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Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects

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Abstract: Decolonizing trauma theory has been a major project in postcolonial literary scholarship ever since its first sustained engagements with trauma theory. Since then, trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies have been uneasy bedfellows, and the time has now come to take stock of what remains in postcolonial trauma studies from the original formulations of trauma theory, and see which further steps must be envisaged in order to reach the ideal of a truly decolonized trauma theory today. To this end, this article presents a detailed overview of the short history and the present situation of the trajectory of decolonizing trauma theory for postcolonial studies, clarifying the various re-routings that have so far taken place, and delineating the present state of the project, as well as the need for further developments towards an increased expansion and inclusiveness of the theory. I argue that openness to non-Western belief systems and their rituals and ceremonies in the engagement with trauma is needed in order to achieve the remaining major objectives of the long-standing project of decolonizing trauma theory.

Keywords: trauma theory; postcolonial scholarship; literary criticism; postcolonial trauma; Freudian psychoanalysis; resilience; spirituality

1. Introduction

The call for a decolonized trauma theory may be dated quite precisely to the publication of the special issue of *Studies in the Novel* (Vol. 40, nrs.1 and 2) of Spring/Summer 2008, whose topic, as presented by editors Buelens and Craps, was the rapprochement between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies [1]. Before that date, trauma theory as conceptualized in the 1990s by

Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub had already garnered much negative critique due to the theory's many controversies, contradictions, and limitations. Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question*, also published in 2008, presented an overview of the theory's inherent inconsistencies and contradictions, concluding that it had serious limitations for literary studies [2]. While Luckhurst does not focus on the usefulness of trauma theory for postcolonial studies, a major point raised in his book concerns the theory's blind spot to politics, which Luckhurst calls "its shocking failure" to "address atrocity, genocide and war" ([2], p. 213). The depoliticizing and dehistoricizing tendencies of the dominant trauma theory were also deemed major obstacles by most of the contributors of *Studies in the Novel (StiN)* to the rapprochement that was envisaged by the issue's guest editors Gert Buelens and Stef Craps. In fact, while the editors emphasized possibilities, the contributors saw major obstacles to a fully postcolonial trauma theory, and opened up many pressing questions about the complex relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. These were summarized by Michael Rothberg in a detailed and insightful response essay published in the same issue of *StiN* [3]. Although feeling that the investigative theme of *StiN* was timely and that it accomplished "much necessary and overdue work", Rothberg's essay concludes that the publication's contributors seriously question whether trauma theory as currently conceptualized "provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world" ([3], p. 226). As the contributors argue convincingly, Rothberg concludes that "turn-of-the-millennium trauma studies has remained stuck within Euro-American conceptual and historical frameworks" ([3], p. 225); thus, if we wish to find ways forward, we shall have to turn away from the original formulations of literary trauma theory and develop the tools needed "in the simultaneously intellectual, ethical, and political task of standing against ongoing forms of racial and colonial violence" ([3], p. 232). This, then, delineates the project that Rothberg, in 2008, correctly predicted as necessary and urgent for the time to come, a project which he felt should be named "decolonizing trauma studies" ([3], p. 226).

In retrospect, Rothberg's response essay marks a clear start to the present ongoing discussion about the decolonization of trauma theory for postcolonial cultural and literary studies. The many and pluriform contributions that have added to the discussion since 2008 often address and repeat Rothberg's central arguments, building on the groundwork that his article provides, and thus demonstrate that Rothberg's main considerations have remained astute and relevant. For example, in a special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (2009), devoted to tracing new directions in postcolonial studies, editors and contributors emphasize the importance of a continued postcolonial critique of historical and political processes as the original sites of trauma for postcolonial communities, as opposed to trends in trauma studies that neglect or elide such processes [4]. In a recent special issue of *Postcolonial Text*, titled "Situating Postcolonial Trauma Studies" (2014), guest editor Norman Saadi Nikro discusses the complexity of the relationship between Holocaust-centered trauma studies and present-day postcolonial trauma studies, referring explicitly to Rothberg's essay of 2008 and pointing out that Rothberg's concerns have remained important issues in postcolonial scholarship to the present time. Other major publications, too, have returned to Rothberg's concerns, explicitly or implicitly affirming their relevance for present theorization of trauma, and highlighting the ongoing need to decolonize trauma theory for postcolonial literary studies [5–8].

Rothberg's foundational essay, then, is the starting point for my overview of the development in theoretical and critical thinking about the decolonization of postcolonial trauma theory from 2008 to

the present. Outlining the changes that have been effectuated already, I delineate and clarify the present situation of the decolonizing project. My retrospective overview opens with the points that Rothberg highlighted as urgent: trauma theory's Eurocentric, event-based conception of trauma; its too-narrow focus on Freudian psychoanalysis; and its deconstructionist approach that closes off other approaches to literary trauma. Discarding or reconfiguring these elements have been crucial steps in the decolonizing project that started in 2008; however, as I will argue, there are further steps to be taken in order to fully accomplish the ideal of a decolonized trauma theory.

2. Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Initial Steps

Rothberg established in 2008 that the Eurocentric foundation of trauma theory as originally conceptualized by Cathy Caruth *et al.*, was untenable in postcolonial theory and that it needed a redirection, stating that as long as trauma theory remains "tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses (such as the Holocaust) and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories" ([3], p. 227). Moreover, as Rothberg observes, the theory's narrow focus casts doubt on Caruth's much-quoted notion that trauma may itself provide the link between cultures ([3], p. 227). Part of the original theory's Eurocentrism is its exclusive focus on the event-based model of trauma, which does not account for the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism. Unlike postcolonial trauma studies, for instance, Holocaust trauma studies engage with a more clearly definable period of history, and a clearer historical sense of victims, perpetrators, and responsibility. Early trauma theory, in Rothberg's words, presupposes "the completed past of a singular event—while colonial and postcolonial traumas persist into the present" ([3], p. 230). Rothberg here refers to early trauma theory's use of the first definition of trauma in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) of the American Psychiatric Association, which accorded trauma official recognition, and which defined trauma as a serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of the self in the form of an overwhelming, sudden, and unassimilable experience [9]. The metaphor of trauma often used in trauma theory is that of a sudden, sharp piercing of a membrane, as, for instance, by a sharp object implanted in the psyche, where it remains in its original form, hidden behind the screen of consciousness, but making itself known through a series of symptoms. The "sudden" or unexpected aspect of trauma is not the prolonged, cumulative hurt of long years of repression that constitutes the trauma of colonialism, with its repeated and cumulative stressor events. Later editions of the DSM (DSM-IV and DSM-IV-Text Revision of 2000; and DSM-V of 2013) have made the definition more inclusive, allowing trauma to occur along a continuum of responses and broadening it to include vicarious trauma, such as that incurred by witnesses or other recipients of traumatic events, as well as removing the emphasis on individual traumatization. However, in cultural trauma theory as developed by Caruth *et al.*, in the early 1990s, the DSM-III was still the norm, and it is to this norm, which resulted in a Eurocentric, event-based, individualistic orientation, that contributors to *StiN* articulated their resistance. As Rothberg notes, despite the fact that the contributors' critical focus stays appropriately on Caruth's theory of trauma "in its psychoanalytic mode", the implications of their critique are "far-reaching" in calling for the need for a redirection of the theory ([3], p. 226). This redirection would constitute a first, significant step ahead in the project of decolonizing trauma, intended to achieve a more thorough, global, and responsible paradigm. The

histories of trauma of the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism, re-enacted through narrative, must not be considered as contesting for primacy, but rather as non-contesting and co-existing, from a recognition that collectively held traumatic memories resonate profoundly. Rothberg's suggestion is to rethink trauma as "collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)", which would break "the hold of the category of trauma as it had been developed by Caruth, Felman, Laub, and others" ([3], p. 228).

Following Rothberg's article of 2008, there has been a widespread recognition among postcolonial scholars of the need for a new model for understanding and interpreting trauma to enable more differentiated and more culturally and historically specific notions. For instance, Craps, in his critique of what he terms "Caruthian theory", argues that if trauma studies are to "have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness", the social and historic relations must be taken into account, and that traumatic histories of subordinate groups should be situated against the histories of socially dominant groups ([10], p. 53). At this moment of the history of the project of decolonizing trauma, we may conclude that a consensus among scholars has been reached and that this argument need no longer be made: much postcolonial scholarship has situated trauma in specific historic and societal perspectives in a broad range of national literatures in postcolonial literary studies, and the Eurocentric, event-based model of original trauma theory has now, in 2015, been discarded.

This necessary advance in postcolonial trauma studies has made the theory more comprehensive, and at the same time has also allowed more cultural specificity than Caruth's trauma theory envisaged. By the same token, this rerouting of trauma theory has also opened up movements away from the restrictions of the Freudian foundation of classic trauma theory. This part of decolonizing trauma theory has indeed been a far-reaching reconfiguration of the original theory, which was from the start firmly grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist deconstruction. Although Rothberg notes that many of the contributors to *StiN* concur with the "withering critique" that Caruth's Freudian approach had received from various influential critics ([3], pp. 230–31), at the same time, it was incontestably the hegemonic theory's foundation, and it has taken quite some time for postcolonial literary scholarship to reconsider alternatives for this foundation in Freudian psychoanalysis.

To understand the difficulty of the removal of Freudian psychoanalysis from the engagement with postcolonial trauma, we need to point out that a defining part of the strong influence of Caruth's landmark publication *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) is its promise of a renewed engagement with history, or, as she puts it, to "rethink the possibility of history" ([11], p. 12). Caruth's suggestion, although vaguely worded, is that in the encounter with trauma, history is to be regarded as no longer "straightforwardly referential", that is, no longer based on "simple models of experience and reference" ([11], p. 11). Contrary to what this seems to mean at first glance, Caruth does not envisage a new orientation towards politics in real-life and/or historic contexts, but instead a turning away from such engagement in favor of Freud's notion of the indirect referentiality of history, as expressed particularly in his account of the Jews' collective racial memory of guilt and traumatic secrets in his *Moses and Monotheism* of 1939; Caruth's much-debated claim was that Freud's thinking could "help us understand our own catastrophic era" ([11], p. 12). While this chapter of Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* has been widely quoted, it has also elicited increasingly negative reactions. Luckhurst, for instance, denies the value of *Moses and Monotheism* for present-day theorization, stating that "largely ungrounded speculations such as this on prehistory were typical of Victorian anthropology" ([2], p. 10);

