

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Trauma Across Generations in the Indigenous Australian Community: An Analysis of Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the trauma developed by the Indigenous Australian community as a result of the process of colonization in Alexis Wright's novel *Plains of Promise* (1997). Special emphasis is made on the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the Stolen Generations and their effect on the female characters. The different manifestations of trauma and the repercussion it had in 1950s Australia and continues to have nowadays will be examined. Even though the central theme is trauma, the way in which some of the female protagonists develop resilience strategies will be also studied. The theoretical framework this dissertation is founded on, follows a cross-cultural perspective, considering the particular circumstances of non-Western societies, especially those who have gone through a process of colonization.

Key words: colonization, Indigenous Australian people, trauma, transgenerational transmission, the Stolen Generations.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el trauma desarrollado por la comunidad indígena australiana como resultado del proceso de colonización en la novela *Plains of Promise* (1997) de Alexis Wright. Se hace especial énfasis en la transmisión transgeneracional del trauma y en las Generaciones Robadas y sus efectos en los personajes femeninos. Se analizarán las diferentes manifestaciones del trauma y la repercusión que este tuvo en la Australia de los años 50 y sigue teniendo a día de hoy. A pesar de que el tema central es el trauma, también se estudiará cómo algunas de las protagonistas femeninas desarrollan estrategias de resiliencia. El marco teórico en el que se fundamenta este trabajo sigue una perspectiva intercultural, teniendo en cuenta las circunstancias concretas de las sociedades no occidentales, en especial aquellas que han sufrido un proceso de colonización.

Palabras clave: colonización, indígenas australianos, trauma, transmisión transgeneracional, Generaciones Robadas.

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1. Introduction

The presence of Indigenous people¹ in Australia dates back about 65.000 years before the British colonizers settled in 1788 (Jalata 1). Nonetheless, Australia was declared *terra nullius* by the early European settlers ignoring that the land was already inhabited by the Indigenous community (Morgan 13). The concept of *terra nullius* means “no one’s land” and was used to justify colonization. It remained in force until 1992 when the High Court delivered its judgment in *Mabo vs Queensland (No. 2)*, finding that Australia was not *terra nullius* at the time of its settlement (“Challenging Terra Nullius”). As well as allowing the British colonizers to deny the presence of the Indigenous Australians and their land rights, this strategy made it possible for them “to destroy their Indigenous identity, peoplehood, and cultural powers, and to entrench the British imperial structures and culture” (Genger 7).

Australia originated as a penal colony. Even though its conquest was economically appealing due to “the accessibility of the Pacific waterways, the large availability of water and land resources, the possibility for early mining ventures, and the quick take-off of agroeconomic activities” (Genger 3), the main reason why the British landed in the country was to find an outlet for the convicts. With the arrival of the settlers, land took on a new meaning and was divided, thus creating boundaries “marked by differences in expected conduct and use: a new spatial ordering for the Land” (Edmonds 196). This dealt a serious blow to the Indigenous people not only because of the dispossession but also because of the different meaning that Europeans and Indigenous Australians gave to the land, leading to a cultural clash. Glarrwuy

¹ Indigenous people (or Indigenous Australians) is an umbrella term referring to both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, which are the two main Indigenous communities in Australia (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2022). This said, since most of the characters in the novel are Aboriginal people, I will use this term in the analysis to refer to them, except in those cases in which a specific character belongs to a different community or when I am referring to the Indigenous community in general.

Yunupingu declared that “the law of history says that we must not take land, fight over land, steal land, give land and so on. Without land ... we will be the lowest people in the world, because you have broken down our backbone, took away my arts, history and foundation” (qtd. in Barta 237).

In spite of the settlers’ hostility, the early reaction of the Indigenous people to their arrival was quite welcoming. However, as the non-Australian population grew, tensions between the two groups increased and violence on both sides intensified. As a result, one of the most massive genocides in history began in Australia. Genger classifies this genocide into three main categories: physical, cultural, and colonial genocide. Physical genocide refers to the direct killing of the Indigenous as well as to chemical products and contagious diseases that the colonizers imported from Europe (8). Cultural genocide refers to the imposition of European social and cultural organization and, consequently, the eradication of the Indigenous culture, including “language, homes, beliefs, practices, structures, and investments that would empower them to continue as People” (9). Finally, biological genocide refers to the so-called Stolen Generations, that is, those “half-caste” children who were removed from their parents to be raised in the British culture (9).

Many Indigenous children were raised in Christian missions. In the missions, it was very common for children to be separated from their parents since this system was thought to contribute to a more efficient conversion of the former (Edmonds 196). According to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Anderson and Tilton 7), “between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970”.

The missions also contributed to the cultural genocide through the Christianization of the Indigenous people. The British colonizers arrived on the continent with a Western sense of superiority, justifying their actions by the need to accomplish their civilizing duty. This process of civilization was conducted mainly by Christianizing the Indigenous population. The purpose of both the British government and the missionaries was to impose the European model of civilization and their Christian beliefs, which required the Indigenous Australians to abandon their way of life and beliefs and to trust those who had traumatized their community (Maddox 211).

