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Cosmological Trauma and Postcolonial Modernity

Sam Durrant and Ryan Topper

Abstract

In this essay we make two seemingly contradictory arguments regarding the relationship between trauma and postcolonial theory: trauma theory has always been postcolonial, and it is not yet postcolonial. By highlighting the similarities between Cathy Caruth's and Edward Said's readings of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, we argue that trauma theory, much like postcolonial critique, is centrally concerned with the undoing of identitarian binds. We therefore suggest that Caruth's theory of implicated subjectivity, which she pulls from Freud, is more in line with postcolonial theory than critics of her Eurocentrism (who often hinge their argument on identity politics) have recognized. At the same time, her theory of implication must become more postcolonial, we argue, by moving beyond its anthropocentric coordinates. As authors such as Derek Walcott and Uzodinma Iweala demonstrate, a postcolonial approach to trauma studies must begin by apprehending the cosmological damage wreaked by colonial modernity, which implicates not only humans, but entire systems of relations amidst the cosmos. By placing Walcott's and Iweala's writings in dialogue with Freud's reading of Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated*, we propose our concept of cosmological trauma, which names the rupture in relational networks central to colonization.

The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism.

Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

In this essay we make two seemingly contradictory arguments. Our first thesis is that trauma theory has always been postcolonial. We thus place Cathy Caruth's and Edward Said's readings of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in dialogue, suggesting that both trauma theory and postcolonial theory have been centrally concerned with the traumatic origin of racial and cultural difference. Our second thesis is that trauma theory is not yet postcolonial. We thus also argue

that Caruth's concept of traumatic implication must be extended to the more-than-human world and introduce our notion of cosmological trauma. Here we return to the debate within trauma studies surrounding Freud's reading of Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated* in order to expand the question of who/what is wounded when Tancred slashes at the magical forest. We then turn to two postcolonial literary texts that illustrate our expanded sense of implication, focusing on the opening of Derek Walcott's celebrated (anti-)epic poem, *Omeros* and the ending of Uzodinma Iweala's child-soldier novella, *Beasts of No Nation*. Both of these passages focus on ancestral spirits that reside within trees and accordingly the cosmological violence involved in hacking them down.

Reread with Walcott and Iweala, Freud's discussion of Tasso in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* turns out to have an implicitly *postcolonial* link to his reading of *Moses and Monotheism*, a link that is centrally concerned with what is lost in the structural transition to monotheism that Freud takes as foundational to Western civilization. As our epigraph suggests, what is lost in this movement from multiplicity to oneness, from a multi-spirited nature to a mono-spirited culture, is animism, that principle of a mutually animating cosmos that is common to so many indigenous belief systems (Soyinka 1992, Bird-David 1999, Rooney 2000, Harvey 2013,). Cosmological trauma names this loss, this fall from a fully animated world. However, as the dialectical reading of Enlightenment advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno suggests, there is no absolute break between the world of myth and the ostensibly rational world of modernity: animism has only ever been repressed rather than extirpated, and continues to inform (albeit unevenly across different cultures and communities) what Achille Mbembe has described as the entangled temporality of postcolonial modernity. A postcolonial approach to trauma studies, we submit, cannot simply entail a shift of focus towards 'non-Western' trauma victims, but must begin by apprehending the cosmological damage wreaked by the deanimating forces of modernity and thus by questioning the ostensibly rational, secular coordinates of contemporary psychoanalysis.

Our first thesis is partially intended as a nuancing of recent calls for the decolonization of trauma theory, a call emblemized by Stef Craps' *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013). Craps indicts (Caruthian) trauma theory on four counts:

The founding texts of the field . . . marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal

validity of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetics of fragmentation . . . and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas (2).

We agree with Craps' core argument: trauma theory must expand its gaze. However, all but the last of the four charges he lays above rely on a stable opposition between a hegemonic Western subject and a non-Western or minority subject whose traumas have been overlooked or misapprehended. The first charge glosses over the ambivalent status of Jews as both and neither Western and non-Western, as Said describes in *Freud and the Non-European*. The second takes Western modernity as a discrete category, as if Western modernity had not emerged precisely through the violent construction (both discursive and material) of the non-West. The third leads to a championing of realism, that form which, as human rights theorists such as Joseph Slaughter have demonstrated, is irrevocably tied to the universalization of Enlightenment concepts of the human, personhood, self-determination and statehood (and thus to the Eurocentrism Craps' attempts to dismantle). Finally, Craps' fourth critique is for us less a critique than a reaffirmation of Caruth's argument about co-implication.

