twentieth century] experienced this type of community-based children care” because plenty of black women working out of the home needed the help of people in their communities to bring up their offspring (1984, 144). Today, this practice still remains an essential “strategy of survival” (O’Reilly 2004, 6) within the African American community, for it ensures that black children develop the necessary mental and social skills such as feelings of self-worth and kinship as well as knowledge of African American social and cultural history to overcome the damaging and humiliating messages from the dominant society.

In Morrison’s novels the appearance of othermothers is as common as it is crucial, since it is usually an othermother figure that plays the role of the ancestor helping the protagonist to survive, heal or succeed. This is the case of Pilate in *Song of Solomon* or Ethel Fordham and the group of women from Lotus in *Home*. In *God Help the Child*, although at first Queen’s invitation to enter and eat makes Bride wonder “for a second if she was being seduced into a witch’s den” (Morrison 2015a, 145)—a clear intertextual reference to the fairy-tale of Hansel and Gretel when they are tricked by the witch who wants to eat them—she soon realises the elder woman’s good intentions. In fact, thanks to Queen, Bride recovers energy from her difficult road trip with the thick soup she prepares for her—a plate which she regards as revitalising “manna” (145) after her exodus from the city. This act of nurturance clearly points to Queen as an othermother since this careful feeding counteracts Sweetness’s failed maternal nurturing role on account of her refusal to breastfeed baby Lula Ann, as it gives Bride a loved sense of self that she had never received from her biological parents.



Additionally, thanks to Queen, Bride learns about Booker's tragic past (146-47) as well as his poetic writings about her, racism and himself (148-49). The reading of these thoughts results in a sort of epiphany which makes Bride become aware of her self-centredness and "*permanent ignorance*" (149) of others as a result of her own traumas. Thus, with this little help from Queen, Bride summons up enough courage to face Booker because, as she recognises aloud, "[t]his is about me, not him. Me!" (152). Certainly, it can be assumed that the face-to-face encounter between Bride and Booker enusing her conversation with Queen entails the protagonist's accomplishment of the second part of her quest: the confrontation with Booker. This reunion is, nevertheless, a moment of mutual aggression between the two lovers which recalls the fight between Son and Jadine in *Tar Baby*. Such an altercation could be representative of Bride's change from a vulnerable girl struggling with her childhood ghosts and cultural trauma, to a strong woman who no longer receives blows, but rather delivers them.

It is important to remark, however, that whereas the conflict between the two protagonists of *Tar Baby* ends up in the break-up and separation of the couple, the contrary occurs in *God Help the Child*. Following Bride's confrontation of Booker to let him know that the reason behind her journey is not the request of his love but the demand of respect towards her, their argument leads Bride to confess the darkest secret which had haunted her since her childhood: that she wrongly accused Sofia in a desperate attempt to be loved by her mother (Morrison 2015a, 162). As if the verbalisation of her phantoms and the confession of her lie were yet another trial in her quest—as happens to Psyche just after the accomplishment of her last task—Bride falls in a long and deep slumber. In contrast to the ancient heroine after whom she seems to have been moulded, Morrison's character falls asleep following the (violent) encounter with her lover and, later on, she wakes up by herself, thus retaining the sense of rebirth

in the Greek myth in the novel. This impression of renewal is noticeable when, after the confession of her psychic demons and her awakening in Booker's bed, Bride feels "a fresh vitality," she feels "newly born. No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father" (162). More than ever, this new Bride captivates Booker, who cannot help but admit his love for the protagonist (164).

Booker's verbalisation of his feelings is also a sign of his gradual working-through process, a new psychological stage which starts getting activated in the fight scene when, in front of Bride, he opens up about his former need to flee owing to her strange attachment to a child molester like Adam's murderer (154). This important step and a subsequent private conversation with Queen about his much-needed self-liberation from the burden of his dead brother enable Booker to begin closing his mourning process for Adam's death. Queen advises his nephew to let his favourite brother go because he must let him rest in peace and also, because Booker's incomplete mourning process has turned him "into a cadaver" (157), a zombified person with a cold heart unable to truly love. Queen's words make Booker aware of his own self-victimisation, a long-term condition which had prevented him from awakening from the spell of his traumatic past and, therefore, from loving others except for Adam. Then, once again, Queen plays the essential role of othermother and healing ancestor who teaches an important lesson to his nephew that his parents could never deliver due to their own unresolved grief.