Ruth Leys also forcefully refutes Caruth's readings ([12], p. 282). For a decolonized trauma theory, I would argue it is necessary to discard Caruth's emphasis on a new perspective on history when this is predicated on the dissolution of historical factuality. For instance, the trauma of Māori history as the aftermath of colonialism as depicted in literature by Māori authors such as Witi Ihimaera, Apirana Taylor, and Patricia Grace is not the anti-historical, phylogenetic, and mythic trauma of Freudian theory, but the trauma of concrete historical factuality: of dispossession, of land loss, and of instances of racial discrimination.

3. Re-Viewing Melancholia

Like the contributors of *StiN*, other theorists and scholars have also distanced themselves from Caruth's Freudian, transgenerational, and psycho-historical model of trauma. A central point of critique, for example, that which is expressed by Dominick LaCapra against Caruth's Freudian theoretical framework, is directed at the notion that melancholia and fragility are defining and unalterable characteristics of the post-traumatic stage, and lead to the lasting effect of weakened communal and individual identities ([13], pp. xi–xiii). LaCapra instead poses “acting out” and “working through” as two interconnected, non-binary modes of coming to terms with traumatic experiences, in which melancholia may be regarded as a form of “acting out”, whereas the Freudian concept of “working through” is to be considered “an articulatory practice” that enables the traumatized subject to recall memories of “something that happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” ([13], p. 22). In Caruth's Freudian outlook, as Luckhurst observes, the emphasis is on the affirmation of the crippling effects of trauma; memory is situated “entirely under the sign of post-traumatic melancholia”, and “there is a kind of injunction to maintain the post-traumatic condition” ([2], p. 210). For postcolonial literary studies, the implications of this “injunction” are problematic if the aftermath of colonial trauma is by definition expressed only in terms of weakness, victimization, and melancholia, by which themes of social activism, recuperation, and psychic resilience are obscured. Eli Park Sorenson, in his book *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary* (2010), while positively evaluating Caruth's trauma theory as a “narrative turn” in postcolonial studies, nevertheless also finds the theory inadequate due to its emphasis on melancholia, which results in a crippling self-reflexivity [14]. For a decolonized trauma theory, then, the intersection between postcolonial theory and dominant trauma theory has needed to be reconceived to theorize not only melancholia, weakness, and stasis but also the completely opposite dynamics of life-affirming and activist processes. In his book *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2012), Craps underscores the notion often expressed after 2008 in postcolonial studies: that literary trauma criticism is still too overly reliant on Caruth's work of the mid-1990s, and again asserts that its hegemony should be overturned [8]. Referring to what Luckhurst terms “the injunction to maintain weakness and melancholia”, Craps posits instead the critical commitment in postcolonial studies “to make visible the creative and political” rather than the “pathological and negative” in trauma literature ([8], p. 127). Since 2008, when the contributors to *StiN* first found that postcolonial trauma fiction assigns meaning to themes of recuperation, redress, and resilience, many other scholars have expressed similar views. We can justifiably conclude that today, in 2015, it is generally agreed that the postcolonial interrogation of the legacy of Western colonialism cannot maintain the

“injunction” to regard malaise and melancholia, with their connotations of submissiveness and inaction, as the inevitable outcome of traumatization. Removing this injunction has been accomplished as a clear and necessary step in the project of decolonizing trauma theory.

What remains undisputed, I wish to stress, is Caruth’s notion of the enduring and ultimately unknowable and inexpressible nature of traumatic wounding. Caruth’s focus on the impossibility of exact and “ultimate” knowing does not oppose or contradict the notion that narrative is curative, and that trauma victims may come to terms with their traumatic experiences. It is the domain of literature to present, re-present, and dramatize trauma in its many manifestations without making claims to precise definitions or complete exactitude. Without negating the lasting, profound impact of trauma, postcolonial trauma narratives often also demonstrate that resilience and growth are possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding. An example of this positive narrative arc is presented by Toni Morrison’s novel *Home* (2012), the story of Frank and Cee (Ycidra) Money. *Home* depicts the siblings’ traumatic memories of childhood abuse, also drawing into play the wider history of slavery and racist persecution and lynchings, as well as Frank’s trauma as a veteran of the Korean war, and his many symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Cee suffers from the traumatic experiences of exploitation and near-death as a victim of illegal experimentation. Despite these ineradicable scars of past and recent wounding, the final pages of *Home* speak unreservedly of healing, rejuvenation, and personal growth. Its final page presents the image of a green bay tree that is damaged at the core, but at the same time alive and growing:

*It looked so strong
So beautiful.
Hurt right down the middle
But alive and well.* ([15], p. 147)

The image of the beautiful tree symbolizes a sense of closure that is not the erasure or denial of past hurt, but which affirms growth and health to emphasize that recovery, despite traumatic wounding, is possible, and that trauma, although it stands outside precise representation, can be integrated. Morrison’s novel is an example of many similar narratives that emphasize renewed life and growth after traumatization, in contradistinction to trauma theory’s insistence on melancholia and weakness.