The process of colonization in general and Christian missions in particular were episodes that left their mark on the Indigenous Australian community. In this dissertation I will analyse the different forms of trauma represented in *Plains of Promise*, a novel written by Alexis Wright in 1997, with special emphasis on the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the Stolen Generations. Alexis Wright is a member of the Waanyi people of Northern Australia involved in Indigenous rights activism who has gained recognition for representing the lives of Indigenous Australians in her work. Wright spent a long time in rural Australia, “listening to people telling stories about the land and culture and history and colonial experience and what I wanted to do [...] was to write a book in that story telling way” (“Alexis Wright”). As a result, she published her novel *Plains of Promise*. In an interview, Wright explains the irony of her novel’s title as follows:

“Plains of promise” is actually a phrase given by the first explorers who came to the Gulf of Carpentaria. They saw some of the grassland up there and they called it “plains of promise” for their cattle. So it might have been “plains of promise” for them in terms of good grazing areas for their cattle but it wasn’t for us. We’ve paid a high price for it. [...] It’s just out of irony that I gave it that title. (Wright)

The novel presents four generations of Indigenous Australian women —Ivy's mother, Ivy Koopundi, Mary Doolan, and Jessie Doolan— from the 1950s, when the missions still possessed some power, to the end of the 20th century, when they had lost their relevance. Even if Ivy's mother commits suicide on the opening pages, it is such the violence and discrimination she is subjected to, that her traumatic experience has an impact on the succeeding generations. In addition to this trauma, Ivy Koopundi is a victim of physical and psychological abuse in the mission. Her daughter, Mary Doolan, is one of the children from the Stolen Generations and through her character we can see the transmission of trauma but also the obstacles these children had to overcome in order to discover their roots. The trauma of having been removed from one's own community is embodied by the characters of Mary and Jessie, her daughter, who also shows some traces of the trauma transmitted from one generation to another. Therefore, trauma is present in all generations to a greater or lesser extent. In addition to this, Wright intended to represent "the idea of being an outcast in a non-indigenous world but also an outcast in the community" (Wright).

The aim of this dissertation is to study the representation of trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a consequence of colonization, giving special consideration to the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the Stolen Generations. However, in order to have a broader perspective of this concern, the origin of trauma in the Indigenous community must be previously examined. On this basis, trauma studies can shed some light on the analysis of the different forms of trauma represented in Wright's novel, *Plains of Promise*. Therefore, after providing an overview of the theory of trauma, the analysis will be divided into two main parts. The first one will provide a more general explanation of the origin of trauma in the Indigenous community, i.e. the displacement from their land, oppression and abuse,

and the destruction of Indigenous identity and culture, and its manifestations. Having established the origin of trauma, the second one will be centred on the analysis of the transgenerational transmission of trauma, including the Stolen Generations as the main source of this form of trauma in the novel.

2. Theoretical framework

The term *trauma* was already used in the field of medicine in the 17th century to refer to a physical injury caused by an external factor “resulting in extensive shock or damage to the entire body system” (Figley et al. 2). Over time, this concept was reconsidered and, in the 19th century it broadened its meaning to include psychological and emotional damage as well (2). Nevertheless, it was not until 1980 that the American Psychiatric Association officially recognised post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and included it in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Figley et al. 5).

One of the pioneers in the area of trauma whose theories provided the basis for future studies was Sigmund Freud. In *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Freud explains that an event is not traumatic per se, but that trauma is the result of reviving memories of it. (Balaev 361). In his later work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud delves into this notion pointing out that psychological damage does not heal in the same manner as a physical injury since the former “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (qtd. in Caruth 3). These recurrent symptoms are known as post-traumatic stress disorder and can manifest themselves in multiple ways, the most common of which are: “aggression against self and others, depersonalisation, dissociation, compulsive behavioral repetition of traumatic scenarios” (Van der Kol 8). The most frequent manifestation of trauma among

the victims is the reminiscence of the traumatic event in their mind, seriously affecting different aspects of their life.

The problem with Freud's theory of trauma is that it was formulated from a Eurocentric perspective, without considering "the uniqueness of trauma processes in cross-cultural contexts" (Visser 130). Experts in this field, like Stef Craps, consider that classical trauma theory does not conform to non-Western literary studies and endorses "the existing injustices and inequalities" (2). Craps gives four reasons to support his claim that are:

they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. (2)

In line with this approach, Irene Visser explains that classical trauma theory understands trauma as "individual and event based", and she suggests that, in order to respond to non-Western literary studies' demands, there should be a revision of its theoretical framework to cover "political, historical, and socioeconomic factors" as well (124). This understanding of trauma is suitable for the Indigenous Australia context since it includes aspects such as "colonization, racism, exploitation, and oppression" (Visser 125) that should be contemplated in order to obtain an accurate and representative picture of the notion of trauma beyond the Western view. On this basis, the concept of insidious trauma, coined by Maria Root, can throw further light. She defines insidious trauma as "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" (qtd. in Craps and Buelens 3). Thus, in contrast to what classical

trauma theory maintained, trauma is not simply about a specific event but it can also be the result of a series of micro-aggressions.