Significantly enough, the novel renders Booker's awakening moment through a passage in direct interior monologue which parallels the chapters devoted to Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, Rain and Sofia, and which could be understood as Booker's recuperation of his voice, of his subjectivity, of his true self: "Bride probably knows more about love than I do. At least she's willing to figure it out, do something, risk

something and take its measure. I risk nothing. I sit on a throne and identify signs of imperfection in others. [...] I liked [her]. The first major disagreement we had, and I was gone” (160). As these words demonstrate, with the aid of Queen, Booker realises that despite his love for Bride, his big mistake was his own unhappiness and intransigence resulting from his inability to cope with Adam’s murder. Hence, aware of his flaw, he decides to let Adam go by writing a short piece in his notebook where he apologises for having enslaved him so many years just as ante-bellum holders did with their chattel (161). This striking comparison is very revealing, since it is the ultimate sign that Booker’s individual trauma is connected with the transgenerational African American trauma that has always marked the collective psyche of the African American community. After all, as Booker admits, the introjection of his brother chained “[him]self to the illusion of control [...] and power” (161), exactly what black slaves and their descendants were deprived of for centuries. Similarly, Booker would repeat this illusive sense of power in his relationship with Bride as has been explained in subsection 4.3.3. Thus, Booker’s realisation about this unhealthy demeanour towards his loved ones thanks to his othermother enables him to stop it and, consequently, to reconcile with himself, his brother and Bride.

Although it could be argued that both protagonists’ gradual process of working through and their subsequent reunion entails the end of Bride’s journey, this is not really the case. As Murdock puts it, the quest of the heroine is not about conquest but about the reconciliation of her feminine and masculine traits (1990, 129), a merging which, in the case of Bride, includes her former independent and autonomous self—traditionally masculine features that Bride adopted after her detachment from Sweetness—and her developing generous and caring new self—traits usually embodied by women and most specifically, mothers.

In order to achieve the combination of both sides, Murdock explains, at the last stage of the quest, the heroine formerly influenced by the masculinised identity she had constructed around materiality, competitiveness and success, calls upon the safe haven of the grandmother (an othermother) who “embodies the qualities of feminine insight, wisdom, strength, and nurturance which were missing in the heroine’s daily life (1990, 141). Following these tenets, the moment when Queen gets trapped in her burning house and Bride does not hesitate to rescue her from the fire, could be interpreted as the last trial in Bride’s initiatory journey. After all, this is the main act of love that she carries out since she left her mother behind. If with Rain she had risked her beautiful body, with Queen, Bride jeopardises her own life so as to save her from the flames. Therefore, without any doubt, the rescuing of her othermother is the clearest index of Bride’s maturation from childish self-absorption to adult generosity, which, in turn, allows her to forge a rounded identity made up of her formerly assertive and leader-like self (related to her experience in the eminently patriarchal world of business) and her new altruistic one (associated with an ethics of care that women have traditionally epitomised). This (re)gained feminine side becomes all the more evident when, due to Queen’s serious injuries, Bride takes care of her at the hospital, which demonstrates that Morrison’s protagonist has definitely walked away from her frivolity and self-centredness and, as Booker notes, has changed from “one dimension to three—demanding, perceptive, daring” (Morrison 2015a, 173).

Bride’s maturation is also conveyed through a physical transformation that only this character notices—a proof of the recovery from her trauma-related hallucinations—when she recovers her “lovely, plump breasts” (166), female attributes that represent her embracing of the feminine and even the maternal. It is important to recall that, regardless of Bride’s return to her adult form, she continues with a three-month delayed

period. This situation hinting at a possible pregnancy could be deemed as yet another link between Bride and Psyche from the Greek myth, for both heroines embark on a journey with a baby in their wombs who will be born at the end of their respective odysseys. Yet, what this baby evidences is that, at the end of Bride's quest, not only has she moved "from the prepubescent body of the 'poor little black girl' to a maternal body" (Wyatt 2017, 187), but, in listening, caring and protecting others during her trip, she has also acquired the necessary skills for being a good mother.

