

Haiti's "Painful Truths": A Postcolonialised Reading of Trauma in Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State*

Las "verdades dolorosas" de Haití: una lectura poscolonizada del trauma en *An Untamed State*, de Roxane Gay

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Abstract: Drawing on a postcolonialised approach to the traditional trauma paradigm, this paper analyses Roxane Gay's novel *An Untamed State* as a trauma narrative which does not solely revolve around the Haitian American protagonist's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ensuing her abduction and violation in Port-au-Prince, as suggested by previous critical work. Particularly, it aims to demonstrate that Gay's heroine is a resilient survivor of both a rape-related trauma and the traumatic blow to her partly Haitian identity caused by her direct contact with Haiti's social and gender issues. Lastly, the essay examines how the novel delves into the unresolved cultural traumas derived from the effects of (post)colonialism in Haiti, which push the protagonist's victimisers to commit such terrible acts.

Keywords: postcolonial trauma; systemic rape; resilience; victimisers; Haitian American literature.

Summary: Introduction: A Turn towards Postcolonialised Trauma Theory. "Kenbe Fèm": From Rape Trauma and Uprootedness to Haitian Resilience and Healing. The Emasculating Power and Unresolved Grief of the Haitian (American) Postcolonial Trauma. Conclusion.

Resumen: Recurriendo a un enfoque poscolonizado del paradigma del trauma tradicional, en este artículo se analiza la novela de Roxane Gay, *An Untamed State*, como una novela de trauma que no solo trata el Trastorno por Estrés Postraumático que sufre la protagonista haitiano-americana después de su rapto y violación en Puerto Príncipe, como ha sugerido la crítica hasta hoy día. Concretamente, se pretende demostrar que la heroína de Gay es una superviviente resiliente de un trauma provocado por su violación y también por el golpe traumático que su contacto directo con los problemas sociales y de género de Haití supone para su identidad haitiana. Finalmente, el

ensayo examina cómo la novela explora los traumas culturales no resueltos derivados de los efectos del (pos)colonialismo en Haití, los cuales empujan a los victimarios de la protagonista a cometer esos actos tan terribles.

Palabras clave: trauma poscolonial; resiliencia; violación sistémica; victimarios; literatura haitiano-americana.

Sumario: Introducción: un giro hacia la teoría postcolonizada del trauma. “Kenbe Fèm”: del trauma por violación y el desarraigo a la resiliencia haitiana y la curación. El poder castrante y el duelo no resuelto del trauma poscolonial haitiano(-americano). Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION: A TURN TOWARDS POSTCOLONIALISED TRAUMA THEORY

Trauma theory, which emerged as an area of cultural investigation in the early 1990s, has become established due to its huge impact on cultural studies. At first, scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman articulated a view of trauma as amnesic, unspeakable, unrepresentable and irresolvable. Nevertheless, these postulations, which were later on used by literary critics as a framework to study trauma fiction, have lately witnessed resistance and opposition from postcolonial and non-Western criticism. In fact, from the late 2000s onwards, Michael Rothberg, Stef Craps, Irene Visser, Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué as well as Silvia Martínez-Falquina, among other scholars, have claimed for a reformulation and transformation of the dominant postulations around trauma. Whereas the classical model is grounded on the understating of this condition as solely psychological, individual, and event-based, with an excessive emphasis on melancholia and unspeakability—a view of trauma derived from Freudian psychoanalysis and Derridan deconstructionism—the aforementioned scholars propose a decolonial turn away from what they consider “a narrow Eurocentric framework” (Rothberg 227). To them the Caruthian approach is a point of departure, yet an inaccurate one, for it tries to impose a monolithic conception of the trauma paradigm both in Western and non-Western contexts (Rothberg 227; Craps 2; Visser 252–53; Martínez-Falquina 835).

In particular, attending to political, historical and socio-economic factors, especially in what regards non-Western minorities, the decolonising reconfiguration of the traditional trauma model that these scholars propose attempts to redress four problematic aspects presented by classical trauma theory. Firstly, the excessive “focus on an individual/psychological perspective,” which “may pose the danger of

separating facts from their causes, thus blurring the importance of the historical and social context” especially in the study of postcolonial trauma narratives (Herrero and Baelo-Allué xi). Secondly, the idea that trauma is a mental injury solely provoked by a single violent event, an axiom that can be easily refuted with the postulations of prominent sociologists like Jeffery C. Alexander, Arthur G. Neal and Ron Eyerman, on the possibility of trauma being collective, cultural and even structural (Herrero and Baelo-Allué xii). Thirdly, the inadequacy of a prescriptive conception of trauma as an aporetic and melancholic question. As Visser argues, in the world of literature, many non-Western narratives show that resilience and healing are also possible (255), yet this recovery is fulfilled through culturally-specific ways that must be considered so as to avoid perpetuating the imposition of a Western conception of the dynamics of trauma (261). Lastly, in lieu of a focus of experimental and (post)modern narrative strategies as the only adequate form of representing trauma in fiction (Craps 63), the decolonised or “postcolonialized” (Martínez-Falquina 857) approach to trauma takes an opposite stand.¹ Particularly, it calls for the acknowledgement of “the diverse strategies of representation and resistance” which narratives from “non-Western contexts invite or necessitate” (Craps 63) in order not to be disregarded or misinterpreted.