Even though Australia became independent from Britain in 1901, the effects of colonization on the Indigenous society did not disappear but persist until the present day. This phenomenon is known as transhistorical trauma which, according to Balaev, refers to the fact that “a cultural group’s traumatic experience in the historical past can be part of the psychic landscape of the contemporary individual who belongs to the same cultural group” (364). Taking this into account, transferring the term posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to this context may be quite misleading since, as it has been mentioned, trauma “is by definition not post” (Visser 125) but it lasts over time. The same interpretation could be applied to the term “postcolonial” in non-Western literary studies since, again, the impact of colonization is still discernible today (125). In fact, Judy Atkinson demonstrates a connection between historical events related to the colonization of Aboriginal people such as “epidemics, massacres, starvations, and the removal of people to reserves” with increasing rates of “family violence, child sexual abuse and family breakdown in Indigenous society” (Atkinson et al. 137). That said, it could be concluded that trauma has become an inherent element of the Indigenous Australian culture.

As well as being a phenomenon that affects the community as a whole, trauma is transmitted from generation to generation. Transgenerational trauma can be explained as the transmission of trauma to second and even third generations without them having been witnesses, but rather inheriting the trauma from their ancestors who did suffer it firsthand (Kirmayer et al., “Rethinking Historical Trauma” 307). The transmission of trauma from one generation to another can unfold in different ways including, “impaired parenting or distressing narratives”, “epigenetic processes or unspecified

spiritual means”, or in the form of a “cycle of abuse”, that is, the idea that if children suffer abuses in their childhood, they will grow up to be abusive adults, thus perpetuating transgenerational trauma (Kirmayer et al., “Rethinking Historical Trauma” 307). Judy Atkinson states that “the presence of unacknowledged or unresolved trauma in previous generations was linked to dysfunction in later generations of an extended family” (Atkinson et al. 138).

Another episode affecting the Australian Indigenous community that occurred as a result of colonization and which remains largely unresolved to this day is that of the Stolen Generations. According to research conducted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation:

Children were moved to institutions run by churches and non-government organisations, adopted by non-Indigenous families, or placed with non-Aboriginal households to work as domestic servants and farm hands. Many children suffered very harsh, degrading treatment (including sexual abuse), limited or no contact with families, and were frequently indoctrinated to believe in the inferiority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture. (Anderson and Tilton 7)

These racist policies that were disguised as “bureaucratic generosity” (Atkinson 138) left many miserable families, with mothers tolerating family violence in order not to break up the family even more (Anderson and Tilton 21). This not only affected the families involved but the entire community. Besides, for those children who were removed from their parents, growing up between two cultures, one of them trying to be erased from their minds, resulted in a significant identity crisis (Charles 134).

Similarly to the interpretation of trauma, a Eurocentric approach to psychology assumes that recovery from trauma is achieved through the victim’s “linguistic control over his or her pain” (Craps and Buelens 4). However, for trauma recovery to be

successful in a community victim of such a traumatic event as colonization, material recovery is over and above immaterial recovery, that is, the “reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system” is preferable (qtd. in Craps and Buelens 4). Frantz Fanon claims that a traumatized person cannot be easy in his or her mind as long as the imposed structures that led to this trauma remain in force (qtd. in Craps and Buelens 4). In other words, even though the psychological healing is essential in the recovery process, in non-Western societies, the collective recovery of their previous organisms prevails over the individual process. Far from being passive victims, Indigenous people’s resilience manifests in multiple ways such as “revitalizing language and culture as resources for narrative self-fashioning, social positioning, and healing; and renewing individual and collective agency through political activism, empowerment, and reconciliation” (Kirmayer et al., “Rethinking Resilience from Indigenous Perspectives” 1).

All things considered, since trauma studies were first developed, a continuous evolution has taken place in the approach to trauma. In the specific context of the Australian Indigenous community, colonization triggered the development of diverse forms of trauma including insidious trauma, transhistorical trauma, and the transgenerational transmission of trauma. This theoretical framework examines some forms of trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have suffered and continue suffering as a consequence of colonization. Hereunder, theory will be put into practice in the analysis of the representation of trauma in *Plains of Promise* taking a cross-cultural approach of trauma as a frame of reference. The first section will detail the circumstances that gave rise to trauma in the Australian Indigenous community and its early manifestations. As for the second section, it will concentrate on a more specific

area that is the transgenerational transmission of trauma, with special emphasis on the episode of the Stolen Generations.

3. Analysis

In her novel *Plains of Promise*, Alexis Wright presents part of the atrocious episode of colonization in Australia while illustrating the traumas of the Indigenous Australian community as a consequence of this process. The novel deals with different forms of trauma as well as their manifestations and their transmission.

