

“KEMBE FEM. HOLD TIGHT”:  
A DECOLONISED READING OF RESILIENCE AND  
COPING WITH TRAUMA IN TWO HAITIAN AMERICAN  
NOVELS OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One cannot deny that the twentieth century and first decades of the new millennium have been an era of much advancement in multifarious fields. However, it must be admitted that the last hundred years have been defined by trauma too. In her book *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman explains that since the twentieth century, an era of various atrocities like two world wars, the Holocaust, Vietnam War, totalitarian rules in different countries and thus, of psychic and social wounds (2002, p. 2), trauma—what cultural studies scholar Cathy Caruth has defined as “a wound inflicted...upon the mind” caused by a violent and unexpected event which cannot be “assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (1995, p. 4)—has emerged as “a conceptual center” and an “essential dimension of human and historical experience” (Felman 2002, p. 2). Most especially, in the past forty years humanity has been living in what could be referred to as “the age of trauma” (Miller & Tougaw, 2001; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Kurtz 2018), for, during this time, the concept of psychological wound 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)” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, p. 2). This shift, as noted by Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman 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 now is both medically and socially recognised (2009, p. 5).

Sociologist Daniel Levy relates this evolution and the boom in Memory and Trauma Studies since the 1980s and 1990s with “a cultural response to the ontological insecurity that permeates the global age” (2020, p. 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 famously postulated in *World at Risk*, started occurring around the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986, when technological and social progress stopped being seen as a safeguard against risks and a source of control and of optimism about the future (2009, pp. 8, 36). It is no surprise then that such an attitude towards the immediate present and future ran parallel with the rapid growth 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, p. 566) to address contemporary anxieties in a time when national and religious authority could no longer fulfil this mission (p. 568).

Following this line of thought, the first decades of the new millennium have borne witness to various crises and tragic events from global terrorist attacks, natural disasters and ecological accidents to a pandemic, which, owing to 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. Thus, although the mentioning of the above tragic events does not imply that individuals are more traumatised today than ever before, it is evident that the increased visibility of the psychic injury in the last forty years has risen global citizenship’s awareness about their intrinsic vulnerability to the wound. All this has made trauma a key concept to characterise the new millennium.

But perhaps, or precisely due to our awareness of the wound, of our own vulnerability despite all the technological advances around us, as Michael Basseler argues, we are currently “witnessing a shift away from the trauma paradigm, to a new, post-trauma one that manifests itself most strongly in the (by now quite diverse and fuzzy) concept of

resilience” (2019, p. 16). As this scholar explains quoting the American Psychological Association, resilience can be defined as the “process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress . . . It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult situation” (2018, n.p.).<sup>75</sup> However, for Basseler, resilience “is not an opposite to trauma” or “does not imply the end of trauma” (2019, p. 16). Rather, it should be conceptualised as a new approach to trauma in the line of the latest reorientation of the trauma paradigm (pp. 16-17), one which has started moving away from the Westerncentric, psychoanalytic and aporetic view of the inner wound offered by classical trauma theory, and which now considers multifarious understandings and responses to the psychic injury without no longer discarding the possibility of recovery (Rothberg, 2008; Craps, 2012; Visser, 2014, 2015).

Nonetheless, although Basseler thinks that “resilience might ... be understood...as a new form of traumatic representation that does not, as in the classical model, posit the unrepresentability of its source,” but that rather highlights narrative possibility (Basseler, 2019, 17), it is important to remark that resilience in literature is not entirely a new concept or field. As Susie O’Brien reminds us, already in the nineteenth century white authors from Charles Dickens to Victor Hugo wrote stories, generally about children, about “transformation through adversity” (2017, p. 45). In addition, during the twentieth century and first decades of the twenty-first century a good deal of works penned by authors from non-Western/postcolonial communities have dealt with “growth, change or renewal” following usually cultural traumas related to (post)coloniality (Borzaga, 2012, p. 88; Visser 2015, pp. 255, 261) as a way to demonstrate that these communities do not want to be eternal victims of and even were eager to fight back the dire effects of (neo)colonialism and slavery. After all, as Silvia Martínez-Falquina argues, “agency, empowerment, affirmative politics or ‘post-traumatic growth’ ... are some of the ways of responding to trauma ... in the postcolonial context” (2015, p. 837).