Drawing on this revised trauma model that seeks to redirect its theory towards a more global and rigorous paradigm, the aim of this paper is to analyse *An Untamed State* (2014), the debut novel of Haitian American author Roxane Gay, as a trauma narrative where psychic/individual wounds coexist alongside collective and cultural ones related to Haiti's (post)colonial context. The narrative 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 Mireille's father, Sebastien—a returned Haitian expat and *nouveau riche*—a million-dollar ransom that he can afford but that he is unwilling to pay. This negative response results in the torture and gangrape of Mireille, who will end up suffering a clear case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after her release. The skilful writing of this story earned Gay the nomination and finalist position for several awards in 2015. However, despite this literary recognition and Gay's global success as a writer of

¹ Martínez-Falquina uses the term “postcolonialized” to refer to the trauma theory which has been “challenged, debated, revised from a postcolonial way of looking at the world” (857).

essays, newspaper columns and a memoir about her own rape trauma, very scarce scholarly work has been published on *An Untamed State*. Curiously, the few literary critics and reviewers who have (succinctly) tackled the theme of trauma in the novel have only addressed the protagonist and her rape-related PTSD (Jean-Charles, “*An Untamed*” 204; Garvey 119–20), thereby turning a blind eye to the cultural traumas that haunt other key characters, particularly the protagonist’s captors and her father. As I contend, this research niche results from a reading of the novel based on the classical trauma model only, inasmuch as, like this prescriptive theory, the scholars who have analysed Gay’s text have excluded the insidious and cultural forms of trauma affecting characters other than the protagonist, namely her Haitian perpetrators.²

Thus, in order to offer a complete analysis of the novel’s treatment of trauma, I will explore this narrative through the more holistic approach of postcolonialised trauma theory (in Martínez-Falquina’s sense of the term), which allows for the study of both psychic trauma/PTSD and the historical, collective and cultural psychosocial wounds provoked by colonialism that a Haitian American text like *An Untamed State* requires. This expanded framework will allow me to demonstrate three findings about the novel. Firstly, that the factors behind the protagonist’s trauma are not only her kidnapping and rape, but also the blow to her partly Haitian identity derived from her appalling experience in the homeland, where, as different scholars have proved lately, sexual violence has been historically used as a weapon of terror and domination since colonial times (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 26–27; Duramy 15–16). Secondly, that the deplorable actions carried out by the gangmen and Mireille’s father are triggered by a cultural trauma related to the extreme poverty and social caste system lingering in Haiti since its colonial emancipation. Lastly, I will also prove that, notwithstanding the protagonist’s resilience and eventual healing, the novel remains ambivalent over the recovery of the other two culturally-traumatised characters. This denotes that *An Untamed State* does not

² Psychotherapist Laura S. Brown notes that besides the traumatic experiences undergone by the privileged, trauma theory must also embrace those endured by women (sexism), people of colour (racism) and lower-class individuals (classism) among other marginalised groups. Although these latter experiences are an indirect form of suffering, as she puts it, they can give way to an “insidious trauma” that derives from “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to the bodily well-being at the given moment but do violence to the soul and the spirit” (107).

promote a triumphalist discourse about the Haitian (American) trauma, which, as I shall explain, derives from the chronic and cumulative traumatic effects of former and current forms of colonial oppression.

1. "KENBE FÈM": FROM RAPE TRAUMA AND UPROOTEDNESS TO HAITIAN RESILIENCE AND HEALING

Although the representation of sexual violence in literature may risk the re-victimisation of the survivor and even the normalisation of this violence, as Régine Michelle Jean-Charles puts it, the study of the literary portrayal of rape, and more particularly of rape trauma syndrome, is crucial for the accounting of the all-too-often silenced "physical (material), as well as psychological *and* social dimensions of sexual violence" (10). After all, as this scholar argues, "the critical silence surrounding rape representations is another form of epistemic violence," (11) especially in contexts like Haiti, a country which faces a problem of endemic violence, not least sexual aggressions (James 39).

Notwithstanding Haiti's criminalisation of rape in 2005, this Caribbean state is one of the nations where sexual violence is more difficult to prosecute, because of the so-called "culture of impunity" and the social stigma attached to it (James 40). This situation, in turn, has promoted a rape culture in a country where sexual aggressions against women are systemic and even structural due to their relation to Haiti's harrowing social and gender inequalities (James 50, 52; d'Adesky et al. 13). In fact, as Jean-Charles puts it, in Haiti women's bodies have always been understood as "territories of colonial conquest" (27) both by foreigners and locals. Although, this has been particularly observable in periods of conflict from slavery to the country's independence in 1804, the United States occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), the ruthless Duvalier regime (1957–1986), the years following the two coups d'état that unseated the democratically-elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991 and 2004 respectively, as well as in the agitated post-earthquake 2010s (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 62), as Jean-Charles claims, rape in Haiti has been present in moments of peace, too (*Conflict* 9).