3.1. The origin of colonial trauma in the Indigenous community

The analysis of this section will be conducted following Genger's classification of the forms of genocide —physical, cultural, and biological— during the British colonization of Australia (8-9). Beginning with the physical genocide, it primarily includes “disease episodes, the withdrawal of resources, and killing” (Jalata 2). The pages of Wright's novel are plagued by death, the first one being that of Ivy's mother, who takes her own life because she cannot endure the pain of being separated from her daughter. This event is the catalyst for several more cases of suicide. Psychologist Alice Miller suggests that, as a result of their poor living conditions, “Aborigines have turned their rage in on themselves ... The result is the long list of cell suicides, self-injury, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect” (qtd. in Caroline Atkinson 34). The spread of European diseases, such as smallpox (*Plains of Promise* 11), brought in by the colonizers, is also the cause of several deaths in Wright's work. Besides, the insalubrious conditions the Indigenous Australians found themselves in, deteriorated their health which, at the same time, facilitated the rapid spread of such diseases. Thus, “daily crowding in the small gaol resulted in an outbreak of dysentery which brought down the whole community. The Whites got it too. Babies died. Old people died. Yet

the daily routine continued with the gastric-stricken, diarrhoea-driven, all attending church” (*Plains of Promise* 39).

Sexual violence could be also considered a form of physical genocide even if it does not entail the death of the victim since, “aftereffects of rape —forced impregnation, psychological trauma, degradation, and demoralization— go beyond the rape victims themselves” (Sharlack qtd. in Jalata 9). In the novel, Ivy is sexually abused by Errol Jipp, the head of St Dominic’s Mission. In addition to force the child, Jipp tries to justify himself by means of his Christianizing duty, by saying that he “would, by God, push the evil out of the ‘she-devil’ who was possessing him” (*Plains of Promise* 32), somehow blaming Ivy for his despicable act. Besides, these assaults take place in the church sometimes and, since it is a Christian mission, Ivy feels that she is committing a “sin in God’s place” (*Plains of Promise* 32), which shows the extent of the Christianization of the Indigenous people.

Regarding cultural genocide, it can be seen from the very beginning of the novel. Arriving in St Dominic’s Mission for Aborigines, a Christian mission in the northern Gulf country (*Plains of Promise* 3), Ivy, who is still a child, is immediately separated from her mother. This common practice which was justified as being “for the good of the child” (13) is part of the cultural genocide of Indigenous Australians. Genger defines cultural genocide as the imposition of European systems and institutions and the consequent eradication of Aboriginal culture including “language, homes, beliefs, practices, structures, and investments that would empower them to continue as a People” (9). On her arrival in the mission, Ivy is disposed of her identity through the imposition of a new name: “He stood directly in front of Ivy ‘Koopundi’ Andrews, aged about seven. She had just acquired the name Andrews. Andrews, Dominic, Patrick, Chapel, Mission —all good Christian surnames given by the missionaries for civilised

living” (*Plains of Promise* 5). This excerpt is highly revealing since it illustrates the process of homogenization of the Indigenous community accomplished by means of the establishment of predetermined Christian family names. This is important because these surnames were not randomly chosen but they were used to introduce Christianity in a subtle way. As a result, not only the identity of individuals was erased but their origins as well.

Apart from the abolition of individual identity, this form of genocide involved “the forceful erosion of culture and language” (Soon et al. 15). This aspect is represented in the novel:

The white man wanted to pay alright for taking the lot. But they didn’t want to pay for the blackman’s culture, the way he thinks. Nor for the blackman’s language dying away because it was no longer tied to his traditional country... now prosperous cattle station or mining project. The white people wanted everyone to become white, to think white. Skin and all. (*Plains of Promise* 74)

This excerpt is particularly significant as it addresses different aspects of colonization. Firstly, the appropriation of the land by referring to it as “now prosperous cattle station or mining project”, since one of the main targets of colonization was making profits from the land. Secondly, there is a reference to cultural genocide by pointing out that “language [is] dying away”. This is a consequence of the fact that “missionaries forbade parents to teach their children their own languages [and] instead taught them English” (*Plains and Promise* 91). Since Indigenous Australians’ “knowledge, arts, rituals and performances” (Jalata 2) were orally transmitted from generation to generation and preserved in this way, the fact that their own language was prohibited led to the gradual disappearance of some elements of the Indigenous Australians’ culture. Finally, the last sentence, “skin and all” may refer to the Stolen Generations since the aim of this process was the assimilation of children, especially “half-caste” children, into

civilization. Thus, the lighter their skin was, the easier they would adapt. Besides, as future adults, it was probable for them to have a non-Indigenous partner and so, their descendants would be increasingly light-skinned. Another form of eradicating the Indigenous culture was by means of religion. In the novel, Aboriginal spirituality is replaced by Christianity through the imposition of Christian masses (*Plains of Promise* 37), Christian funerals (18), or the celebration of Christmas accompanied by the traditional message from the Queen (54).