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<sup>75</sup> According to Melvin Konner “resilience and/or independent recovery are by far the most common responses to potentially traumatic experiences” (2007, p. 320)

Despite its acknowledgement for years, it is true that in the last decades researchers in the field of psychological resilience and narrative psychological studies have begun “to shed light on the important role of narration and storytelling as the central coping strategy or healing mechanism” (Basseler, 2019, p. 19) for traumatised individuals. For instance, in 2001 Robert Neimeyer and Heidi Levitt examined how self-narratives help individuals to overcome psychological crises and stress as they allow readers to inscribe these micronarratives of their own life stories “as personal resources in the more or less coherent macronarratives that consolidate our sense of identity over time” (2001, p. 64). Thus, it seems evident that, as Basseler argues, the growing popularity of resilience-thinking in the past few decades points “to an increasing awareness and conceptualization of life as ... complex, vulnerable and fraught with risk” (2019, p. 23) and the need of such stories to cope with that traumatic realisation.

Yet, it is important to bear in mind that in traumatic events of a collective dimension some groups are always rendered more vulnerable and others more resilient, so as Basseler suggests, it should be taken into consideration those who are and who are not “represented as resilient (or vulnerable), and what ... the underlying narrative patterns of such representations” are (2019, p. 24). Thus, although resilience discourse is now a global phenomenon (Basseler, 2019, p. 29), when dealing with cultural forms of resilience, Basseler and other researchers (Borzaga, 2012; Visser, 2014, 2018; Martínez-Falquina, 2015) have pointed out the necessity of scholarly work’s sensitivity to the culturally-specific traumas of vulnerable communities, especially non-white ones. As the new decolonised directions in trauma theory have demonstrated, it is not only important to take into account the feasibility of traumatic working-through in contrast to previous models of trauma, but also scholars must look at individuals’ and communities’ resilient capacity to sudden or historical/ongoing violence through culturally-specific ways in order to offer more global and responsible explorations of literature.

## 1.2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Drawing on the lately (and crucial) shift in trauma theory towards a more inclusive and responsible direction, the goal of this article is to analyse the culturally-specific forms of resilience and working-through trauma in two novels written by two Haitian American authors, Roxane Gay and Ibi Zoboi. Both narratives—Gay’s *An Untamed State* (2014) and Zoboi’s *American Street* (2017)—revolve around two Haitian American women who suffer the negative and even traumatic after-effects of economic migration and the postcolonial situation of Haiti in the twenty-first century. As this article aims to demonstrate through a methodological approach based on the comparative *close reading* of both texts,<sup>76</sup> in the aforementioned narratives both Gay and Zoboi highlight the possibility of resilience and healing for their psychologically and emotionally wounded second and first-generation immigrant protagonists, respectively, and how these characters resort to Haitian forms of resistance and working-through in order to move forward, heal and grow psychologically and personally.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. ROXANE GAY’S *AN UNTAMED STATE*

*An Untamed State* (2014), Roxane Gay’s debut novel, is a trauma narrative where psychic/individual wounds coexist alongside collective and cultural ones related to Haiti’s (post)colonial context, as I have explained elsewhere (Roldán-Sevillano, 2022). A first-person narrative recounted by the protagonist herself, it revolves around Mireille Duval Jameson, a Haitian American lawyer kidnapped by a gang from the slums of Port-au-Prince. The leader of this armed group demands

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<sup>76</sup> The methodology of close reading implies the careful and sustained interpretation of the plot, words, what is being said and how is said for the critical analysis of a literary narrative. In the particular case of this article, close reading will be used in order to explore how the actions and utterances of Gay’s and Zoboi’s respective protagonists bring to the fore not only their traumas/overwhelming experiences which make them traumatised or deeply miserable/depressive, but also the way in which these characters try to be resilient, to work through those experiences as well as rebuild their lives and even gain self-empowerment in the process.

Mireille's father, Sebastien—a Westernised Haitian returnee and *nouveau riche* who disregards the critical situation of Haiti and represents for the gang a new Western occupant of the land—a million-dollar ransom that he can afford but that he is unwilling to pay. This negative response results in the torture and rape of Mireille by the gang as a way to force Sebastien to pay as well as to punish his pride and his presence—a neocolonial presence from the gang's viewpoint (Roldán-Sevillano, 2022, pp. 277-282)—who will end up suffering a clear case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after her release from which she will partially recover thanks to her own resilience and female bonding.