Stepping aside for a moment from the discussion of the project of decolonizing trauma theory, we should note that in her more recent book on trauma, titled *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013), Caruth moves away from her initial emphasis on stasis and melancholia as the inevitable condition of trauma victims, and instead now postulates that trauma calls for a turn to life, emphasizing its “imperative to live” ([16], p. xi). We should not take this to mean a departure from Caruth’s earlier alignment with Freudian psychoanalysis; on the contrary, Freud continues to inform her new thinking about trauma, but Caruth now foregrounds the language of Freud’s life drive, “by which Freud signals a mode of speaking and of writing that bear [sic] witness to the past by turning toward the future” ([16], p. xi). This turn towards life, and subsequently growth, constitutes what Caruth sees as the challenge for the theory of trauma in the 21st century in which she poses the disappearance of history as a site where “we can recognize the persistence of a language, or a writing, that emerges precisely as the archival resources of meaning and tradition slip away” ([16], p. xi). In its vague and sweeping generalization, this statement nevertheless clearly negates Caruth’s previous emphasis on melancholia,

which, as I have shown, has been found by many scholars to be unproductive and ultimately untenable, particularly in the engagement with postcolonial literature. Since 2008, an increasing number of postcolonial critics have rejected trauma theory's limited Freudian orientation towards trauma and have argued for an expansion and redirection of the theory in order to adequately understand trauma during and after colonization. A major issue that necessitated a resolution has been the controversy about the value of narrative.

4. Re-Valuing the Function of Narrative

A crucial concern in the decolonizing project has been the debate about early trauma theory's deconstructionist approach to narrative, in particular its aesthetics of the indeterminacy or impossibility of meaning. This issue has been crucial to literary scholars because it touches on the value of narrative, and it has long been controversial because Caruth's aporetic dictum opposes notions of the therapeutic and recuperative value of narrative that are prioritized in other theories of trauma. Early trauma theory's deconstructionist notions of the impossibility of truthfulness or accuracy in narrative were initially presented as inherent in the theory's ethical orientation, which demanded an empathetic connectivity in the reception of trauma narratives. This other-directed response must follow from the recognition that trauma cannot be fully verbalized or understood, as expressed in Caruth's oft-quoted statement that "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" ([11], pp. 91–92). As I observe above, it seems an unproblematic notion that due to the limitations of human expression the exact and ultimate meaning of a traumatic experience can neither be fully understood nor perfectly narrated in language, but Caruth's theory goes beyond this notion, posing instead that verbal expression of trauma constitutes an affront to understanding, or, even, an act of betrayal of the traumatic memory. From the mid-1990s onwards, this orthodoxy of the "unsayability" of trauma as the only, or prescribed, ethical position in the reception of trauma had an opposing, but very influential counterpart, associated with the work of psychiatrist Judith Herman (in particular, her book *Trauma and Recovery*). Herman views narrative as an empowering and effective therapeutic method in the treatment of trauma victims. Narratives of trauma, as an "organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content", contribute to healing and recovery ([17], p. 177).

These opposing views about the value of trauma narrative, termed "the flat contradiction in trauma theory" by Luckhurst ([2], p. 82), have long been problematic to literary scholars wishing to use the theory in their critical praxis. Following Caruth's formulation, trauma narrative must be regarded as leading to increased indeterminacy, denying the possibility of resolution and recovery, whereas in Herman's view, trauma narrative is therapeutic, enabling psychic integration and eventual resolution of trauma. For many years, Caruth's aporetic stance remained a core element in trauma theory and was adhered to by some postcolonial scholars as well, although it inevitably proved inadequate to a full reading of postcolonial trauma. For example, Susan Y. Najita's *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific* initially underwrites Caruth's rejection of narratives of recovery, which Najita terms the "fetishized narrative of complete recuperation" ([18], p. 63). However, despite this initial denial, Najita's readings of postcolonial trauma fiction lead her to conclude that the dominant theory's notion of aporia is too limiting a perspective, and that, in fact, dominant themes in literary texts are of recovery and redress, often through political activism [18]. The theme of recuperation through activist resistance is found in

much postcolonial trauma criticism, and these findings oppose the orthodoxy of Caruth's passivist melancholia as well as trauma theory's denial of the value of narrative.

While it has taken quite some time for the strong emphasis on the denial of the therapeutic value of traumatic narrativization to fully disappear in postcolonial thinking about trauma, Caruth's original formulation is now effectively superseded. A very strong factor in this process has been the serious critique expressed by Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga in their collection of essays on trauma, memory, and narrative in South African literature [19]. Mengel and Borzaga and their contributors underscore the fact that trauma theory in Caruth's deconstructionist formulation is inadequate to the analysis of trauma in South Africa. This trauma is inextricably involved with the history of apartheid, which has caused the collective traumatization of several generations, and as such, it is neither an unclaimed nor unclaimable experience. Mengel and Borzaga express strong objections to what they term the "melancholic vocabulary" of theorists like Caruth and Hartman, which is marked by "notions of absence, holes, deferral, crises of meaning, unknowing and dissociation" and which precludes "any possibility for healing for individuals or entire nations" ([19], p. xiii). The hearings by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa derive their importance from the understanding that the truth of traumatic experiences can be reclaimed in oral and written narratives, and that these narratives provide ways of coming to terms with the aftermath of apartheid and its atrocities.