If one takes a look at Haiti's history, there is no doubt that for Haitian women the trauma of sexual violence is a collective one. Firstly, it is worth noting that the colonial founding of Haiti was inextricably linked to the rape of the enslaved African women taken to the island through the Middle Passage and their female descendants (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 58; Duramy

19). In addition, over a century after Haiti's independence from the colonial yoke, the collective trauma of sexual violence was re-enacted in the early twentieth century during the United States occupation, when many Haitian women were raped by the American marines as well as by the Cacos, the Haitian forces supposed to protect the nation from the foreign invaders (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 63–64; James 54). Notably, these latter attacks and, decades later, the sexual aggressions used as a punishment for political dissidence or simply as a recreational activity by the Duvaliers' paramilitary forces, the Tonton Macoutes (Jean-Charles 64; James 63), show how Haitians inherited rape as a weapon of terror and humiliation from the white slave-owners and occupants, respectively. Unsurprisingly, this form of violence was also deployed against Aristide's female supporters in the years after the military coup that temporarily overthrew him in 1991 (Jean-Charles 66; James 69–70; Duramy 25). Likewise, the proliferation of Haitian gangs during Aristide's latest rule and especially after his definitive exile in 2004 went hand in hand with an increase in the number of sexual aggressions in the country (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 67; Duramy 27). This situation was worsened by the 7.0 earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010 due to the chaotic and unsecure environments of the massive displacement camps (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 67–69; d'Adesky et al. 15).

Interestingly enough, Gay's *An Untamed State* came out in a time when toxic masculinity, misogyny and both physical and psychosocial gender violence was being favoured by what Haitian sociologist Sabine Lamour has called a "legal bandit governance" (92) and sexual violence was being perpetrated by some members of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) troops (d'Adesky et al. 131–33; Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 67). Likewise, during those years, the Haitian armed gangs contributed to the perpetuation of this type of violence by committing numerous kidnappings and rapes against local and foreign women and girls (Duramy 51–52). Particularly, the numerous abductions and sexual attacks that occurred in the years in which the novel is set (2008–2014) have been related to the exacerbation of the Haitian gangs' anger and discontent resulting from the overthrow of President Aristide (Duramy 52; Hallward 165–66) and the new "occupation" of Haiti by international forces (Jean-Charles, *Conflict* 267), as well as from the food crisis, the global financial and economic crisis and the devastating socioeconomic impact of the hurricane season that hit Haiti since 2008 (Duramy 31). Thus, it seems no coincidence that Gay's novel tackles the

scourge of (unpunished) sexual violence by a Haitian gang *vis-à-vis* the aforementioned time span.

A first-person narrative which mixes conventions of postmodern fairy-tale revisions and the thriller, *An Untamed State* revolves around how the protagonist's fairy-tale life as a wealthy Haitian American attorney, who normally spends her holidays in her parents' "Caribbean Camelot" (Gay 90) with her American Prince Charming (her husband, Michael), comes to an end when she is kidnapped in Port-au-Prince. The novel opens with Mireille being attacked by a group of unknown men driving "three black Land Cruisers" and "carrying machine guns" (5), just when she, Michael, and their little baby are en route to the beach. Following her abduction, Mireille is taken to a dwelling in the slum of Bel Air where she meets the gang's leader, a young man who everybody calls "Commander."

During her thirteen-day-long ordeal in a gloomy chamber, as Mireille's narrative voice discloses, she is tortured, humiliated and sexually abused by the Commander and his men. Such a cruel and disgusting experience changes her completely, not only because of the physical harm she endures and that the novel describes very graphically, but also due to the psychological damage that this traumatic experience provokes in her. In Caruth's classical definition, trauma is "a wound inflicted . . . upon the mind" (*Unclaimed Experience* 3), caused by a traumatic event which "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" ("Trauma" 5). Although it is difficult to overcome trauma and the traumatic repetitions of the experience—what Dominick LaCapra calls "acting out" (66)—the recovery from or "working through" of this psychic condition is possible by means of the narrativisation of the hurtful memories which allows the traumatised individual to break the acting-out spiral (66). Nonetheless, while stuck in the process of acting-out, more often than not, the traumatised subject experiences psychological and physical responses such as terror, loss of control, intense fear of annihilation, hypervigilance, sleep disorders, depression or emotional numbing as well as intrusively recurrent flashbacks and dreams, which give way to the persistent re-experience of the traumatic event (American Psychiatry Association 427–29; Caruth, "Trauma" 5).

In Gay's novel, as a victim of tortures and sexual abuses, Mireille ends up suffering a clear case of psychic trauma/PTSD, which haunts her with recurrent memories of her hideous experience with the gangmen. In fact, in a similar fashion to mainstream trauma novels, Mireille's PTSD

symptoms are conveyed in the text through the plot and a series of moderately experimental narrative strategies such as repetitions, gaps/ellipsis and linearity breaks, as I will explain hereunder. The first sign of Mireille's traumatised state is observable in her change of attitude from a defiant woman recalling the good memories of her past, while waiting for the payment of the ransom, to an almost defeated individual attempting to suppress those happy recollections, when they turn into a source of pain and melancholia threatening "to break [her] body more than any man could" (Gay 171). The problem is that this intentional forgetting which Mireille uses as a coping strategy prevents her from remembering who she was before her ordeal once she is liberated.