During Mireille's thirteen-day-long ordeal in a gloomy chamber in Bel Air, a slum of Port-au-Prince, as her narrative voice discloses, this character is tortured, humiliated and sexually abused by the Haitian gang. Such a cruel and disgusting experience makes Mireille, both during her captivity and later on after her release, undergo psychological and physical responses such as dissociation, terror, loss of control, paranoia, hypervigilance, sleep disorders, depression as well as intrusively recurrent flashbacks and dreams, which give way to the persistent re-experience of the traumatic event (American Psychiatry Association, 1994, pp. 427–429; Caruth, 1995, p.5).

As I have explained elsewhere, the first sign of Mireille's PTSD is observable in her intentional forgetting of the past good memories that threaten “to break [her] body more than any man could” (Gay, 2014, p. 171) due to the clash between the happiness of her previous good life and the ordeal she is experiencing in the slums (Roldán-Sevillano, 2022, p. 272). Likewise, Mireille's deprivation from her own body and will through the sexual abuses and tortured perpetrated by her victimisers make her sink into a process of traumatic dissociation whereby she unconsciously tries to repress the violence she is enduring, as evidenced by her dissociative language when she refers to “[her] body [being] not [her] body” (Gay, 2014, p. 106) or to herself by using third-person singular pronouns—“*she* has a husband *she* loves” (p. 196; my emphasis). Nonetheless, her efforts to repress her trauma prove unfertile for, following her liberation, Mireille is continuously haunted by

repetitive involuntary flashbacks and nightmares of her traumatic experience with the gang (p. 277), which make her fall into depression, an incipient anorexia and a paranoid state which make her confuse men like her husband with the gang leader (pp. 301-303).

However, with the unfolding of the plot, the novel portrays Mireille as a resilient and brave woman rather than a defeated victim. In fact, despite her ordeal with the Haitian gang and later on when with her PTSD symptoms, Mireille struggles to repress her trauma and heal somehow in order to go back to her life, which denotes a key volition to change her mental and physical situation. This can be noted, firstly, in her decision to flee Haiti and leave behind her two perpetrators—the gangmen but also Sebastien who treats her as a bargaining chip when, instead of paying the ransom demanded by the kidnappers straightforwardly, he chooses to negotiate the price of his daughter’s life (Gay, 2014, p. 145)—as well as her whole Haitian family because, as Mireille explains, in her beloved motherland “there would be no evidence collected, no trial, no justice” (p. 234)

Significantly enough, once back home in the US, a country where she should feel much safer, Mireille also ends up fleeing the marital home as a response to her husband’s attempt to confine her with the pretext of “keeping [her] safe” until she heals (p. 262). Precisely, the idea of being confined again makes Mireille more anxious and out of control, for she feels she is being “trapped” (p. 261) one more time. Such a situation propels her to run away to her parents-in-law’s farmhouse in Nebraska, where she begins her healing process thanks to her mother-in-law, Lorraine, who, contrarily to cultural expectations about mothers-in-law, takes care of and actively listens to Mireille. One could think that these acts of escapism or *marronage* on Mireille’s part is an act of cowardice, however, far from this conceptualisation of her flight or escape to the countryside, Mireille’s decision actually denotes that this character is a strong woman like her rebellious Haitian forefathers and mothers in colonial times, the runaway slaves or *maroons*<sup>77</sup> who, after living in the

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<sup>77</sup> As happens with the French word “marron,” the English word maroon derives from Spanish “cimarron,” a term originally used in the New World to refer to domestic cattle that had escaped to the hills in Hispaniola the former Spanish colony which comprised today’s Haiti and

forests away from the plantations, participated in the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) seeking the country's colonial emancipation from France and the white slaveholders (James, 1980, p.15). In other words, it could be argued that through her rebellious escapism the novel portrays Mireille not as a passive character expecting to be freed from her psychic confinement in the gloomy chamber provoked by her haunting flashbacks and her marital confinement, but rather, as an active woman who wants to heal and get rid of the burden of her trauma by resorting to a culturally-specific manner of resilience, that of her ancestors.

Interestingly enough, earlier in the novel readers had learnt that while Mireille was kept captive by her kidnappers, she tried to run away from her perpetrators' dwelling as the following passage demonstrates:

I ran ... I had no idea where I was going. Even though it was early and still and silent, there were people in the street. As I ran past them, they stared. I cannot imagine what I looked like, bruised and bloody and barefoot, running, wild, so very wild, trying to get free... (Gay, 2014, p. 133).