Postcolonial literature provides many examples that support the claim that trauma itself instigates a strong need for narrative in order to come to terms with the aftermath of colonial wounding. The work of Māori writer Patricia Grace, for instance, centrally poses that the injustices and wrongs of colonialism produce a restless state, in which trauma must be brought to light through narrative. Narrativization is empowering to individuals and their communities, and is in fact crucial to cultural survival. Grace's novel *Baby No-Eyes* [20] represents the narration of traumatic memories by the metaphor of unwinding bandages, which, once they have been removed, reveal a core of selfhood; the traumatic event has not invaded this central, authentic sense of self, but has accumulated around it through years of repression, and of compliance with hegemonic, colonialist ways of thinking. Trauma in this novel, then, is neither inaccessible nor inexpressible. On the contrary, the bandages of traumatic memories, in Grace's metaphor, are removed precisely through the process of oral storytelling, exposing many injustices done to individuals and to their communities, and crucially also bringing to light their own acquiescence, guilt, and shame. Telling the story of trauma leads to health: as protagonist Gran Kura states, it is a "ridding oneself of sickness" ([20], p. 148). While trauma is a disorder that can remain latent for a very long time, even then is not beyond healing once it is brought to light in narrative, as my examples from novels by Morrison and Grace demonstrate.

5. Expanding Trauma Theory

Since 2008, postcolonial scholars have increasingly discarded the approaches of Freudian psychoanalysis and deconstructionism for their own work, and have expressed preferences for less prescriptive theories, for instance, from sociology and anthropology. In *The Splintered Glass: Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond* (2011), editors Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué argue for a change in postcolonial trauma studies towards a sociological orientation, expressing the general discontent with contemporary trauma theory's deconstructionist and psychoanalytical

orientations; they suggest that a sociological framework for a theory of trauma will answer the need to rethink the relation between specificity and comprehensiveness in postcolonial literary studies ([7], pp. ix-xxvi). Decolonizing trauma theory, then, has entailed a movement away from the original Eurocentric theory's foundation in Freudian psychoanalysis and its emphasis on melancholia and stasis. In severing the ties with these tenets of the original theory, postcolonial theory has enabled connections with new directions taken from sociology and anthropology, as disciplines capable of providing new models, including those for collective trauma. Indeed, as Erikson states, in sociology it is "well-travelled conceptual ground" to theorize trauma as collective ([21], p. 229). Trauma is now recognized as displaying both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies; trauma is not coherent in cause and effect, but may affect individuals and communities negatively, forcing open pre-existing fault lines ([21], p. 236), while also possibly affirming a sense of belonging, kinship, and mutual trust. These two tendencies, however opposite in effect, are widely observed and can occur "either alone or in combination," as Erikson remarks ([21], p. 237).

A worthwhile definition of collective trauma for a decolonized trauma theory is provided by sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander. He defines collective trauma as the result of a sociocultural, narrative act of constructing traumatic experiences. Literature, then, performs a major part in what Alexander calls the "trauma process": the process that gives narrative shape and meaning to "harmful or overwhelming phenomena which are believed to have deeply harmed collective identity" ([22], p. 10). From the perspective of postcolonial theory, this concept of the trauma process involves the construction and interrogation of the history of colonialism and decolonization through narratives. Colonialism is part of that trauma process. It is an established understanding that colonialism's traumatic aftermath continues until the present day. As Achille Mbembe remarks, "In African self-writing *the colony* is depicted as an original scene which does not merely occupy a space of remembrance, as if reflected in a mirror" but it is also "one of the significant matrices of language, operating on the past and the present, identity and death" ([23], pp. 28–29). It needs no argument that postcolonial literature is a major contributor to the socio-cultural construction of trauma that constitutes the trauma process as defined by Alexander. Postcolonial fiction characteristically dramatizes the notion that the trauma of colonialism can and must be addressed.

Narrativization of trauma allows insight into specifics of the colonial past as a pathway to integration of the traumatic memory. This process of integration may also involve addressing the sensitive issue of complicity. During decolonization, Mbembe states, what needs to be confronted is the complexity of the "entanglement of desire, seduction and subjugation; not only oppression, but its enigma of loss", which may include the realization that the colonized people "have allowed themselves to be duped, seduced, and deceived" ([23], p. 35). In pointing out this complexity, Mbembe invites a positioning towards postcolonial trauma that accords with the findings of the *StiN* project as summarized by Rothberg, who concludes that "attentiveness to complicity" marks one promising direction for "a differentiated approach" in a decolonized trauma theory ([3], p. 232).