On top of that, Mireille's complete disempowerment provoked by the sexual abuses and tortures perpetrated by her captors—especially by the Commander, who, by confining, appropriating and mastering Mireille's body as well as depriving her of her will, mimics white colonisers' domination of black slaves in pre-independence Haiti—makes her sink into a process of traumatic dissociation whereby her mind tries to repress the violence she is enduring. This is evinced by Mireille's feelings about "[her] body [being] not [her] body" (Gay 106) and her use of the third-person singular—"she has a husband she loves" (196; my emphasis)—when referring to herself. Nonetheless, this trauma coping mechanism proves unsuccessful since, ensuing her liberation once her father eventually pays the ransom, Mireille remains psychologically trapped in the gangmen's chamber due to her compulsive repetition of the traumatic events through involuntary flashbacks and haunting nightmares (277). Other symptoms that hint at Mireille's PTSD are her depressive state and loss of appetite (255) alongside her incessant self-conception as "no one" (205), as a "dead [woman]" (207). Likewise, her constant fear and numerous responses of hypervigilance to "strange sound[s]" (281) and to the physical contact with others, including her husband (215), bespeak the severity of her acting-out process.

Mireille's PTSD also makes her continuously experience moments of paranoia and hallucinations derived from the fear of re-victimisation typically suffered by survivors of a traumatic event. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the episode where, at her parents-in-law's farmhouse, Mireille confuses her husband, the man she loves, with the Commander, and runs away to hide in a shed for hours (301–03). As could be expected, this and all the aforementioned PTSD symptoms make the protagonist undergo moments of anxiety—repeatedly conveyed in the

novel through the metaphor of a cage and a choking leash—which Mireille tries to mitigate with “handful[s] of [Valium] pills” (269).

Unfortunately, Mireille's attempts to repress the intrusive traumatic memories of her ordeal not only prove futile, but also impede her from re-establishing a normal relationship with her family and from verbalising her trauma. This incapability of creating a coherent testimony with “the truest truth” (Gay 341), as happens with other survivors of violent traumatic events (Brison 47), prevents Mireille from coming to terms with her traumatic experience and therefore from working through her PTSD. Yet, remarkably enough, this void is not simply a consequence of her psychic condition. Indeed, if Mireille's trauma is analysed from a more sociological perspective, as I will demonstrate hereafter, it becomes evident that her contact with Haiti's extreme poverty, alongside her own experiencing of the Haitian collective trauma of systemic and unpunished sexual violence, also wound her social identity as a partly Haitian woman who feels sorely betrayed by her second homeland aside from her father.

Unlike the characters of numerous novels where Caribbean authors like Edwidge Danticat, Julia Alvarez or Jamaica Kincaid portray the arduous experience of Caribbean immigrants' assimilation in the United States and the trauma of leaving their country behind, Gay's protagonist is characterised as a twenty-first century cosmopolitan and creolised second-generation immigrant. As readers learn through Mireille's memories about her life in the United States and Haiti before her kidnapping, she has a clear cultural *métissage* which retains her Haitian roots, notwithstanding her complete assimilation into the American society. It is true that, as a child, Mireille would reject her Haitian heritage for a while because she felt a stranger in Haiti (Gay 189) and she was mocked in class due to her “wild [afro] hair” (155). Nonetheless, as she matures, she ends up enjoying her connection with the island, where she can relax “swimming in the warm and salty blue of the ocean” (51). Further, her interracial marriage and nuclear family epitomise this hybridity too, for she is married to an American white man with whom she has a mix-raced baby carrying the middle name of the first and only king of Haiti, Henri Christophe.

The problem is that Mireille's pride for her Haitianness in her adult years is based on a one-sided conception of Haiti, an image that sharply contrasts with the observations about the country made by Michael and other white American acquaintances, whom she criticises for offering “their own desperate piece of information about my country, my people, about the violence and the poverty and the hopelessness, conjuring a place

that does not exist anywhere but the American imagination” (11). However, as becomes evident in the novel, Mireille is not completely unaware of Haiti as a country with “so much beauty” and “so much brutality” (97), where the small elite accumulates all the riches whilst most Haitians live in extreme poverty and oblivion (Hallward 1), and where such an unequal distribution has given rise to the criminal business of kidnapping, especially of women (Duramy 51; d’Adesky et al. 159). This awareness can be noted in Mireille’s mentioning of the abduction experiences suffered by other Haitian female acquaintances and relatives some time earlier than her own (25). Neither is Mireille ignorant of the fact that, in Haiti, “gender inequity is an engine of sexual violence” (d’Adesky et al. 54), as evinced by her statement about how kidnappings go “differently for women” (25) there. What the novel actually brings to the fore and even criticises is that Mireille has a distorted image of her parents’ homeland, insofar as the only Haiti she really knows and is interested in is the idyllic and prosperous neighbourhood where her family’s mansion is located. Thus, it could be argued that Mireille’s all too positive conception of her second home does disappear when, due to her own face-to-face experience with the country’s scourges (endemic poverty, criminality and sexual violence) brought to her by her captors, she realises that “[t]here are three Haitis—the country Americans know and the country Haitians know and the country I thought I knew” (11).

As the above comment suggests, Mireille’s kidnapping and rape by a group of Haitian compatriots make her paradisiacal illusion vanish. Such an overwhelmingly disturbing revelation about her “country’s painful truths” (36) arguably becomes traumatic for Mireille to the extent that it leads her to feel betrayed by her own people and, consequently, uprooted from one of her homes. In her own words, she feels “no one” (214), because she has “no place where [she] belong[s]” (259). This sense of identity void resulting from Mireille’s deep feelings of betrayal—magnified by the impunity around sexual violence in Haiti, where, as Mireille points out, “[t]here would be no evidence collected, no trial, no justice and [thus] . . . no crime” (234)—affects Gay’s protagonist so negatively that she decides to leave the country for years because Haiti “can never be home again” (355). Moreover, Mireille’s escape from the island is motivated by her need to fly away from her father, whose refusal to pay the ransom and lack of a clear explanation after Mireille’s return aggravate her grief and creates “a fracture that could never close” (246) between them. Hence, in a way, Mireille’s relinquishment to be “her

father's daughter" (248) could be interpreted as a concomitant reluctance to keep on being a daughter of Haiti, of her fatherland, a decision which clearly bespeaks a social identity trauma.