As the excerpt makes clear, Mireille flees her imprisonment and tortures but not for long, because, following her entrance in a bar not far from the gang's house whose waitress turns in Mireille to the leader of the gang—who everybody calls Commander—Mireille is found and forcedly returned to her chamber of horrors where she is repetitively abused and raped. Nonetheless, despite her unsuccessful escapism, it could be argued that through this first flight, and later on through her running away from Haiti and from her husband, the novel brings to the fore how the revolutionary and fighting spirit of Mireille's Haitian ancestors willing to escape confinement, continuous physical and psychic violence and the deprivation of their will, runs through her veins.

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Dominican Republic—and later on, to the slaves who had escape from the Spaniards too (Roberts, 2015, p. 5). Finally, as Friederici notes, around the mid-sixteenth century, the term—which had connotations of "fierceness" and being "wild" and "unbroken" (as cited in Price, 1996, p.2) started being used to refer primarily to the runaway black slaves in the Americas (Robert, 2015, p. 5).

In addition to these experiences of marronage bespeaking the historical resilience of the peoples of Haiti inherited by Mireille, this character's physical and psychic health improves thanks to female bonding/sorority tanks to Lorraine, Mireille's sister and a kindly-hearted female doctor. It is true that despite all this help, similarly to other victims of trauma, Mireille is no longer the woman she was before her ordeal because she "will never be okay, not in the way [she] once [was]" (p. 342). However, Gay's heroine gradually grows strong enough to rebuild herself, her life and her marriage precisely thanks to her resilient nature.

It must be remarked though that Mireille's recovery is not complete, or as complete as it could be, until she faces her homeland and perpetrators again. Thus, when Mireille goes back to Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake in order to help and grant her father feigned forgiveness (p. 351), and when she decides to take an underscored promenade out of her parents' mansion without "shrink[ing] away" (p. 354) after seeing a dark SUV like the one owned by her captors, these two moments bespeak Mireille's resilience and strength following her traumatic experience.

Finally, Mireille's encounter and confrontation with the Commander at a Miami restaurant where he works years later, can be considered another key moment in her working through process, for, no longer feeling afraid of her perpetrator, Mireille chases and hits him until he escapes (p. 360). Significantly enough, through her confrontation with her victimiser, Mireille proves to be the owner of her body and will again. This recuperation of her subjectivity through direct confrontation with her confiner and perpetrator which somehow recalls the confrontation the Haitian runaway slaves with their masters in the Haitian Revolution allows Gay's heroine to become empowered and eventually verbalise her trauma by narrating her testimony to the implied reader some time later. Precisely this narrativisation of her trauma could be interpreted as the ultimate step in her working-through process, that which had started with her first act of marronage back in the slums.

In sum, despite her PTSD, if one closely examines Mireille's post-traumatic decisions, it can be noticed that this character—who epitomises the traditional Haitian saying *kenbe fèm* "stay strong" or "hold tight" that encapsulates the historical resistant and resilient nature

of the people of Haiti, the first Black colony to become independent—is revealed as an instrument whereby Gay shows that post-traumatic healing, albeit a difficult process, is possible for her Haitian American protagonist due to her resilient nature.

### 2.1. IBI ZOBOI'S *AMERICAN STREET*

Ibi Zoboi's *American Street* (2017) is a migration and coming-of-age narrative about a Generation Z Haitian female teenager, Fabiola Tous-saint, who is separated from her mother, Valerie, at *John F. Kennedy* (JFK) international airport in New York when the latter is detained for illegal immigration. Fabiola, who is an American citizen because she was born in the States when her mother overstayed her tourist visa back then, is forced to continue to Detroit, where her aunt and three female cousins await her. Ironically enough, once in Michigan, the absence of her mother and the impact of her experience in this city heavily shaped by decades of decline and segregation turn Fabiola's pursuit of the American Dream into a nightmarish journey.