Whereas the project of decolonizing trauma theory has involved discarding various notions from the first model of literary and cultural trauma theory, the project has also necessitated expansion. An area of expansion that is important to understanding the traumatic legacy of the colonial situation, I would suggest, is the complexity of the entanglement of complicity, agency, and guilt. These themes are still relatively unexplored as areas of research today, whereas postcolonial literature often dramatizes

conflicted traumatic memories of individual and collective complicity with hegemonic systems of oppression. Complicity is a major theme in Patricia Grace's work, in particular her three novels *Potiki*, *Cousins*, and *Baby No-Eyes* [23–25], published between 1986 and 1998. Complicity is depicted as a poisonous force that undermines, weakens, and even destroys individual and communal life. Grace's novels offer a detailed scrutiny of the history of a generation of Māori who chose to comply with the government's repression of Māori culture. She presents this decision as part of the internalization of the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy, taught in schools and imposed on parents as the best education for their children. This generation's later realization of the insidious nature of this complicity deepens their trauma of loss and impoverishment, and increases their feelings of shame and guilt. What Grace's fiction foregrounds is that storytelling offers a way to come to terms with this traumatic, repressed wounding and opens the way to recovery. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's novel *Home*, shame and guilt are central elements in the trauma process that the novel depicts. Protagonist and trauma victim Frank Money tells the story of his life to a nameless scribe, and in the process gradually uncovers the layers of hurt that are wrapped around a central devastating traumatic experience during the war, which involved his shooting of a young girl in the face. It is only slowly, aided by the work of oral narrative, that Frank is able to reconnect with this extremely painful memory and confront and integrate his guilt and shame. Frank's recovery from trauma and PTSD is presented as a result of his telling his story in an oral narrative to an attentive recipient. In Morrison's *Home*, a further curative force is represented by the community of women in the town of Lotus, whose rituals effectuate Cee's healing and recovery from trauma [15]. In Grace's fiction, storytelling is itself a ritual means to heal from trauma because it connects past and present, drawing upon the ancestors and their sacred power to restore harmony and health. Postcolonial fiction by these authors demonstrates that trauma can be narrated with integrity, and that oral storytelling enables a healing process, which allows insight, acceptance, and access to various modes of redress. Orality, as Najita observes, "provides a language to articulate a new mode of belonging based upon genealogy that leads out of and beyond the traumatic past" and even "through and out of colonization" ([18], p. 23). A decolonized reading of trauma, I would suggest, indeed calls for a recognition of the centrality of oral modes of narrative and their ritual function in indigenous communities.

6. New Areas of Exploration

A response to trauma from a respectful cognition of culturally specific spiritual and religious perspectives, analogous to the recognition of historical, national, and ethnic diversification, is necessary for a postcolonial theory of trauma to be truly decolonized. Rothberg, in instigating the decolonizing trauma project in 2008, already signaled this area of interest for postcolonial criticism in highlighting a response to trauma "that asserts the relevance of localized modes of belief, ritual, and understanding, thereby undermining the centrality of Western knowledge and expertise" ([26], p. 27). If dominant Western models of trauma obstruct entry to meanings that underlie indigenous rituals and cultural practices, this may be attributed to the fact that present theorization in literary studies is characterized by a neglect of religion and spirituality, due to the influence of postmodernist theories and poststructuralist antagonism towards religion as "grand narrative". The dominant stance in contemporary cultural theory is to regard the postmodern period as "thoroughly and satisfactorily

secularized”, as John A. McClure remarks ([27], p. 141). This limited perspective makes cultural theory inadequate for an engagement with indigenous literatures that situate trauma in the context of ritual and ceremony. Moreover, its normativity is reminiscent of Eurocentric or even colonialist tendencies to impose Western notions of religion-as-superstition on non-Western literary texts. Cultural and theoretical paradigms that equate progressiveness and secularism may mask the fact that this kind of orientalism is still operative. Manav Ratti’s *The Postsecular Imagination*, a recent publication on postcolonialism, literature, and religion, argues convincingly that the secular West sees itself as superior (as modern and progressive) to the non-secular non-West [28]. Western secularism identifies itself with “ideas of modernity, progress, civilization, and the othering of religions that are different from Christianity”; consequently, non-Christian belief systems, especially Islam, are the religious other, seen as intolerant and irrational ([28], p. 7).

A decolonized trauma theory, I would claim, must be one that is sensitive to the cultural bias inherent in the secular perspective that imposes such prejudices. In this area of secular thinking about religion and spirituality, the non-West is too easily contrasted with the West as less civilized, or even backward, and in need of enlightenment; Ratti refers to Ashis Nandy’s incisive critique on secularism’s hegemonizing the idea of tolerance “so that anyone who is not secular becomes definitionally intolerant” ([28], p. 13). Decolonizing trauma theory must involve an awareness of entrenched Western notions of ideological superiority, as well as a distancing from these cultural prejudices. As Duncan Brown cautions, “the inability to move beyond conventional paradigms can undermine potentially groundbreaking projects in this area” ([29], p. 9). I wish to suggest that the recognition that a respectful and nuanced conceptualization of religious and spiritual modes of addressing trauma is needed would constitute a necessary and major step forward towards a fully decolonized trauma theory.