Indeed, Craps positions his work as making good on the "promise of ethical cross-cultural engagement" that Caruth's theory suggests but does not, for him, deliver (6). In this sense, he, like us, seeks to extend Caruth's insights, particularly in the later chapters of his book, which offer nuanced readings of the ways different traumas interconnect. The problem comes in the initial, overly Manichean division of "Western" from "postcolonial and minority" subjects. This framing is symptomatic of US academic culture in particular, where postcolonial studies is often understood as driven by an identity politics that seeks to combat hegemonic subject positions. This identitarian battle also structures the current academic "trauma industry," to use John Mowitt's phrase (2000: 277). Drawing on Wendy Brown's *States of Injury*, Mowitt argues that trauma has come to name the enviable wound that "produces moral authority" in the empowered victim who implicitly operates as the subject of both radical and neoconservative politics (consider how the men's movement and white supremacy discourses are founded on injury claims that mimic those made by feminist and anti-racist movements). Although trauma-informed identity politics has a powerful role to play in highlighting hegemonic forms of violence, the project of decolonizing trauma studies must go beyond a focal shift towards

marginalized subjects if it is to break the cycle of *ressentiment* in which critique (reproducing the rhetoric of the public sphere) remains locked.

Here, the anti-identitarian insights about the nature of subjectivity that shaped the foundational texts of both postcolonial theory and trauma theory have renewed importance. In our view, decolonizing trauma studies must entail both insisting on, and extending, these insights. Emerging at roughly the same moment, the late 1980s and early 1990s, both postcolonial and trauma theory are indebted to the poststructuralism that preceded and made possible their institutionalization within the humanities. Caruth's famous dictum that "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996: 24) echoes Edward Said's insistence on a contrapuntal humanism, Homi Bhabha's emphasis on the belatedness of postcolonial modernity, and Gayatri Spivak's reading of the non-representable subaltern histories that haunt the annals of both colonial and postcolonial history. More explicitly than Said, Spivak and Bhabha cast the postcolonial as traumatic in what later becomes the Caruthian sense of the term. While Spivak discovers a traumatic structure, or "catachresis at the origin" of subalterneity (1994: 104), Bhabha focuses on how such a structure traumatizes the nation-state. Most notably, in "DissemiNation," he casts the postcolonial migrant as the return of the nation-state's repressed colonial history, someone who de-seminates or undoes a national community's imagined homogeneity, revealing it as "implicated" in the traumas of those it seeks to exclude. This structure of disavowed implication is at the heart of contemporary politics: the failures of multiculturalism, the virulence of xenophobic populism, and the peculiarly amnesiac power of slogans such as Make America (and now Britain) Great Again all gain cultural impetus through identitarian claims to traumas that must be repaired.

As S.S. "Whiskey" Sisodia puts it in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means" (1988: 317). For Rushdie and Bhabha colonialism is constitutively traumatic for the colonized *and* the colonizer, albeit, we would hasten to add, in asymmetrical ways. As an animalized migrant puts it in the same novel, "[T]hey have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (168). We have no wish to flatten out the very different nature and effects of empire and racism. The work of the Martinican psychiatrist Franz Fanon, on which both Rushdie and Bhabha draw, is foundational to any postcolonial trauma theory. His work on the colonial gaze and the traumatic relegation of the racially marked to objecthood

remains as salient today as it was when *Black Skin White Masks* was first published in 1952. For Fanon, it is the Manichean nature of colonialism that necessitates the revolutionary violence that he advocates in *The Wretched of the Earth*, but his own thought remains dialectical (rather than oppositional or essentialist) in nature. “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” as less-than-human, he argues, casting the racial, territorial trauma he spent his career examining as constitutive not only of the colonies, but of the world (81). If both Europe and the “Third World” are constituted through Empire, then colonialism marks the moment in which modernity becomes irrevocably implicated in non-European history, and postcolonial theory is the attempt to excavate this traumatic history of implication.

In this light, the focus of “Yale-school” trauma theorists such as Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman on the Holocaust is a complementary attempt to excavate the moment at which, in the words of Aimé Césaire, the white man “applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the niggers of Africa” (2000: 36). This framework (shared by Hannah Arendt) is not how Holocaust scholars typically present their work. The insistence of some commentators on the exceptionality of the Holocaust—an insistence that the Israeli state has repeatedly used to obscure its ongoing implication in “colonialist procedures”—sets up an antagonistic relationship between Holocaust and postcolonial studies that Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory* is a welcome attempt to alleviate. Indeed, this essay follows Rothberg’s work in calling for a return to what we would suggest is the fundamentally postcolonial impulse of Caruth’s insistence on mutual implication.