Regarding the idea of motherhood, it should be noted that, during Queen's stay in hospital, Bride and Booker cooperate to take care of their othermother "like a true couple thinking not of themselves, but of helping somebody else" (Morrison 2015a, 167). Such protective behaviour is an evident sign of their post-traumatic growth and most especially of their gained aptness to form a family together. This family is, at first, made up of Bride, Booker and Queen, as the novel narratively suggests through the omniscient's narrator conjoined account of the three characters' actions at the hospital. This narrative strategy is very revealing because it evokes a sense of togetherness, of community and family that had not appeared in the text until this moment. As for the plot, the familial atmosphere around the three characters is also reinforced just before Queen's death in the hospital bed, firstly when, in her delirium, she calls Bride with the name of her own daughter, Hannah, and secondly, when Booker bequeaths Bride his aunt's authentic golden earrings on her behalf. Both events could symbolise Queen's adoption of Bride as a daughter or granddaughter and therefore, the eventual belonging of Morrison's protagonist to a loving African American family.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> As Patricia San José Rico argues, in her works Morrison always favours the community, relationality and bonding, traditional values and the importance of the ancestor alongside the return to the African American roots as curative responses to the African American trauma of "rootlessness and bond-severing" provoked by "the dislocation from Africa and the division of entire families during slavery" (2019, 154). A good example in this respect is the novel *Song of Solomon* and its protagonist, Milkman. This character is a young man who had remained apart from his family's and community's history for his entire life, a situation which had impeded him from forming a full identity. For this reason, when backed

Following Queen's burial, Bride makes Booker aware of her pregnancy, to which he responds by "offering the hand she had craved all her life, [...] the hand of trust and caring for" (175). This physical union textually conveyed through the second- and third-person plural pronouns "ours" and "they" (174-75) works as the final stage in Bride's transitional journey as she will be able to create her own family with the man she loves. In this respect, whereas *The Bluest Eye* was a truncated Bildungsroman where the young protagonist's growing process is cut short with the contribution of her family and neighbours, *God Help the Child* is a completed coming of age novel where the young protagonist evolves from a vulnerable and selfish girl to a generous and strong adult and mother. This personal and post-traumatic growth is related to the eventual reparation of two aspects in Bride's self—her mind and love capacity—that were damaged by her prolonged unresolved double trauma. In fact, it could be argued that, like the reconciliation between Psyche and Eros, the god of love, it is only when Bride is able to reconcile her own *psyche* with her ability to *love* herself and others that she is able to move along in life and form a family together with Booker.

The expectant parents believe in the possibility that the coming child will be "[i]mmune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath" (Morrison 2015a, 175). However, the omniscient narrator's voice adds a note of scepticism at the end of the chapter with the words "So they believe" (175). This uncertainty is reinforced by Sweetness's concluding words in the final chapter where, after acknowledging her regret for having been "tough on [Lula Ann]" in the past, she highlights the difficulty

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by his ancestor (Pilate), Milkman embarks on a journey that allows him to get to know the memories that had been suppressed across various generations in his family, he comes to terms with his past and cultural heritage, thereby becoming a fulfilled self. Another example can be found in *God Help the Child*, for whereas Bride cannot learn about her family history due to its dismemberment and her own separation from Sweetness, she does receive the traditional African American values and empowering mothering that she needs from Queen. In this sense, Bride's quest is not meant to find a Holy Grail, but the necessarily knowledge to fully forge her African American identity as well as to find a true home and the feeling of connectedness and family for which she had always yearned.

involved in being a parent through an apostrophe to her daughter: “Good move, Lula Ann [...] [but] [l]isten to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent. Good luck and God help the child” (178). This last prophetic intervention on Sweetness’s part suggests that both Bride and Booker will be subject to difficulties similar to those she had to go through in the past, mainly because, as could be expected, the baby may be as black as its parents. With such an assumption, the novel encourages readers to reflect on the idea that parenting and, most particularly, black parenting, is never an easy task. After all, as African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates admits to his own son in *Between the World and Me* (2015), there are questions and issues related to racial violence against blacks that are impossible for an African American parent to answer or solve.