Ironically, although once back in the States Mireille feels more secure, Michael's attempt to confine her with the pretext of "keeping [her] safe" (262) makes her more anxious and out of control, for she feels she is being "trapped" (261) one more time. Such a situation propels her to flee to her parents-in-law's farmhouse in Nebraska, where she begins her healing process thanks to her mother-in-law, Lorraine, a sort of fairy godmother who takes care of and actively listens to her. Overall, female bonding helps Gay's protagonist to work through her trauma, since not only Lorraine, but also Mireille's sister, a kindly-hearted female doctor and a woman therapist, help her accept her bodily and psychic scars as well as the fact that she "will never be okay, not in the way [she] once was" (343). Certainly, similarly to other victims of trauma who, as Susan Brison notes, frequently report not being the same after the traumatic event (39), Mireille is no longer the woman she was before her ordeal. However, she gradually grows strong enough to rebuild herself, her life and her marriage. Hence, the novel arguably presents Mireille not as an eternal victim but as a survivor who is able to progressively work through her trauma thanks to sorority and her own resilience.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that despite the aforementioned attempts to move on, Mireille's healing process is only partially completed until she faces the now hostile homeland as well as the two men who caused her so much pain. Firstly, when Mireille gathers strength and flies to Haiti two years after the devastating 2010 earthquake in order to "mourn, to help in some small way" (Gay 345), her decision to grant her father feigned forgiveness, because Sebastien will have to cope with the burden of having made "a terrible, weak choice . . . for what [remains] of his life" (351), allows Mireille to feel "free" for the first time after her kidnapping (352). By the same token, Mireille's decision to take an unescorted promenade out of her parents' mansion reflects another important advancement in her healing process, especially when she does not "shrink away" (354) after spotting a dark SUV like the one owned by her captors. Thus, as these two episodes demonstrate, Mireille's return to the geographical *locus* of her appalling experience symbolises an important step forward in the overcoming of her trauma.

Finally, Mireille's encounter with the Commander at the Miami restaurant, where he works as a busboy hoping to live the Haitian Dream,

can be considered another key moment in her healing process.³ At this point, Mireille no longer feels afraid of her perpetrator, whom she chases and hits until he escapes (360). Significantly enough, through her confrontation with the villain of her story, Mireille proves to be the owner of her body and will again. This recuperation of her subjectivity allows her to become empowered and eventually verbalise her trauma by means of an ungapped testimony that she recounts to an implied narratee—the implied reader—some time later. Thus, because the turn of traumatic memory to a memory narrative that is transmitted to others allows traumatised subjects to gain control over their haunting memories and other intrusive symptoms (Brison 45), Mireille’s narrativisation of her trauma could be interpreted as the ultimate step in her working-through process.

In sum, although her recovery is barely prompted by the Western therapy of psychoanalysis that she receives from different specialists, remarkably enough, Mireille is able to gradually heal thanks to other women’s care and most especially to her own resilient nature. Certainly, if one closely examines Mireille’s post-traumatic decisions, it can be noticed that this character is mainly involved in escapist movements and the facing of her victimisers. It could be contended that such actions echo both the courageous escapes of the Haitian runaway slaves—the *maroons*—and their subsequent confrontation and beating of the French masters/colonisers in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), since not only does Mireille flee confinement on several occasions, but she also faces and confronts the man who became the master of her body and will during and after her abduction. Hence, at the end of the novel, Gay’s heroine—who epitomises the traditional Haitian saying *kenbe fèm* (“stay strong”) 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 the author shows that post-traumatic healing, albeit a difficult process, may be possible for women like Mireille. In this sense, it could be argued that the more holistic approach to Mireille’s trauma proposed in this section allows not only for the exploration of her rape-related PTSD, but also of her social identity trauma caused by her direct contact with Haiti’s social and gender issues and of her eventual culturally-specific overcoming of both injuries.

³ Mats Lundahl defines the “Haitian Dream” as the emigration of the Haitian peoples to the United States in search for a better future (xii).

2. THE EMASCULATING POWER AND UNRESOLVED GRIEF OF THE HAITIAN (AMERICAN) POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA

Although overlooked by critics who have examined *An Untamed State* through the scope of classical trauma theory and its event-based understanding of the trauma paradigm, from the perspective of the postcolonialised trauma model, it is possible to find more traumatised characters other than the protagonist in this novel. However, in their case, the inner wound is caused by a cultural trauma related to Haiti's (post)colonial past and present.