As Fabiola recounts, after the traumatic separation from her mother at the US border, her situation of loneliness, confusion and shock dissolves her initial optimism and sense of safety, which gives way to a sense of fragility and insignificance as evinced by her feeling of being “just a pebble” in “America—its vastness” (p. 2). Moreover, once Fabiola arrives in her family's neighbourhood located in one of the most decaying areas of Detroit, she experiences a big clash between her previous expectations of the good life in America and the reality she encounters there. So, together with the traumatic mother and daughter separation at the airport and Fabiola's impossibility to know if Valerie will soon be sent back to Haiti, Fabiola has to deal with the psychological anxiety that her broken dreams and disillusionment with America provoke in her.

Particularly Fabiola has to face “the broken Detroit streets” (p. 79), “darkness seeping into every crack and corner” (p. 14) as well as the fact that the “the big mansions [she had] seen on American TV” (p. 14) have been replaced by “vacant spaces where houses should be” (p. 37),

numerous broken and “abandoned houses” or small places like her family’s dwelling (p. 19).

Another clash is her realisation about her family’s detachment from the Haitian culture and roots. This can be observed, for instance, when Fabiola speaks Haitian *Kreyol* to her aunt Marjorie, whom she calls “Matant Jo” (Aunt Jo), and the latter prohibits Fabiola from speaking “a word of Creole” and use only English, the language Fabiola learnt at “that English speaking school [Aunt Jo] paid all that money for” (p. 17). Similarly, this detachment becomes obvious in Fabiola’s cousins’ lack of knowledge of and respect for her religion—Haitian Vodou—, which they refer to as “voodoo shit” (p. 63),<sup>78</sup> and in their American diet with no room for Haitian cuisine in which, as Fabiola notes, “avocados” (p. 35), “rice and beans,” “spicy stewed chicken and red snapper seasoned to the bone” alongside “*banana peze*, fried plantains” (p. 192) are a must. Significantly enough, Fabiola dislikes American food McDonald’s meals, which she describes as “really plastic” (p. 120). Evidently, her unpleasant culinary experience in the new country exacerbates Fabiola’s homesickness for Haiti and turns into another factor, and thus, indicator, of Fabiola’s disenchantment with the US.

Moreover, Fabiola is disappointed by the lack of Haitian hospitality in her new house as happens, for instance, when she has to have dinner unaccompanied in the kitchen just after her arrival (p. 20) and, in the following weeks, when she has all her meals alone at the kitchen table. These moments of complete solitude make Fabiola feel extremely lonely, as she admits early in the novel: “Never could I have imagined being in a house full of family and still feeling lonely” (p. 53).

Last but not least, another source of unhappiness for Zoboi’s protagonist is the first contact with her new private school as well as her cousin’s group of friends. As the novel shows, following a few racist experiences

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<sup>78</sup> The word “voodoo” has been used in the US (and transmitted to the Western world through Hollywood cinema) to refer to Vodou, Haiti’s most prominent faith, in “a casual and derogatory manner” (Michel 2006, p. 35) since the US occupation of this Caribbean country (1915-1934). As Michel explains, the term encapsulates negative connotations that go “from the deceptive to the downright evil” alongside the “magical” (2006, p. 35) and sorcery. Precisely, these are the connotations that the words uttered by Fabiola’s cousins vis-à-vis Vodou contain.

in class years earlier, Fabiola's cousins intentionally detached themselves from their Haitian roots in order to assimilate in the US culture. For this reason, they summon Fabiola to do the same and go for a "make-over" (Zoboi, 2017, p. 63). Evidently, this entails that Fabiola must leave behind her Haitian self so as to be accepted at school and in her cousins' circle, a group of friends and classmates that make her really uncomfortable, especially one of her cousin's boyfriend, Dray, a twenty-one-year-old gangboy, drug dealer and bully that has been humiliating and battering that cousin for years.

Besides, Fabiola goes through moments of confusion and shame with her marks at the new school where a new system of education unknown to her makes her fail her assignments, something which had never happened in Haiti, as Fabiola herself confesses:

I've been writing essays and poems in English my entire life. I went to an English school in Haiti. It doesn't make sense that my paper isn't perfect.

... I feel attacked because I wrote down everything I knew about the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint L'Ouverture and why he is important to me. But Mr. Nolan thinks everything I said was all wrong. (pp. 118-119)

In sum, the aforementioned problems and the issue with the marking of her essay on the heroic leader of the Haitian Revolution with whom she shares her surname alongside the fact that Fabiola cannot share her disappointment and frustration with anybody as she explains in her continuous interior monologues throughout the novel provoke in the girl a sense of anger and "deep sadness" (p. 247) that she channels through her fixation with the rescue of her mother, as she herself admits: "First, my mother. Then, everything else" (p. 163).