The novel’s denouement brings to the fore the fact that, notwithstanding the important advancements in equality in the US society such as President Obama’s election, at the end of her career, Morrison was well aware of the uncertain future for African Americans. Considering that the US is a country where racism and misogyny are still endemic and black parents and children are always on guard for racially-motivated violence in all its forms, Morrison’s doubts are not unfounded. Yet, in spite of the open ending regarding her protagonists’ future as parents, given that in the 2000s race and racism still matter, with *God Help the Child* Morrison transmits a clear and powerful message to her readers. Healing from the multilayered and transgenerational African American trauma is possible, but the most effective strategy to cope with it is not the white, materialistic and ego-centric armour that allows black people to fit in the fallacious post-racial US society. Rather, it is the return to the African American roots and the reliance on the community that provide the best tools to fight and change the ongoing racist and patriarchal US society.

## CONCLUSION

### A “WE TOO” LITERARY MOVEMENT IN THE MAKING

In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said points out that “literature is produced in time and in society by human beings, who are themselves agents of, as well as somewhat independent actors within their actual history” (1983, 152). As shown in this PhD dissertation, Louise Erdrich, Roxane Gay and Toni Morrison are three contemporary fiction writers who regard their works not as mere artistic productions, but as artefacts for changing the patriarchal and racist status quo in contemporary US. This way of understanding their own literary production turns these writers into agents of social change and thus, into committed literary activists instead of mere spectators and reproducers of the reality that surrounds them. Hence, despite substantial differences in plot, setting and characterisation, as well as those derived from the various ethnic contexts in which they originate, the three novels that I have analysed present numerous similarities that confirm the initial hypothesis from which this project sprang: that Erdrich, Gay and Morrison are part of a literary tendency among US ethnic women who are exposing the effects of racist and sexist violence on their fellow ethnic women through realist and straightforward novels that work as tools for social transformation.

As has I have intended to demonstrate through my analysis, in the three novels the authors deploy a realist, accessible or reader-friendly prose to reach a wider audience and allow those readers to comprehend their social and political denunciations in a clear and direct manner. This stylistic choice goes in line with the realist impulse among some non-Western authors that has recently emerged “not simply as a resistance to today’s new culture of heterogeneity and digitalization but as a new way of imagining literary and political futures in a world increasingly lacking the clear-cut lines along



which politics, history, and capitalism can be imagined” (Anjaria 2017, n.p.). In fact, this twenty-first century non-Western realism which “springs from a renegotiation of the relationship between postmodernism, postcolonialism and realism” (Hoydis 2019, 156) is characterised by a turn to “a more stripped-down and less ostensibly self-conscious aesthetic” that attempts to represent “contemporary conditions with more urgency” than twentieth-century (post)modernist fiction (Anjaria 2016, 278).

In order to evoke a sense of verisimilitude, the three narratives include lifelike characters and highly realistic plots. Notably, this trait is a novelty in Erdrich’s and Morrison’s fiction inasmuch as these authors used to portray their peoples’ socio-political circumstances and suffering derived from extant racism and (neo)colonialism alongside their resistance to such continuous oppression through a way of writing popularly deemed as postmodernist and magical realist. Moreover, two of these narratives, *God Help the Child* and *An Untamed State*, are set in the new millennium, a choice which, I believe, facilitates the empathic understanding of the protagonists’ suffering provoked by the patriarchally- and racially-motivated violence they suffer. Although this is not the case of *The Round House*, where there is a clear lapse between diegetic time and the publication year, this novel boosts readers’ empathy towards the Native American protagonist and his community by means of another narrative strategy: the inclusion of a candid, young male autodiegetic narrator who faithfully represents a Native teenager with whom younger and more mature readers can easily connect. Similarly to *The Round House*, *An Untamed State* and *God Help the Child* include autodiegetic narrators, a narrative device that, as happens in *The Round House*, establishes a direct relationship with the reader, thereby facilitating the transmission of the authors’ urgent social, political and ethical message about racist and sexist violence against their fellow women through the voice of those characters-narrators.