Haiti's history, which is indeed the history of the Caribbean archipelago, is one of resistance but also "of repeated wounding" (Garvey 106). Since the arrival of Christopher Columbus, with the exception of the Haitian Revolution and subsequent independence from France, Haiti has been a country marked by human trafficking, poverty, violence, exploitation, social and racial differences as well as natural disasters (Duramy 18–33; Hallward 317–19). Likewise, in the political terrain, the country has endured the effects of Spanish and French colonialism as well as the American military occupation, a bloody thirty-year dictatorship, various assassinations, coups d'état and uprisings, political corruption, the proliferation of local armed gangs and a lingering neocolonial domination by the United States and other international agents like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Hallward xxiv–xxv, 5–15). Moreover, in an ironic turn of the events, although Haiti was once known for its profitable resources and for becoming the First Black Republic in nineteenth century, the former Pearl of the Antilles is today one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the world. This situation alongside the ubiquitous violence coming from the gangs and sometimes even from the Haitian government (James 57–56; Lamour 92–93) has earned Haiti the status of failed state, an unfair label given that the international community has contributed to the country's socio-economic and political problems (Hallward 5–6; 12–15).

Regarding the unequal distribution of wealth in Haiti, it is important to bear in mind that just one percent of the Haitian population "controls more than half of its wealth, while the great majority of the people endure harrowing levels of poverty" (Hallward 1). Peter Hallward traces the structural basis for such a social polarisation in the legacy of colonial slavery and its after-effects in terms of class and skin colour. According to this scholar, after Haiti's independence, the natural successors of the

European elite were the mix-raced Haitians and pre-war freed slaves whilst the new free slaves were left at the bottom of the social pyramid (9–13). Significantly enough, nowadays there is a small Haitian elite—made up of deeply conservative landowners and militaries as well as the liberal bourgeoisie (2–3)—who speak English and French, live in “well-guarded villas” located in “exclusive neighbourhoods” and usually travel abroad (2). In contrast, the vast majority of the Haitian population—most of them descendants from the last Haitian slaves—only speak *Krèyol*, move on foot and live in total vulnerability (2–3). In sum, Haiti is a divided nation founded on a sort of caste system lingering from its colonial past, a fact that becomes manifest even in the geographical partition of the capital city into the shantytowns areas like Cité Soleil, La Saline or Bel Air and the luxurious hilltop enclaves such as Pétienville.

In *An Untamed State*, from the moment in which Mireille is taken to the violent slum of Bel Air, the novel makes clear that her kidnappers belong to the poor Haitian mass through her depiction of the area as

an endless maze of narrow streets and alleys lined with small concrete block homes The sky is often blocked by a thick and tangled web of electrical wiring. Cars are parked everywhere, sometimes half on the sidewalk, half in the street The streets are covered in trash The air is thick with the smell of too many people in too little space. (134)

Similarly, Mireille’s allusion to the gangmen’s faded poster of the Fanmi Lavalas also points to her captors’ unprivileged social status and even to their belonging to the paramilitary gangs that supported this social-democratic political party led by President Aristide in the 1990s, a time when this leftist faction of Haiti’s politics was massively voted for by the working-class and the poor due to Aristides’ non-elitist roots and his reforms aimed at improving the lives of the lower classes. Such policies which, unsurprisingly, incommoded Haiti’s business and military elites alongside the IMF and the American neoliberal and neocolonial agenda of extraction in the country, came to an end in the 2004 coup that definitively forced the popular president into exile after years of continuous accusations of corruption, authoritarianism, criminality and fostering of paramilitary gangs (Hallward xxiv–xxxiv). In this respect, given that Mireille’s story is set in 2008, the Lavalas party poster with the faded image of a man who may be President Aristide, also hints at the fact that, with the end of Aristide’s rule, the Commander and his men’s hopes of

social change, like those of many poor Haitians, were gone too. Hence, as the descriptions provided by Mireille suggest, her abduction by the gang puts her in contact with the dark side of Haiti, one fraught with *bidonvilles* where her poorest compatriots live “desperate, angry, hungry, scratching” (Gay 97).

Indeed, during Mireille's imprisonment, the Commander reproaches her—and by extension her wealthy family—with living a luxurious life while ignoring the issues of the country: “[y]ou are complicit even if you do not actively contribute to the problem because you do nothing to solve it” (137). The problem to which the gang leader refers is Haiti's unfathomable poverty and the current high rates of unemployment which have led many Haitian citizens, especially youths, to see crime as their only way of survival and economic improvement (Duramy 33). Mireille becomes aware of this harsh reality when one of her captors, TiPierre, tells her that, at a young age, he was sold as a *restavek* (a child working as an indentured domestic servant) to a wealthy family who abused him until he eventually ran away to “the slums [where] he would be safe” (Gay 148–49). This testimony about human trafficking and modern slavery in Haiti contrasts sharply with Mireille's distorted image of the island as “a jewel in the middle of the ocean” (90), which makes her and therefore readers realise how some Haitians can only resort to crime and extortion so as to survive in “this land of mad indifference” (36).