The last form of genocide, biological genocide, is defined by Genger (9) as the means used “to destroy and distort the reproductive capabilities of Indigenous Australians”. The main practice was the forced removal of children from their parents. These children were sent away from their families so that they would grow up in a “civilised” environment and under the influence of white culture (Ballyin qtd. in Genger 9). Those children who were uprooted from their family and community experienced a disconnection from their culture that resulted in the development of trauma and its transmission from generation to generation (“Who are the Stolen Generations?”). The consequences of this form of biological genocide, known as The Stolen Generations, will be studied in the section devoted to the transgenerational transmission of trauma.

The situations mentioned above are certainly traumatic in themselves, however, trauma in the Indigenous community was not solely the result of these events but also of minor incidents of everyday life as well. This is referred to as insidious trauma, “the daily incidents of marginalization, objectification, dehumanization, intimidation, et cetera that are experienced by members of groups targeted by racism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, sexism, and other forms of oppression” (“Definitions”). In the novel, there are punishments, such as shaving Aboriginal girls’ hair due to misbehaviour (*Plains of Promise* 59), public humiliations (89) and threats (37-38), among others.

However, in Wright's work, Ivy is victim of insidious attacks at the hands not only of the colonizers but also of the Aboriginal people themselves. The motives behind this violence are mainly two. On the one hand, Ivy comes from another community, what the girls call "a rubbish country" (*Plains of Promise* 33), adding that Ivy's mother was "a myall" (33), meaning "wild, uncivilized", or "stranger, person from another tribe" ("Myall"). On the other hand, the fact that Ivy is a "half-caste" girl —her mother being an Aboriginal woman and her father a white man— causes a general rejection on the part of the community which do not hesitate to express it through comments like, "inbreeding produces the worst from both sides of the fence. They are all the same, these half-castes" (*Plains of Promise* 23).

As if being discriminated and treated as an outsider was not enough, Ivy is also judged as a woman. The relationship established between Aboriginal women and promiscuity permeates the novel and is used on several occasions to justify sexual aggression. This is evident when Ivy is sexually abused by the mission chief and is criticized by the rest of the Aboriginal community, as reflected in the following comment from one of the mission girls: "We's know what youse up too, no-shame slut-face!" (*Plains of Promise* 34). However, the Aboriginal girls' attacks are not reduced to verbal violence but they also include physical aggressions, as reflected in this excerpt: "Ivy was often left semi-conscious after these attacks. A rib. A bone. A finger. Broken to mend by itself" (*Plains of Promise* 23). The intra-community violence experienced in the Indigenous Australian community is known as lateral violence, described by Gregory Phillips as the use of violence to "feel powerful in a powerless situation" (qtd. in "Chapter 2: Lateral Violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities— Social Justice Report 2011"). As a result of being witnesses of the settlers' aggressions, the colonized established their "own hierarchy of power" that "mimic those of the

colonisers” (“Chapter 2: Lateral Violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities—Social Justice Report 2011”), which could explain the Aboriginal people’s behaviour to some extent since they were subjected to daily abuses at the hands of the settlers.

The violence Ivy suffers from other Aboriginal people continues over time. When she is 14, and already pregnant with Errol Jipp’s child, Jipp himself arranges her marriage to Elliot, an Aboriginal man within the mission, who brutally mistreats her:

He liked to twist Ivy’s ear, sometimes both of them together. [...] Then he descended on her with more abuse about her supposed infidelities. Finally, as she lay semi-conscious, he held a knife across her throat and told her the next time she lied about his father she would be dead meat. “That will go too”, he added and ran both sides of the knife across her stomach. (*Plains of Promise* 152)

This excerpt shows one of the episodes of physical violence that Ivy suffers from her husband. As well as being hit and humiliated, Ivy also receives death threats towards her and her unborn baby. Due to these traumatic events, the victim has a feeling of “powerlessness and helplessness” (Bower 625), resulting in a constant state of alertness. However, in the family home, the abuse comes not only from her husband, but also from her father-in-law: “At night she lay watching while the old man stood above her without speaking, shaking his penis, exposed through one of the holes in his tattered trousers, until eventually a few drops of semen fell on her” (*Plains of Promise* 150-51). Relying on the previously mentioned studies about abused children, it may be argued that being either a witness or a victim of his father’s violent personality is one of the reasons why Elliot becomes a perpetrator.

For all these reasons, the Indigenous community dispossessed of their land, their culture, their identity, their family and, in many cases, their lives, was traumatized by

the British colonization. Colonization along with the micro-aggressions suffered on a daily basis, led the Indigenous community to a state of trauma that continues to some extent to this day.

3.1.1. Manifestations of trauma

In the novel, trauma manifests itself mainly in four different ways: somatically, as the impossibility to express oneself, in the form of recurrent memories of the traumatic event and, by contrast, as the incapacity to recall the traumatic event. Somatization is defined as experiencing “problems that are psychological (relating to the mind) in a physical way” (“Somatize”). In other words, the body expresses that which the mind has not yet managed to process (Rodriguez et al. 32). This symptom of trauma is evident in a scene in which Ivy’s mother begs the mission members to return her daughter to her, without success: “Her arms and legs felt as though they had been strapped down with weights” (*Plains of Promise* 13). Even though her body is able to express this distress, Ivy’s mother cannot articulate a single word since her brain has not assimilated all she has gone through yet: “‘No, don’t,’ was all she could think of to say, but the words never passed her lips” (*Plains of Promise* 13).