Besides the realist impulse behind the selected novels, another outstanding similarity is that, alongside their inclusion of culturally specific literary genres and elements—including the Native American trickster story, the Haitian zombi tale or the Haitian and African American marronage story—, the three texts have also been elaborated following the conventions of mainstream literary genres in Western culture. One of those genres is crime fiction, some of whose main features are present in *The Round House* and in *An Untamed State*. As shown in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, whereas *The Round House* is a detective novel about a Native American young boy traumatised by his mother's rape who turns into a premature sleuth in search for clues that incriminate the unprosecuted white perpetrator, *An Untamed State* is a thriller which does not present a detective and an investigation. Instead, this narrative revolves around a crime and the psychology of the perpetrators as well as the female victim in order to question the implication of the Haitian and US societies in the suffering of the Haitian and Haitian American population, especially women. Despite these differences, both novels can be categorised as crime fiction, a genre which usually requires a linear plot that enables the reader to follow the investigations or after-effects of a criminal atrocity. In particular, linearity—or less fragmented plot lines—is one of the devices that make both narratives comprehensible and easy to follow for all the readers, including those who are not familiar with the cultural contexts of each ethnic group. Even though *God Help the Child* is not articulated around the aforementioned literary genre, this narrative is a quest novel, a romance in which the female protagonist embarks on an inner and physical and geographical voyage in order to find her lover but also herself. In this sense, similarly to the other two novels, the linearity that vertebrates the quest plot in *God Help the Child* helps readers to follow the protagonist's personal journey from traumatic childhood to post-healing motherhood.

Likewise, *God Help the Child* is a Bildungsroman—a genre also characterised by the presence of a straightforward plot—and so is *The Round House*, for in both cases, the young protagonists enrol in a maturation journey, that is, in a process of personal and post-traumatic development from their childhood to their adult years. Thus, because the Bildungsroman is yet another popular literary genre especially among young adults, this generic choice and its related straightforward unravelling of events evidence Erdrich's and Morrison's conscious attempts to attract and thus raise the awareness of a broader readership. Significantly enough, whilst *An Untamed State* is not a Bildungsroman per se, as revealed in Chapter 3, this narrative is also a novel of mental and personal development which deals with the linear process of post-traumatic and self-growth of the female protagonist. After all, Mireille evolves from a childishly selfish and shallow wealthy Haitian American woman who takes advantage of the idyllic scenery of the motherland for her personal well-being, to a survivor of kidnapping and rape trauma who fully apprehends Haiti's harrowing socioeconomic conditions after her thirteen-day-long traumatic experience with her underprivileged Haitian perpetrators.

In addition to the aforementioned generic and formal traits that the novels have in common and although Erdrich, Gay and Morrison write from different histories and experiences, as my investigation has shown, the three narratives under analysis here also share several themes, primarily (1) the suffering provoked by racist and sexist violence over their female characters and the community as a whole; (2) the healing and resistance to that kind of violence by the ethnic individual as well as the community; (3) the problematisation of the perpetrators of that violence.

In relation to the first of these ideas, trauma and suffering are overwhelmingly present in the three novels. As shown in the analytical chapters, each narrative includes

various characters enduring the effects of different forms of trauma that can be better identified thanks to an approach which combines classical and postcolonial trauma theory. On the one hand, the three texts provide a realistic portrait of the effects that psychic and individual traumas by-product of violent and sudden occurrences have on the main characters. These events go from abductions and sexual assaults, as is the case of *The Round House* and *An Untamed State*, to abusive motherhood and family murders, as happens in *God Help the Child*. On the other hand, the three texts represent or perform more collective and cultural inner injuries provoked by various oppressing intersectional factors and the lingering effects of (neo)colonialism in the US. These latter traumas—Native American historical unresolved grief, PTSS and the Haitian American trauma—are depicted as transgenerational wounds transmitted in multifarious manners. Especially they are inherited through silences and revengeful discourses, as in *An Untamed State*, or through the historical internalisation of racist discourses and an incomplete post-slavery mourning process due to the ongoing racial violence that continues re-enacting the community's founding trauma, as in *God Help the Child*.