The dominant influence of secular rational thinking has often been compared to that of colonialism, both leading to a loss of indigenous practices all over the world; according to Erin O’Connor, the “devastating loss of tradition, ritual and belief” has become one of the principal preoccupations of postcolonial writing ([30], p. 227). The erosion of indigenous minority cultures is indeed a central issue in much postcolonial fiction. In her 1995 collection of essays *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Chicana writer Ana Castillo speaks of the repressive attitude in the United States and “everywhere where primal peoples reside and where white imperialism has reigned”, emphasizing the need for minority cultures to gain knowledge of their indigenous heritage in order to “educate the world, including our own communities, about ourselves” ([31], p. 6). Ratti, in expounding the difficulties involved for Western academics in understanding and representing the “religiously-informed lifeworld” and the “otherness” of religious belief and faith, concludes that there is an urgent need to conceptualize what is so resistant to conventional secular rational thinking ([28], p. 12). This conceptualization, I argue, must be part of the trajectory of decolonizing trauma theory.

The long-standing debate in postcolonial literary studies about the term “magical realism” presents a case in point. The central question is whether this term, with its binary opposition between magic (as superstition) *versus* realism (as truth), can be adequate to the reading of postcolonial literature. African writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, and Zakes Mda have distanced themselves from this intrinsic binary, stating that such a dichotomy is not relevant to their work, nor to their worldview. Soyinka, for instance, asserted in 1976 that “the harmonization of human functions, external phenomena and supernatural suppositions within individual consciousness merges as a normal

self-adjusting process in the African temper of mind” ([32], p. 122). Commenting on the frequent classifications of his work as magical realism, South African writer Zakes Mda has stated in an interview that it is the Western, not the African stance, to refer to magic as opposed to reality, and that to him, as an African, the immaterial is real, natural, and ordinary: “part of the way people live” ([33], p. 8). Derek Alan Barker, in an article presenting an overview of critical views of magic realism in Mda’s work, concludes that the term does not provide a “sufficiently full account of any of Mda’s texts”, but will probably continue to be used by critics for its descriptive function; he warns, however, that it may become “tyrannical” when used as “expedient, modish or dismissive of the narrative truth of a text” ([34], p. 17).

A central concern to be addressed in the context of decolonizing trauma theory, then, is the pervasive influence of the secular ideology of postmodern Western culture, which may obstruct an engagement with spirituality, ritual, and ceremony in postcolonial trauma narratives. As Brown states, the major challenge in postcolonial criticism today is the question of “how do we develop a critical language and framework that avoid the dismissiveness of materialism in its approach to spirituality, while still undertaking studies that are rigorously analytic and critical, but receptive to other modes of identification, identity and being?” ([29], p. 9). Research in social studies supports my claim for a new perspective on trauma in postcolonial criticism that would oppose the limitations of hegemonic poststructuralist resistance against the study of religious and spiritual practice. According to researchers Peres, Moreira-Almeida *et al.*, social studies confirm that in actual therapeutic processes, trauma victims may find in their belief systems pathways to resilience and recovery from trauma, and that forms of spirituality that provide a sense of identity and hope can prevent PTSD [35]. They strongly recommend a respectful approach from therapists working with trauma victims who (even in Western secular nations) themselves often raise existential and spiritual issues, and urge further study of the role of spirituality “in fostering resilience in trauma survivors” as a way to “advance our understanding of human adaptation to trauma” ([35], p. 348). Rather than considering the openness to spirituality as dubious, then, we should realize that this openness may liberate analytic readings in trauma criticism to consider as worthwhile the dimensions of human life and experience as they are expressed in trauma narratives and testimonies. A further example of a study that supports this claim is Renee Linklater’s *Decolonizing Trauma Work*, which explores trauma stories and healing strategies in indigenous communities [36]. Presenting itself as a “decolonizing journey”, Linklater’s book engages with indigenous health care practitioners who still use traditional approaches to trauma today [36]. Conducting a respectful dialogue with spiritual trauma healers, Linklater’s work counters the secularist default assumptions of hegemonic trauma theory and its very limited pattern of response to trauma, in which, as Luckhurst states, religion has no place and resilience and recovery have long been ignored or even seen as pathological ([2], p. 210). I would suggest that a turn towards an engagement with spirituality may vitalize the work of criticism in postcolonial trauma studies, in alignment with Ratti’s view that the arrogant denial of spirituality in the West has also led to a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction: “worldviews centered in scientific rationality, which perceived and reinforced perceptions of colonized peoples as subhuman, thus justifying colonial conquest and violence—have resulted in a disenchanted West” ([28], p. 17). The disenchanted Western outlook lacks what Ratti calls the “irresistible dimensions of the human experience”, such as faith, awe, and transcendence, which may infuse the mundane with a richness of experience ([28], p. 17).

Disenchantment is a central theme in Ana Castillo's novel *So Far from God*, which presents the life stories of a Chicana mother and her four daughters. Sofi's daughters, growing up in the dominant culture of American consumerism, seek happiness and fulfilment through education, networking, and career moves. Attracted by the American Dream of success, the young women discard Chicano culture and spirituality and embrace the world of mainstream ideology only to return to the family home "disappointed, disillusioned, devastated, and eventually not at all" ([37], p. 127). All learn that the "enchantment" of American materialism and individualism is in fact an "entrapment" and does not lead to independence, happiness, and freedom. In *So Far From God*, the eventual deaths of all four daughters (through war, sexual assault, chemical poisoning, and AIDS) reveal the inherent violence, racism, and spiritual emptiness of American culture. In sharp contrast to this disenchantment, Castillo posits the rejuvenating value of communal effort in Chicano culture, and the curative effect of traditional Chicano spirituality and religious observances, which, in combination, result in collective and successful, political activism.