Significantly enough, in order to cope with her sorrow while finding a plan to get her mother back, Fabiola tries to adapt to the US by assimilating in her new social group. And so, with the purpose of becoming a west-side Detroiter like her cousins, she gradually accepts changing her image and language as well as meeting her teachers' academic requirements. Moreover, as the novel shows, thanks to all these changes, Fabiola increasingly feels "more American" (p. 59) and also more accepted

in her family, as illustrated in the episode when the three cousins and Aunt Jo eventually sit with Fabiola at the family table to celebrate Thanksgiving (p. 230).

Yet, it is important to remark that, despite this change, Fabiola finds ways to hold onto her Haitian roots, not only by cooking Haitian recipes to her family, but also by clinging to another part of her culture: her Vodou spiritual practices.<sup>79</sup> The connection with the Haitian *lwes* or spirit guides through her prayers allows Fabiola to contact her mother and remind her of the Haitian saying “Kenbe fem. *Hold tight*” (p. 77).<sup>80</sup> Particularly important in the novel is Fabiola’s identification of Bad Leg—a homeless man always loitering at the intersection of streets next to Aunt Jo’s house—with Papa Legba, “the *lwa* of crossroads” that “opens doors and unlocks gates” (p. 34), whose riddles and songs, as Fabiola thinks, contain clues that can bring “[her] mother back to the other side” of the border (p. 323).

In addition, besides her prayers asking for more clues, Fabiola demands Bad Leg/Papa Legba to help her choose a path when she has to decide whether or not to accept a deal offered by a detective who contacts Fabiola promising Valerie’s liberation in exchange of the girl’s help to find any evidence that can incriminate Dray for selling drugs that are killing people. Pushed by her eagerness to reunite with her mother as soon as possible and by the rage that Dray’s abusive behaviour with one of her

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<sup>79</sup> Haitian professor in Black Studies Claudine Michel defines Vodou as “a broadly encompassing worldview, a comprehensive system that shapes the human experience of its adepts in their search for higher grounds and purpose in life” (2006, p. 28). In addition, as this scholar further explains, “Vodou religion is omnipresent, pervasive, strong, and performs key functions in all aspects of Haiti’s social and political life. As such, the ancestral religion represents a key element of Haitian consciousness and provides moral coherence through common cosmological understandings” (p. 28).

<sup>80</sup> Because of the syncretic (African and Catholic) roots of Vodou (McCarthy Brown, 2006, p. 19), vodouists bring their *lwa*, that is, “their African/Creole spirits” (Michel, 2006, p. 30) somehow shaped in a reinterpretation of the Christian saints (Desmangles, 2006, p. 39), “into all affairs and consistently seek their influence” (Michel, 2006, p. 30). For this reason, as Michel points out, “[o]n a daily basis, the religious life of those who *serve the spirits* (*sèvi Lwa yo*) revolves around a form of collective self-consciousness guided by their *Lwa* and the following African-derived principles: holistic conception of life, human-centered orientation, centrality of the community, honor and respect for elders, beneficence, forbearance, forgiveness, and sense of justice” (2006, p. 30).

cousins provokes in her, Fabiola convinces herself that Dray is the person behind the crime. For this reason, she resorts to Ezili-Freda, the *lwa* of love, beauty and sensuality, with the aim to seduce Dray and collect some evidence about his illicit business. Nonetheless, the novel offers a plot twist when Fabiola discovers that it was actually her cousins and not Dray that sold the lethal drugs as a way to help their mother with a big debt that Aunt Jo owes Dray's gangster uncle, a powerful and dangerous man who helped her provide her family when her husband, Uncle Phillip, unexpectedly died a decade earlier.

Unwilling to disclose her family to the police, Fabiola plots a new plan so as to solve her and her family's problems: to convince Dray with lies and the seduction skills granted by Ezili-Freda to sell drugs at a new party where the police will "catch him in the act" (p. 90). Thus, Fabiola also seems to be guided by Ezili-Danto, "the *lwa* of vengeance for women" (p. 178) traditionally represented as a woman warrior as Fabiola's willingness to fight for the women in her family in order to release them from their burdens, their chains, suggests. As Fabiola puts it,

I am a volcano. I am Ezili-Danto. Everything—Haiti, my mother, my cousins, my aunt, the house, school, Kasim, the detective, Dray, America—comes to a boil: sizzling and popping and oozing hot, red lava (p. 253).