But also, as revealed in the analytic chapters, the three novels foreground how the cultural and collective traumas suffered by the Native American, African American and Haitian American groups are re-enacted and enlarged by contemporary societies' and governments' neglect of these groups. This ongoing vicious attitude towards those who belong to subaltern ethnic collectivities in the US like the aforementioned ones does not provide the necessary reparation for their historical and collective suffering. Instead, it turns this grief into a chronic and, by extension, inheritable condition generation after generation. The narrative that best illustrates the transgenerational trauma derived from this situation of disregard and subalternity is *The Round House*. As analysed in Chapter 2, the rape of Geraldine and the impossibility to imprison Linden due to a historical

conflict between US and tribal jurisdictions on reservation territories rooted in the US government's deprivation of Indigenous peoples' lands and sovereignty, not only entails a family trauma for Joe. The sudden realisation of the dramatic implications of settler colonialism in his contemporary times opens a wound in the young boy's self that pushes him to retaliate against his mother's white perpetrator and the racist and patriarchal society that man represents.

Despite all this, the three novels present healing—the second theme they have in common—as a possibility for the protagonists. But it is important to bear in mind that, in each narrative, these characters respond to and heal from their psychic and cultural traumas in different culturally-specific ways. In *The Round House*, recovery is facilitated by communal care—especially female assistance—and the empowering traditional stories of cultural heroes which provide Joe with the resurgence seeds necessary to resist and fight back the attacks of the contemporary Euro-American wiindigoo embodied by his mother's rapist. In *An Untamed State*, female bonding helps in the protagonist's healing process. Yet, Mireille herself also responds to her rape trauma and the sense of betrayal provoked by her father's and compatriots' trading on her life as a result of a power-relations conflict through her astonishing resilience and several rebellious acts of marronage. These actions, which echo the courageous flights of the Haitian slaves from the plantations, allow her to eventually re-appropriate her body and subjectivity just as the runaway slaves did. Similarly, in *God Help the Child*, Bride's healing process is not only facilitated by female figures but it is also linked to two brave flights from oppressing domination: firstly, from the subjugation of her embittered mother and later on, from the misogynoirist world of beauty and fashion where she had taken refuge after leaving her past life behind. These escapist acts allow Bride to forge a positive sense of self that the transgenerational shame of the colour line

inherited from her mother had formerly prevented her from developing. Likewise, they enable her to become a more empathic and generous person capable of truly loving and taking care of others. In this sense, Bride's flights, especially the second one, lead her to complete her maturation process and become a self-assured African American adult woman and a qualified mother.

It is important to bear in mind that, although trauma can divide or fracture the community and give rise to the alienation of the individual as postulated by classical trauma theory, as Irene Visser rightly notes, it can also consolidate "a sense of belonging, of kinship and mutual trust" (2014, 109), thereby reaffirming and strengthening the bonds of an existent community or even creating new ones (109). Significantly enough, as the novels under analysis in this PhD dissertation present healing as possible, they also invite readers to understand that post-traumatic recovery for postcolonial-ethnic victims is never achieved individually; this key stage in the trauma process is always accomplished thanks to the community. After all, the racist and sexist violence that engenders the traumas that haunt Erdrich's, Gay's and Morrison's protagonists and the real ethnic subjects they represent entails a direct attack against their respective communities. For this reason, an effective healing from and response to that postcolonial, racist and patriarchal violence as well as its traumatic after-effects endured by many Native Americans, Haitian Americans and African Americans today, as the three novels show, can never come solely from the individual, it must emanate from the community. In this sense, *The Round House*, *An Untamed State* and *God Help the Child* bring to the fore the fact that we are social beings and, more than ever today, in a time when we are keenly aware of living in "world risk society" (Beck 2009, 9), the solution to constant vulnerability, grief and anxiety is not

the individualist ethos promoted by the neoliberal Euro-American culture, but the force of the community, the social group.