Nevertheless, given that the protagonist in most of the novel is Ivy, the reader witnesses the trauma and its manifestation mainly through her. The first symptom that she exteriorizes is “the re-experiencing symptom” (Samuelson 346), which refers to intrusive memories of the traumatic event that may occur unexpectedly or be triggered by an element external to the victim that he or she associates with his or her experience (Van der Kolk 9). The former is the case of the following passage: “She recalled how the remains of a banana bush rubbed coarsely against her back as Jipp pushed her up and down, her feet unable to touch the ground in his tight grasp” (*Plains of Promise* 33). At this time, Ivy is not being sexually abused and Errol Jipp is not even present, but her

mind dissociates and brings back memories of the traumatic assaults perpetrated by the head of the mission.

Conversely, trauma may also manifest itself through what Samuelson refers to as “the avoidance symptom” (346), involving the impossibility of recalling aspects of the traumatic event or the event itself. This can be seen when Ivy is sent to a mental health institution. At first, “she tried hard and often to bring back the lost memories, only to sense her mind revolving faster and faster into a black vortex, disappearing into nothing. There was nothing to remember” (*Plains of Promise* 169). While it may seem contradictory, these two symptoms are not mutually exclusive, but the same victim may experience both. During her stay, the members of the institution try to help her to recover her memory and “within five months she had made impressive progress. Ivy managed to revive a relatively dependable short-term memory” (*Plains of Promise* 175). This fragment is a clear example of resilience. Despite the traumatic experiences that Ivy has undergone, she demonstrates a great capacity to overcome adversity and keep on going. However, it is not possible to talk of a complete recovery since, from this point onwards, she is victim of different forms of violence again and, by the end of the novel, some manifestations of trauma reappear in Ivy. In the last chapter, she is described as “a wild animal” (*Plains of Promise* 294), “like a small child” (294), with “bony arms” (294), “yellowish eyes protruding from their sockets [claiming] all the fear on earth” (294), and “as crazy as a loop” (296). This is the reader’s last image of Ivy, a terrified and traumatized woman isolated from society. Even the children describe her as “a mad witch with long white hair” (*Plains of Promise* 297) and invent games with her as the villain. This said, it could be argued that Ivy’s trauma remains unresolved by the end of the novel.

In conclusion, Alexis Wright's novel not only illustrates the horror of colonization but also its aftermath. Trauma is present in the work from the very beginning through its multiple manifestations. In addition to this, the novel makes it clear that the trauma originated by the European settlers did not disappear when the process of colonization came to an end, but that it became part of the Indigenous Australian community. The next section will analyse this aspect in depth by showing the different ways in which the trauma of those who lived colonization is transmitted from one generation to another generation or generations that did not experience it first-hand, which is known as transgenerational transmission of trauma.

3.2. Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and the Stolen Generations

Transgenerational transmission of trauma is defined as the impact that traumatic events have on an individual or a community and that is transmitted from one generation to another (Kirmayer et al., "Rethinking Historical Trauma" 307). Several studies demonstrate a heritability effect in "adults with histories of abuse as children, survival of war, and other forms of trauma leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" (Krippner et al. 55). In Wright's novel, several aspects of Ivy's mother's life are mirrored in the life of her daughter, Ivy, and consequently in her granddaughter's, Mary. Sexual violence is one of the forms of abuse that is reflected in all three generations. The first victim is Ivy's mother, who suffers sexual violence at the hands of several members of the mission (*Plains of Promise* 14). Later, Ivy is sexually abused by the head of the mission (32) and, while pregnant, she is raped by her husband (129). Finally, Mary is forced to have sex with her partner (291). According to the World Health Organization, children who come from families in which violence is inflicted are more likely to perpetrate or experience violence later in life ("Violence against

women”). It is noteworthy that, in this case, there is not only a family connection between the victims but also between the perpetrators since Victor, Mary’s partner for some time, is the son of Delainy, a member of the mission who abused of several women while being a preacher there. Furthermore, even if daughters were not witnesses of such violence towards their mothers, according to biological studies, it would not be necessary for the victims to have direct contact with their progenitors in order to develop the trauma since “genes contained in DNA are the standard way that biological information is transmitted from one generation to succeeding generations” (Krippner et al. 59).