Interestingly enough, the decision to take action with the aim of changing her mother's, family's and her own situation in the US denotes that in Zoboï's novel, as happens in Gay's *An Untamed State*, the female protagonist tries not to remain a helpless victim of her traumatic experience by fighting the forces around her so as to change her and her female relatives' harrowing reality. And so, like her hero in the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture,<sup>81</sup> Fabiola leads a movement to liberate her mother from the manifestly xenophobic and anti-black US migratory system, and her family from the long-lasting consequences of racial

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<sup>81</sup> As C.L.R. James explains in his famous book *The Black Jacobins*, the slave revolts that ended up with the independence of Haiti were driven by manumitted mulatto ex-slaves and the maroons who fought for liberty and freedom (ideals that had been defended in the French Revolution) (1980, p. 10) and led by "tactically brilliant leadership, notably under Toussaint L'Ouverture!," who had been a slave himself until he was forty (p. 17).

segregation and stratification in the country with the help of her three cousins, in what could be considered a guerrilla group with echoes of the rebellious Haitian maroons who, together with the *affranchis* (freed mulatto slaves) struggled to liberate their people from the pain caused by white settlers in the Haitian Revolution (James, 1980). In fact, Fabiola at some points resembles a modern maroon, for she is always on the move wandering the neighbourhood as a nomad in search for clues, signs and information that allow her to achieve her liberatory goal while trying to adapt in what she regards as a new environment which, like the unwelcoming mountains and forests where the Haitian maroons settled after fleeing the plantations, she finds significantly hostile.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, like the maroons, she is determined not to accept her and her people's suffering caused by an ongoing white supremacist system established in the States since colonial times which oppresses them more or less directly due to their black skin. For this reason, just as her fugitive forefathers did in the Haitian Revolution, Fabiola decides to take action so as to change their unfair situation through plotting, warfare tactics and endurance. In this sense, similarly to Mireille in Gay's novel, Fabiola can be related to Haitian marronage, in this case, a psychological form of flight and resistance encapsulated in her decision to move forward and not to remain static and passive while waiting for an external solution to her family's suffering provoked by US institutional racism that may never come. After all, as Laurent Dubois contends, marronage in Haiti "laid the groundwork" for collective uprising that could "smash the system from within" in their fight for freedom (2004, p. 55), and this is precisely what Fabiola does when she bends the law by plotting a plan for getting a commission of Dray's sale of drugs that pays her family's debt and getting Dray's detention and her mother's release in exchange

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<sup>82</sup> Neil Roberts's definition of marronage as "a flight from the negative, subhuman realm of necessity, bondage, and unfreedom toward the sphere of positive activity and human freedom. Flight is multidimensional, constant, and never static" (2015, p. 15) becomes handy in the analysis of Fabiola's actions as an example of marronage, for, her behaviour throughout the novel meets the features provided by Roberts, especially her non-conformist way of being in order to flee the negative, her obsession with the liberation of her mother, family and herself so that they can live a happy life once and for all and her continuous movement through the streets of her neighbourhood and Detroit.

so that her family and herself can be truly free in the land of opportunities as they always had dreamt.

In addition, in order to fulfil this mission, Fabiola resorts to her comrades, her cousins, a decision clearly in contrast to US individualism for it draws on the interconnectedness and relationality that characterises the history of the Caribbean US culture in general (Glissant, 1997), and particularly the foundational history of Haiti as a free nation liberated from the colonial yoke thanks to the individual as well as collective agency of the *affranchis* and runaway slaves of Saint-Domingue (James, 1980).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding Fabiola's and her cousins' collective effort to carry out the plan, in yet another plot twist, the ambush set for Dray results unsuccessful and with Dray seeking for vengeance against Fabiola. Fortunately, Zoboi does not offer a fatal ending to her protagonist. Instead, the novel shows that when Dray is about to murder Fabiola with a gun, the girl is saved by Bad Leg/Papa Legba who shoots Dray dead and makes the weapon disappear forever so that neither Fabiola nor her family are found guilty. Moreover, regardless of such a terrible incident, Fabiola's continuous pleas to the *lwas* for her mother's release eventually take effect at the very end of the novel when after the failed plan, Valerie's paperwork is fixed as the detective had promised Fabiola months earlier, which means that Valerie can eventually stay in the US with her daughter and her Haitian American family.