It is true that in the novels under analysis, the three protagonists embark on a geographical and inner journey to healing and post-traumatic growth, but these characters are never alone while en route. Because space is not stable, it is always “under construction [...], in the process of being made” (Massey 2005, 9) owing to the continuous movements and interrelations taking place in it, these curative voyages can be interpreted as a (re)appropriation of the traditionally white and masculine space of the road by racialised female and male Others. Such a reoccupation of the American highway could be deemed as an act of individual resilience and resistance towards a white supremacist and patriarchal system that alienates—even spatially—women and people of colour like Erdrich’s, Gay’s and Morrison’s protagonists. After all, (auto)mobility in the States has always served as a metaphor for freedom and the car in US fiction has traditionally offered disenfranchised individuals like Joe, Mireille and Bride, the possibility of mastering and controlling the American white and masculine space par excellence in a courageous act of rebellion and self-empowerment against the status quo. Yet, these liberating road trips are not solo journeys. They are rather geographical and personal quests or rites of passage that, one way or another, end up being shared with others, be it friends and parents like in *The Round House*, the family-in-law in *An Untamed State*, or a group of strangers that turn into an adoptive family in *God Help the Child*. All these companions turn out to be aides in the protagonists’ post-traumatic and personal growth processes through their rescuing, kind assistance and care as well as their wisdom or empathic listening. In this respect, the three novels encourage readers to see that the community plays a key role in the recovery from the individual and cultural traumas that affect Erdrich’s, Gay’s and Morrison’s main

characters and by extension, their people. But, as shown in my analysis of the three novels, the curative community is not made up entirely of individuals of the same ethnic group to which the protagonists belong. Instead, it is a mixed or hybrid group where both women and men, Native Americans, Haitian Americans, African Americans and some white individuals—like Linda in *The Round House*, Lorraine and the two female doctors in *An Untamed State* and the hippie family in *God Help the Child*—provide the support that the protagonists require to complete their self-quests of recovery.

Lastly, the third theme that the three selected novels have in common is their problematisation of the limits between victims and perpetrators of racist and sexist violence over Native American, African American and Haitian American women. I relate this coincidence with the authors' purposeful realist impulse whereby they endeavour to make their readership aware of the fact that, although we are living in an increasingly polarised world, reality is never black or white, but rather an intermediate colour like the grey zone where victims become victimisers or vice versa. The selected novels are multilayered narratives with multifaceted core and secondary characters who evolve from victims to survivors of violence and trauma; from victims of intersectional violence to perpetrators of physical and sexist offences like Joe in *The Round House*, the Commander and Sebastien in *An Untamed State* and Booker in *God Help the Child*, or of racist violence like Sweetness in the latter novel. This narrative demonstrates too, that victims of concomitant racism and sexism like Bride can also become their own victimisers if they internalise and mimic the racist and patriarchal discourses that linger in contemporary US society.

Moreover, it is important to note that these novels reflect the reality that we readers, as part of a society that witnesses but does not act, can also be implicated subjects in the racist and sexist violence suffered by women of colour both in the US



and worldwide. As proved in Chapter 3, *An Untamed State* is the novel which best represents how single individuals as well as entire societies in the First and Third World can be implicated subjects who help propagate the legacies of historical violence against women of colour. Specifically, with my analysis of the novel I have shown how Gay exposes the fact that the aggressions suffered by Haitian and Haitian American women are perpetuated by the US and Haiti's citizenries' more active or passive support of the patriarchal and/or postcolonial class structures pervading these countries.

In a similar vein, *The Round House* presents the US authorities as implicated subjects in the suffering of raped Native women and their communities, for they do nothing to solve the jurisdictional problems that make the persecution of such a crime impossible when it happens on a reservation. This distressing inaction, as my analysis of the novel has demonstrated, is related to the US unwillingness to lose its (post)colonial sovereignty over Native peoples' territories, a clear case of what Michael Rothberg calls "structural implication" (2019, 79). This type of systemic involvement in the suffering of the racialised Other is also visible in *God Help the Child*, where Morrison brings to the fore how the legacies of slavery and the colour line that resulted from this inhumane institution still matter in a society that continues being racist in spite of naïve claims of post-racialism. In this regard, by including individuals and societies as partly responsible for the grief of the Native American, Haitian American and African American communities, Erdrich, Gay and Morrison allow us to reflect on the fact that it is upon us to be or not to be implicated subjects in the violence they condemn in their novels.

Such foregrounding of the implication of passive societies or individual bystanders alongside the blurring of the limits between victims and perpetrators evidence that Erdrich, Gay and Morrison do not take an essentialist position in their

endeavour to denounce and by extension try to stop the violence suffered by their fellow women. This non-essentialism is also reified in their open endings. Whilst there is some hope at the closure of each narrative with the protagonists' willingness to keep on living, to continue moving forward, these denouements also contain a sense of uncertainty towards the future of these characters and their communities. With this narrative strategy, the three authors unsettle their readers to make them realise that, even though everybody likes happy endings, when dealing with a sort of violence that is systemic, reparations and solutions for ethnic groups such as the Native American, Haitian American and African American ones are not achieved that easily. Moreover, with their ambivalent endings these writers encourage readers to be attentive not simply to their protagonists' suffering of and more or less complete healing from outward and inner injuries by-product of the aggressions directed to them, but also and most especially to the historical and social causes behind such violence.