Nevertheless, the main source of trauma in the female characters of the novel is the one caused by the biological genocide. In the opening pages of the novel, Ivy is separated from her mother. This situation is the same as Ivy’s when she gives birth to her daughter Mary and the baby is grabbed away without even having the chance to be held in her mother’s arms. In the case of Mary, there are different factors that trigger this fear of having her daughter taken away from her. This feeling arouses when Mary comes home to find that neither Jessie nor Jessie’s father are there: “Several hours later she started to phone around. – ‘Seen Buddy?’ – ‘Nope’ – ‘Not since yesterday’ – ‘Don’t worry, you know him, probably talking to someone.’ The problem was that Mary did know him. And she did not trust him.” (*Plains of Promise* 224). It is evident that one of the reasons for Mary’s anguish is her distrust of Buddy, who has proved to be an immature man and an absent father. Another reason would be the natural fear that mothers develop regarding their children and their safety. However, given that both Mary’s mother and grandmother suffered a forced separation from their daughters, part of this fear could be explained by means of the transgenerational transmission of trauma. These involuntary behaviours such as “anxiety and shame” or “low community

trust and cohesiveness” (Bezo qtd. in DeAngelis 36) are referred to as a “survival mode” that people enter to when they inherit a trauma (Bezo qtd. in DeAngelis 36). Besides, this fear might be aggravated due to the fact the best-established form of transgenerational transmission of trauma is that in which the mother is exposed to the trauma while pregnant (Krippner et al. 55). Given that Elliot, Ivy’s husband, threatened to kill the baby while she was pregnant and other people in the community suggested Ivy to have an abortion, this anxiety can also be explained as part of the trauma transmitted from mother to daughter.

The episode of the Stolen Generations left a mark in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people not only because it constituted a form of biological genocide but also because it contributed to the destruction of their identity and their culture. In addition to the profound impact it had on the families whose children were robbed, and on these children themselves, this event affected the succeeding generations that were enforced to grow up with no clue of their history, their identity, their family or their community. This circumstance is most clearly responsible for the transgenerational transmission of trauma in *Plains of Promise*.

3.2.1. The Stolen Generations

The Stolen Generations is a term used to refer to thousands of Indigenous Australian children that were “forcibly removed by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be raised in institutions, fostered out or adopted by non-Indigenous families, nationally and internationally” (“The Stolen Generations”). Not only did this event shattered several families, but it also severed “cultural [and] spiritual ties” that remain unrepaired to this day, resulting in a transgenerational impact on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community (“The Stolen Generations”). The main target of this procedure were the so-called “half-caste” children. Because they were usually the offspring of an

Indigenous woman and a white man, their skin was lighter, which was regarded as an advantage when it came to integrate them into the European civilization (Kartika 4).

As a result of being sexually abused by Errol Jipp, the head of the mission, Ivy becomes pregnant. When she gives birth, the members of the mission take the child away without Ivy having seen her. The missionaries tell her that “the baby was being cared for by Mr and Mrs Jipp, because it was very sick” (*Plains of Promise* 157). In these situation, it was usual for the parents to be told that the baby had died (“Who are the Stolen Generations?”), as happens in the novel when members of the Mental Health Institution discover Ivy’s documents, which indicate that “the verdict was a botched abortion” (*Plains of Promise* 171). This devious method not only denies the existence of Ivy’s labour but also erases every trace of the mother-daughter connection, making it extremely difficult for Mary to discover her roots. On the child’s side, due to the Government’s power to manipulate birth certificates, it is only after her adoptive parents die that Mary is informed that “her father was unknown. Her real mother was Aboriginal —but her birth certificate stated that her stepparents were her real parents” (*Plains of Promise* 209). Mary is already an adult when she discovers this and it is only then that she understands the reason why “she had felt different all her life” (*Plains of Promise* 209). As a consequence of the separation from their community, the children from the Stolen Generations were “less likely to have a strong sense of their Aboriginal cultural identity, more likely to have discovered their Aboriginality later in life and less likely to know about their Aboriginal cultural traditions” (“Bringing Them Home. National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families”). These aspects are central in Mary’s character.

Since the episode of the Stolen Generations constitutes a form of collective trauma among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, an effective approach to

healing from its sequelae would be “community resilience” (Saul 7). As has been done in relation to the theory of trauma, a distinction between Western and non-Western societies should be made in this respect since, “in collectivistic cultures collective events and their consequences may have more significance than in Western individualistic societies” (Somasundaram qtd. in Saul 6). This, together with her eagerness to learn about her origin, may be, consciously or unconsciously, the reason behind Mary’s return to her birthplace. Since Mary herself confesses that she has felt different all her life, feeling welcome in her community, immersing herself in her culture, identity, and spirituality, and forging ties that had been abruptly cut, is the best cure.

When Mary becomes aware of her Aboriginal background, she resolves to discover who she really is. To do so, Mary joins the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments willing to be useful to her community by means of political activism as a powerful form of agency. After some time working there, for one reason or another, she ends up in what used to be St Dominic’s Mission. During her stay, “she perceived a denial by Aboriginal people wherever she worked to accept her Aboriginality” (*Plains of Promise* 240). The explanation for this is that these children “were forced to assimilate into non-Indigenous society and culture” (“Who are the Stolen Generations?”). As a result, even though Mary has Indigenous features, she is perceived as totally different from them since the cultural ties that connected her to the Aboriginal community had been cut a long time ago. Aboriginal people notice this difference due to physical and cultural aspects. Firstly, Mary’s skin tone is lighter than theirs and the hairstyle of both Mary and her daughter Jessie is more stylish than the rest of the women in the community, marking them off as having a higher social status (*Plains of Promise* 261).