Hence, as the novel proposes with this optimistic denouement following Dray's dramatic death, it could be suggested that thanks to her resilience based on the Haitian roots, historical resilience and Vodou—a faith which was so crucial for the unification of the enslaved peoples of Saint-Domingue in their fight for freedom during the Haitian Revolution (Hebblethwaite, 2015, p. 5)—Fabiola not only achieves the liberation of her mother, but also she releases her aunt and cousins from a big economic burden and, in turn, enables them to start anew somewhere else.

Likewise, thanks to her bravery and determination, Fabiola allows herself to dream again with a better life on US soil next to the people she loves, as the novel's closing words bring to the fore:

I stare out the window as we drive out of Michigan. On the other side is the wide, free road. Unlike in Haiti, which means “land of many mountains,” the ground is level here and stretches as far as I can see—as if there are no limits to dreams here. But then I realize that everybody is climbing their own mountain here in America

....

And I am not a pebble in the valley.

I am a mountain. (Zoboi, 2017, p. 324)

Significantly enough, these final words not only make evident the maturation process undergone by Fabiola—who no longer feels insignificant in America and who realises that living in the US is not an easy road but rather, a steep and difficult journey towards a Dream aimed and fought for by everybody living in this country—also, they reveal Fabiola’s own identification with a mountain, a prominent geographical feature of Haiti, a country whose name in the native/Taino language of its first inhabitants prior to colonial times—*Ayiti*—means “mountainous land” (Roberts, 2015, p. 122). In this sense, it could be argued that with the above final words that acknowledge the indigenous meaning of her Caribbean country, Zoboi’s novel closes with an important suggestion: that despite Fabiola’s eventual stay in the US, she remains reluctant to relinquish her Haitian identity and roots, precisely the culture which offered her the adequate tools (gallantry, endurance and non-conformism) to save her family and grow psychologically and personally regardless of the numerous obstacles she encountered in the initial stage of her quest for happiness in the US, another kind of mountainous land. Thus, as happens in *An Untamed State*, it could be argued that *American Street* highlights not only the importance of resilience to face contemporary adversities, but also, and most particularly, the essential role that culturally-specific ways of resilience for non-white individuals, in this case, the Haitian American community.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in this article, both *An Untamed State* and *American Street* deal with traumas related to the Haitian reality either in Haiti or in the Haitian diaspora, traumas that even though at first sight may seem

only individual, they are also collective because they are tightly related to the postcolonial legacies of Haiti. In the case of *An Untamed State*, the postcolonial trauma that starts the conflict between Mireille's father and perpetrators and catches her in the middle makes Mireille suffer physically and psychologically, to the extent that despite her connection to the land of her parents and ancestors, Mireille flees the island as if the umbilical cord that joined her to the motherland had been cut. It is true that she goes back after the 2010 earthquake, but she mostly travels there in order to face her perpetrators, traumatic memories and fears. In the case of *American Street*, although the trauma experienced by Fabiola after the separation of her mother and her disillusion with the US may seem an individual one, her obsession with the liberation of Valerie and her relatives is also the result of a trauma rooted in Haiti's (post)colonial condition in which, like their ancestors, contemporary Haitians strive to live freely, with no economic, food, race-related burdens once and for all.

Finally, a second aspect these novels have in common is the fact that, despite their proximity to the American culture, in both texts the main characters resort to Haitian forms of resilience presenting features of Haitian epistemology and cosmology in order to cope with the aforementioned traumas. As explained in the article, these forms of resilience are Haitian historical resilience, rebelliousness and relationality, as well as Haitian marronage and Vodou. Precisely, as this piece of work has tried to demonstrate following the recent decolonising tendency in trauma and resilience studies, these culturally-specific elements must never be disregarded in literary criticism of trauma novels if we critics want to offer a complete, unbiased and rigorous analysis of these post-colonial/non-western texts. For this reason, it could be concluded that, in a world where the aspect of human resilience is becoming globally known and studied, it is important to remember the need to pay attention to specific mechanisms of endurance represented in western and non-western literary texts so as to provide accurate analyses of such an important aspect of humanity from the past to the new millennium.

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