Regarding the Commander, he is the actual villain in this thriller-tale, for he is the one who tortures Mireille, repeatedly rapes her and orders the other men to sexually abuse her, too. However, a scar under his eye which “pulse[s], . . . swell[s]” (187) and “hisse[s]” (359), as if it were alive or not entirely healed, hints at a deeper open wound. Because trauma “is the story of a wound that cries out” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 3), the Commander's more profound injury, as the novel seems to suggest, is the unresolved cultural trauma of Haiti's (post)colonial history of poverty and social injustice that the Commander's father—a precarious worker for a well-off Haitian family—passed on to him through this lesson: to never forget how wealthy people choose their luxury in the hills of the city over the wellbeing of people like them (Gay 191). This message—and the encysted trauma that produces it—influences the Commander forever, to the point of making him live, from a young age, with blind rage and a deep desire for vengeance against the rich, as the following passage demonstrates:

You people are all the same. You live in your grand homes looking down on us in the gutter. You think you control everything and can have anything . . . One day all of you will live like the rest of us. You will know what it's like to live the way the real people of this country do. (131)

This selfish disregard of the country's problems by the elites and returnees that the Commander criticises is precisely the reason why he wants to punish Mireille and her father, representatives of the privileged Haitian population, through the weapon of terror and domination par excellence in the country: rape. Hence, it is not farfetched to suggest that the Commander's terrible actions are the product not only of the transmission of a rape culture across generations of Haitian men since colonial times, but also of a cultural trauma related to Haiti's dark (post)colonial history which he inherits from his father and which prompts him to take revenge against those whom he considers his oppressors.

Interestingly enough, Gay does not convey the Commander's trauma through experimental textual techniques as happened with her protagonist's. Instead, direct speech and Mireille's own account are deployed by the author to represent the cultural wound of this character, as can be observed in the above passage or in the one that follows, where, through Mireille's own narration, the socio-economic origin of the Commander's unresolved grief and concomitant visceral animosity against the Haitian elite is once again revealed:

The Commander . . . told me a story about his mother, who, . . . [after working] for a man like my father . . . [who] treated [her] like a whore because that's the kind of thing men like my father can get away with, . . . now is . . . more ghost than woman. (197)

Alongside these narrative techniques, a third one—an intermittent heterodiegetic omniscient narrator—allows readers to have access to the thoughts, feelings and impressions of other characters, especially Sebastien. He, as I will argue below, suffers from a non-verbalised insidious and cultural trauma which prompts him to refuse to bend his will in his negotiations with the Commander, even if the life of his own daughter is in danger.

Although Mireille admits to know “very little of [her] parents' lives as children” because “they are not prone to confession” (15), as she explains to the implied reader, they left Haiti because they “grew up poor.

. . . They were often hungry. They were barefoot and were teased for having dirty feet" (14). Such scarce information about her parents' past lives in Haiti brings to light the usual practice among Haitian immigrant families of omitting sad memories about the past in the motherland in order to avoid passing them on to the subsequent generations (Casimir 168–69). This purposeful ellipsis that the novel conveys through Sebastien's and his wife's unvoiced history or "nonhistory" (Glissant 62) reveals how deeply the legacy of unresolved traumas and silences rooted in a historical past marked by colonisation, slavery, poverty, political and social upheavals, alongside the experience of immigration, haunt present Haitian and Haitian American families.⁴

Actually, even though Sebastien's migration to the United States allows him to live a decent life in socio-economic terms, on American soil he suffers a huge disillusionment that makes him spend most of his life trying to return to the homeland. This disenchantment with the host country is provoked by his realisation that he is a nobody there, because the United States is not a land where everybody is created equal. Rather, it is a hostile country of exclusion and discrimination where "everyone looked upon him [a black immigrant] with suspicion" (145). In addition, as readers learn through Mireille's account, while in the States, Sebastien was an exploited and underrated employee who was forced to work "seventy hours a week, answering to white men who would never promote him even though he gave them more than twenty years of his life" (36). But despite the grief that, as Franz Fanon explained decades ago, "a galaxy of erosive stereotypes" provokes in the black immigrant Other (129), Sebastien is depicted in the novel as a determined person and a man of great ambition who rejects weakness, probably as a result of the deep mark of his childhood trauma. From such a traumatic past he learns "that the only way to survive this world is by being strong" (Gay 15), especially as an immigrant in America:

My father . . . said we needed to be strong because as Haitians in America we would always be fighting; Americans wouldn't understand we came from

⁴ The silenced unresolved traumas in the Duval family are the result of a general phenomenon in the Caribbean—a purposeful mnemonic ellipsis that entails the absence of a collective memory in this area (Glissant 62)—where historical and cultural wounds have been mostly repressed ever since the brutal dislocation derived from the transatlantic slave trade and the plantation system.

a free people [T]hey would always see us as slaves so we had to work harder, we had to be better, we had to be strong He said, “There is no room for emotion if you want to succeed in this country [A]mbition is the only emotion that matters.” (155–56)

Mireille’s portrayal of Sebastien as an extremely ambitious man helps readers to comprehend the reason why he is incapable of accepting “failure” or giving in as “an option” (32). This ethos becomes manifest in his tenacity to get a better life in the United States by obtaining a degree in civil engineering and working hard to “reach higher and higher” (32) in his career as a builder of skyscrapers. His fixation with the construction of these big buildings, I would argue, denotes a fervent wish to secure a sense of masculinity—inextricably connected to money and success—that he could never develop in his childhood on account of his poor origins. Moreover, the erecting of these rather phallic constructions enables him to diminish the emasculating humiliation experienced in the host country where he was “mocked” by and “had to prove himself to the men he worked with, the men he worked for, the men who worked under him” (144).⁵

It is important to bear in mind that the economic and material domination of black men has long been associated with castration and emasculation (hooks, *Yearning* 58). For this reason, and because men’s masculinity and perception of self-worth is most often defined in terms of their hard work and “the personal sacrifice” as the breadwinners for their families (Pleck 65), it is not surprising that Sebastien is obsessed with his fortune and labour status in the United States. Given that in the West most black men “spend their lives striving to emulate white men” hoping to occupy a similarly powerful or omnipotent location (hooks, “Doing” 99), Sebastien’s obsession with the idea of becoming a paterfamilias and a businessman in America could then be interpreted as an effect of two concomitant desires: to fit into a white-supremacist society driven by a liberal ideology and hard-work ethic and to feel powerful, to feel like a man, once and for all.