Hence, to conclude, this PhD dissertation has aimed to create a partial cartography of racist and sexist violence in the US with the study of three novels about ethnic survivors of this type of violence. Likewise, the three texts include protagonists who end up hitting the American road in an attempt to heal from their wounds while vindicating their presence in the still white supremacist North American society that normally disregards them. As I have intended to demonstrate, the three texts are part of a broader trend in new millennium US fiction by ethnic women writers denouncing the ubiquity of white supremacist and patriarchal violence in the country as well as the individual and collective traumas that this scourge provokes in the victims-survivors and their communities. Thus, Erdrich, Gay and Morrison can be considered three exemplary authors within this wider literary tendency which regards novels as artefacts of political and social resistance.

I am keenly aware that in this cartography resultant from the transethnic analysis of Erdrich, Gay and Morrison, I have only included three ethnic groups and focused on a representative example of each of them. Obviously, for space reasons, the scope of my research is limited to the selected trio of writers regardless of my awareness of more Native American, Haitian American and African American female authors who are also denouncing the racist and sexist suffered by the women who belong to those collectivities, as is the case of Frances Washburn, Maika and Maritza Moulite or Tiffany D. Jackson, respectively. In addition, I am conscious of the fact that in the US there exist other diverse ethnic groups whose women endure similar abuses today. For instance, sexual harassment and exploitation at the workplace, trafficking and rape around the Mexico-US border as well as domestic violence are common aggressions that Latinas and Chicanas endure. Likewise, Asian American females are vulnerable to abductions and violations motivated by historical stereotypes around their exoticism and submissiveness, and Arab American women are exposed to sexism in and out the home as well as to post-9/11 Islamophobic discrimination. Such multifarious forms of violence have recently been denounced by writers like Alicia Gaspar de Alba (Chicana), Kelly Yang (Asian American) or Laila Halaby (Arab American).

In short, because racist and sexist violence is systemic and structural due to its inextricable relation to the manner in which Western thought and societies have been constructed, it is no surprise that it recurs in all US ethnic groups and that female writers of all these different communities are penning realist novels to expose and denounce it. Hence, notwithstanding the relatively small sample of novels selected as literary corpus, the present study lays the groundwork for future research into alongside transethnic analyses of this fiction of denunciation and resistance.

It is evident that there is much work to do in the study of such a critical and urgent topic. For this reason, in the future I would like to continue exploring how writers such as Gaspar de Alba, Yang, Halaby as well as Washburn, the Moulite sisters and Jackson are tackling this very violence suffered by girls and women in their own communities. Like in this research project, I would like to carry out a comparative analysis of the traumatic after-effects and subsequent healing processes of the female characters, the origin of those aggressions, the implication of white and non-white perpetrators or bystanders, as well as the generic forms and narrative strategies used by the authors to raise readers' awareness of the overwhelming presence of such a scourge in the US territory. In this sense, by *mapping* or making visible more minority female writers seeking to sensitise white and non-white readers about the systemic violence suffered by their fellow women in the alleged "Land of Liberty," as I have attempted to do through this PhD dissertation, I will be contributing firstly, to the spreading of such necessary *herstories* of social, political and literary resistance in the world of academia and beyond; secondly, to the transformation of the MeToo movement—whose early seeds are behind the literary tendency identified and confirmed in this project—in a transethnic, transracial and even transnational WeToo cause. Thus, if between victims and perpetrators of violence against women of colour there are two possible middle positions, that of the implicated subject as conceptualised by Rothberg and that of the subject partaking in a collective attempt to eradicate such a social pandemic, I choose the latter one. As a literary critic and a white woman, I choose to be part of the solution and not of the problem, because the fight for the rights of ethnic women in the US, is at the end of the day, the fight for the rights of all women, of every one of us, too.



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