In Castillo's novel, the trauma of colonialist oppression is addressed and resolved through communal rituals that constitute moral and political energizers. It exemplifies Ratti's claim that postcolonial literature is powerfully poised to undo the oppositions between secularism and religion, and that "in its ability to represent a multiplicity of voices and in its acceptance and juxtaposition of contradictory and conflicting perspectives", postcolonial literary criticism can "represent, imagine, and pursue a rich array of possibilities" ([28], p. xxi). Such possibilities are evidenced not only by Castillo's novel, but also by the examples I have so far presented from novels by Morrison and Grace, which dramatize how individuals and their communities employ religious ceremony and rituals to address the traumas of racist discrimination and colonialist exploitation, and in doing so successfully resist the dominant culture's ideology.

An openness to indigenous belief systems and their rituals will give access to explorations of specific ways in which postcolonial fiction expresses new avenues towards the perception of trauma, its aftermath, and possible resolution. An example of such a new avenue is provided by Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Whale Rider*, which assigns a crucial function to forgiveness as a healing force in the trauma process that the narrative depicts. A cycle of violence, wounding, and suffering is broken and healed by forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a recognized concept in trauma theory, mainly due to what Julia Kristeva diagnoses as the problem of Freudianism, which is that it has no place for forgiveness; "forgiveness is not a psychoanalytical concept" ([38], p. 14). Ihimaera's narrative, however, assigns a central place to forgiveness. In its final pages, a formal ritual of forgiveness is enacted, which marks the end to protagonist Kahu's trauma of rejection and exclusion. Forgiveness for causing this trauma is formally asked, in Māori, and ritually repeated several times, and it proves to be a very powerful psychological force, reconciling differences and healing the wounding of the past. Despite its complexity, and the potentially controversial nature of its theorization in view of Western trauma notions, forgiveness invites serious conceptualization in postcolonial trauma studies. A further prospective expansion of trauma theory would not only include attention to resilience, non-Western modes of spiritual counselling, and reception of trauma, but also the place and function of forgiveness as a factor in the engagement with trauma.

7. Conclusions

In 2008, Rothberg astutely predicted that in the engagement with postcolonial literature, scholars would critically expose the limitations of trauma theory and would make evident what decolonizing trauma theory must involve [3]. As the retrospective part of this article has shown, since 2008, the project of decolonizing trauma theory has involved a gradual process of moving away from the theory's Eurocentric tendencies, from its orientation on Freudian psychoanalysis, and from its emphasis on melancholia and stasis, as well as a movement towards an expansion of the theoretical field and towards a greater openness to culturally specific modes of addressing and negotiating trauma. In postcolonial studies today, trauma is recognized as a very complex phenomenon. It is not only understood as acute, individual, and event-based, but also as collective and chronic; trauma can weaken individuals and communities, but it can also lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion. Postcolonial literary studies reflect and reconstruct this full complexity of trauma in its specific cultural, political, and historical contexts. "As a research paradigm, trauma cannot be stabilized according to a predetermined field of theory", Nikro remarks, "but is both embedded in and traverses relational accommodations between disciplines, geographies, histories, implicating flows of material and imaginary resources and the institutions directing their distribution and access" ([5], p. 1). In the complicated and dynamic area of literary trauma studies, postcolonial literary criticism has played an important role, precisely due to its critical engagement with the limitations and contradictions of dominant trauma theory. Bill Ashcroft regards the critical, resistant, and paradigm-changing function of postcolonial studies as crucial, describing it as "a remarkable facility to use the modes of the dominant discourse against itself and transform it in ways that have been profound and lasting" ([39], p. 13). In a recent collection of essays on trauma in literature, editor Michelle Balaev also affirms this positive evaluation of the critical stance of postcolonial scholars, pointing out that in the history of the concept of trauma, which is "filled with contradictory theories and contentious debates" ([40], p. 2), postcolonial theory is one of the major influences that enabled alternatives to "viewing literature as a closed psychoanalytic system" ([40], pp. 4–5), particularly in presenting "a view of trauma as multiply figured with diverse representations in literature and far reaching effects in culture" ([40], p. 10).

The diverse representations mentioned by Balaev, I would suggest, include the potentially fruitful area of investigation of spiritual and religious traditions and ceremonies that are employed in non-Western cultures in therapeutic engagement with traumatic experiences and their aftermath. The respectful engagement with these indigenous modes of address will demand nuanced attention to Western preconceptions and their interference with indigenous, culturally specific ceremonies and rituals. Such a re-routing of the secular orientation of literary theory accords with the long-standing call for a diversification of postcolonial modes of reading trauma, already expressed by Rothberg in his first formulations of the project of decolonizing trauma theory [3]. Postcolonial theory has largely sidestepped this area, mainly because indigenous modes of representing trauma in fiction often include emphases on spiritual and religious traditions, which so far have fallen outside the framework of poststructuralist theory. The nuanced exploration and conceptualization of the function of indigenous belief systems in the engagement with trauma would constitute a further necessary development in the project of achieving a fully decolonized trauma theory.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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