Nevertheless, as the omniscient narrator indicates, despite all his achievements in the United States, Sebastien still has to cope with his co-workers’ condescendence and discrimination, “indignities [that] choked

⁵ Sebastien’s behaviour echoes Fanon’s postulation that the trauma of racism makes “Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, . . . the equal value of their intellect” (3).

him and filled his mouth with bitterness" (Gay 145). As a result of this bigotry and his long-lasting homesickness, he decides to go back with his savings to Haiti, where he feels "the triumphant son, returned" (36), the man who left "with nothing and returned with everything" (36). Thus, in a sense, although Sebastien's shameful past shaped by the Haitian cultural trauma composed of three insidious ones—the emasculating mark of childhood-poverty, the trauma of displacement and anti-black racism—does not justify the betrayal of his daughter, it does shed some light on the inner conflict that leads this character to refuse paying "a lifetime fortune" (145) for her. As he reflects, the reason behind his decision "wasn't about money. It was about so much more and there was nothing he could say to explain what he meant" (145). This "much more" which Sebastien is unable to verbalise, as the novel insinuates, is his fear of losing his money and secure position as well as the power and manliness with which his wealth endows him.

Similarly to Sebastien, the Commander also attempts to enhance his masculinity largely weakened by his poor and oppressing context. Nevertheless, the core difference between these two characters is that the latter tries to attain his desire through the use of violence and guns. This is a common behaviour among gang male members because, as Carine Mardorossian explains, most of these men habitually need to compensate for their social alienation and fragility through violent and patriarchal attitudes which grant them with a sense of superiority and thus reassure their masculinity (5). Ironically enough, once in Miami, the city where the Commander flees with his share of the ransom, he becomes a nobody, for in lieu of his gun and crew, he is now a precarious immigrant who only has "his scar and the stained apron around his waist" (Gay 360).

Hence, as the above analysis has shown, it is not farfetched to suggest that the novel presents the Commander and Sebastien not only as victimisers of Gay's protagonist, but also as victims of insidious and cultural traumas derived from their postcolonial context. Yet, contrary to what happens with Mireille, the novel leaves open the resolution of the traumas suffered by these two characters since, as suggested by the text, Sebastien will always carry a sense of shame and guilt for the harm he did to his daughter, and the Commander may or may not fulfil the Haitian Dream or experience the racism that Sebastien endured while living in the United States. In this respect, *An Untamed State* invites readers to consider that cultural traumas related to race and postcoloniality are not easy to work through because, in most cases, and Haiti is not an exception to this,

the (post)colonial factors that engendered those wounds tend to persist in the present.

CONCLUSION

As my reading of the novel proves, *An Untamed State* is a postcolonial trauma narrative that must be explored through a framework based on a postcolonialised trauma theory in order to provide a rigorous analysis of the traumatic processes that affect its main Haitian/Haitian American characters. As explained in the first section of the article, Gay's protagonist suffers from a clear case of PTSD ensuing her kidnapping and rape. Nevertheless, an exploration of her inner wounds solely based on the Caruthian model, a framework that has sometimes proved inattentive to the historical, sociological, cultural and political factors behind non-Western traumatic experiences, would be an erroneous one. As has been demonstrated here, this traditional approach misses Mireille's identity trauma resulting from the double blow—social and gender violence—that she receives from her own father/land as well as the novel's representation of this character as a survivor who heals thanks to sorority and, most especially, to the Haitian resilience that runs through her veins.

Lastly, although Mireille's traumatised state is easily identifiable from a plot and narrative point of view owing to the moderate experimental techniques—namely, repetitions, gaps and scattered linearity breaks—which Gay deploys to convey the protagonist's symptoms in the novel, these strategies cannot be used as a criterion to explore all forms of trauma present in the text. As proved in the second section, unlike Mireille's personal trauma, the insidious, historical and cultural injuries suffered by her father and captors are rendered fairly naturally through dialogues in direct speech and two different narrators. Perhaps this is the reason why the scholars and reviewers who have analysed *An Untamed State* never took into account the postcolonial trauma determining the actions of Mireille's victimisers, who, as demonstrated here, Gay positions in the grey zone between victims and perpetrators. Nonetheless, instead of offering a completely triumphalist view of trauma, the novel's denouement seems to suggest that the cultural traumas of these male characters remain open or unresolved, a seemingly intelligent move on Gay's part to avoid the risk of denying the continuous impact of postcolonial trauma over Haitian locals, émigrés and returnees.

In conclusion, as this article has demonstrated, an analysis of trauma in postcolonial narratives like *An Untamed State* must be carried out through an approach based on the postcolonialised reconfiguration of trauma theory that attends both the context in which trauma originates and the culturally-specific healing strategies and responses to it so as to avoid a non-rigorous and Westerncentric study of these texts. Only by so doing will critics be able to offer more global and responsible explorations of literature without re-victimising non-Western peoples and/or appropriating their suffering.

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