In an attempt to establishing contact with her roots, Mary constantly asks people about her mother but “nobody wanted to have the past suddenly foisted upon them. The memories were too sad” (*Plains of Promise* 227). Far from being rare, the avoidance of “activities, places, people, conversations and cover thoughts” related to the traumatic event is a characteristic symptom identified in traumatized people (Bower 626). Finally, and, by chance, Mary finds a woman who belonged to the Stolen Generations. She confesses that she “could never give [her] children the law, the language of their mother’s country” (*Plains of Promise* 275), and she adds: “I couldn’t give them their past. They lived with the fear of the unknown. They have no future and I cry for them, because they cannot go back to their country” (275). These excerpts reflect that the removal of Indigenous children from their communities as part of the biological genocide had an impact beyond those who went through the process, affecting the generations to come by means of a cultural, historical, and spiritual vacuum, as can also be recognized in Mary and Jessie —their cultural background being the one they were forced to assimilate.

Even though Mary is a victim of the assimilation policies implying the removal of children from their families, her agency in trying to repair the connection with her community and recover that which she was deprived of, represents the ultimate beacon of hope in the novel. Based on the World Health Organization’s claims about the high probability among descendants of victims of violence becoming victims themselves, Mary could be said to have inherited this propensity. As soon as Ivy and her mother are introduced into St Dominic’s Mission, the Aboriginal community considers both of them as outcasts and marginalizes Ivy because she does not belong there. A similar narrative is developed years later when Mary arrives at her birthplace and she encounters the rejection of some members of her own community. Since Mary goes

there on behalf of the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments, this reticence can be also explained due to the Aboriginal community's mistrust of organisms that had made false promises in the past about their will to improve the Aboriginal situation. However, she also finds the support from some other people such as Elliot and Victor, who accept Mary and her daughter Jessie as one of them. In fact, on the last pages of the novel, Mary confesses that she feels at home there and that "she had found a family that had adopted her right from the start" (*Plains of Promise* 283). The fact that Mary integrates into the community despite the adverse circumstances, seems to be a glimpse of hope after such a long time of confusion.

The biological genocide carried out in the colonial period constitutes a traumatic episode in Australia's history that has permeated every generation since the ones that suffered the event first-hand. In terms of culture, family, and community, this genocide erased a huge part of the Indigenous community's identity. In *Plains of Promise*, Mary embodies the community's resilience and their agency in trying to recover that which was taken away from them, even though Wright is quite ambiguous as to whether the ending could be considered encouraging or not.

4. Conclusion

"Plains of promise" is the name that the early European settlers gave to Australia. However, far from being promising, their settlement was devastating for the Indigenous Australians that already inhabited the land. The irony of the title that Alexis Wright gave to her novel is reflected in the analysis of this work by means of the study of trauma. After having analysed this aspect in Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise*, it can be concluded that this abhorrent episode in Australia's history is not a matter of the past. Colonization not only traumatized those who lived the process in their own flesh,

but its impact extended to the contemporary Indigenous community as a result of the transgenerational transmission of trauma.

Trauma is evident in the novel from the very beginning. The exploitation of the Indigenous land and resources, the imposition of the settlers' economic and political systems and institutions, and the erasure of the Indigenous' culture, identity, spirituality, and community to a great extent, were the principal reasons for the development of the colonial trauma. The analysis of this aspect leads to the conclusion that unresolved trauma is transmitted across generations of Indigenous Australian women. The transgenerational transmission of trauma plays a major role in the novel since, even though neither Mary nor Jessie are direct victims of the process of colonization itself, they are indirectly affected. Nevertheless, biological genocide, referring to the episode of the Stolen Generations, could be said to be the main source of trauma in the novel. It not only implies the suffering of both Ivy and Mary due to their forced separation but it also entails a chain of traumatic events. The fact that Mary's family history and community connections are denied to her, affects the development of her sense of identity and, consequently, that of her daughter. This is the reason why talking about post-colonial period is quite ambiguous since the term suggests that colonization is a matter of the past when, in fact, its phantom still creeps up on the Indigenous community.

However, Indigenous Australian people are not passive victims. In the novel, the figure of Mary embodies resilience and agency, proving that non-Western communities have their own ways of coping with trauma. Taking into account that immediately after birth she was stolen and, as a consequence, she has felt alienated all her life, the fact that Mary is an independent woman in her right mind is worthy of recognition. Even though none of the female characters are presented as passive victims, Mary could be

said to be the central figure in this respect due to her exhaustive search of the truth and her political activism. At the end, she succeeds in establishing a connection with her community and her culture.

All in all, Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* contributes to the deconstruction of the history of Australia written by white people providing an Aboriginal perspective on the genocide. In addition to showing the darker side of the things, Wright also leaves the door open to some hope for recovery.

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