Our second thesis, that trauma theory is not yet postcolonial, takes a rather different tack from previous critiques. Following their institutionalizations, both postcolonial theory and trauma theory have been subject to internal and external critique from theorists broadly suspicious of poststructuralism. So-called “Pomo Poco” theory has been attacked by Marxist theorists such as Neil Lazarus and Benita Parry for its alleged betrayal of the nationalist anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to being critiqued for its seemingly Eurocentric focus, critics such as Ruth Leys and Lauren Berlant suggest that trauma theory’s poststructuralist bent severs the discourse from *realpolitik*. In spite of these critiques, we believe that the most profound insights of both movements derive directly from their engagements with poststructuralism. More specifically, while nationalism was central to anti-colonial struggle, the

“worlding” of trauma theory must retain its deconstructive, anti-identitarian impulse if it is to combat the virulence of contemporary nationalist movements. While acknowledging the central complaint of the Warwick collective, that “pomo poco” fails to take into account the uneven distribution of wealth produced by global capitalism, we would insist that this failure has to do with not being anti-identitarian *enough* (Deckard et al 2015). As we have intimated in our initial citation of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is the domination of nature, or what current commentators have dubbed “extractive capitalism”, that continues to drive imperialism. The domination of certain peoples by others needs to be placed within the context of man’s domination of the earth and the concomitant taboo against anthropomorphism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 4), understood not as the projection of human qualities onto the non-human or inanimate world but as an insistence on our co-animacy, on the distributed, more than human, nature of personhood (Abram 1996, Plumwood 2003). Indeed, for Adorno and Horkheimer, racism is the result of man’s domination, and traumatic disavowal, of his own nature, a disavowal that then leads to the projection of unwanted animal qualities onto other humans. The taboo on anthropomorphism leads directly to racism, to the refusal to attribute personhood not simply to the non-human but also to certain categories of human being.

From this perspective, trauma theory is not yet postcolonial in so far as it continues to understand trauma as the breaching of the boundaries of an otherwise bordered or individuated human subjectivity. For many of the peoples and cultures subject to European colonialism, subjectivity is not only not individuated, but also not simply human: the ‘we’ that becomes implicated through colonialism needs to include the “more than human” world if trauma theory (and indeed postcolonial theory) is to be fully decolonized. To say that trauma theory is not yet postcolonial is thus to say that it has not yet caught up with the environmental, posthumanist or planetary ‘turn’ in critical theory. This turn is of course no turn at all if we begin from the perspectives of indigenous knowledge systems, or animist epistemologies. Even within Western academia critics such as Sylvia Wynter have long been arguing that colonialism is coextensive with Man’s domination of nature through His epistemic “overrepresentation.” Similarly, anthropologists such as David Abram, Tim Ingold and Eduardo Vivieros de Castro have argued against the bordered Cartesian subject and for our irreducible enmeshment in the world, an enmeshment that undoes distinctions not only between one culture and another, one people and another, but between nature and culture, the human and the non-human.

This enmeshment in the world extends Caruth's theory of implication beyond the humanist coordinates of psychoanalysis. Ingold and Vivieros de Castro explicitly link the enmeshed ontologies of indigenous peoples to Deleuze's rhizomatic model of subjectivity. Reconsidering Deleuze's attempt to deterritorialise psychoanalysis in dialogue with indigenous ontologies, and tracing how this reconsideration might recast Caruthian implication, thus appears to us a vital step in the attempt to produce a genuinely postcolonial trauma theory, one that might allow us to ask what kind of breach trauma constitutes for those who do not understand themselves as bordered, individuated human subjects.

Implication is central to understanding how trauma inflects diasporic as well as indigenous subjectivities. As Petar Ramanadovic points out, "The subject in or of trauma is [. . .], for Caruth, culturally and politically a diasporic subject, *en route* toward subjectivity" (55). One could read Caruth and Ramanadovic as "universalizing" the Holocaust and the experience of the Jewish diaspora as constitutive of "modern" subjectivity, but theorists of the African diaspora have made analogous claims about what it means to have survived the trauma of the Middle Passage. Paul Gilroy, for instance, quotes Toni Morrison's claim that "modern life begins with slavery," that the slave developed "strategies for survival [that] made the truly modern person (Gilroy 1993 221). While the Middle Passage marks the particularity of black experience in the New World, for Edouard Glissant it also constitutes an "abyssal" history, a non-narrativisable anti-history that simultaneously grounds and ungrounds racial identity. Glissant argues that the trauma of the Middle Passage both defines Caribbean culture but also links it to the rest of the world: "For though this experience made you, original victim floating towards the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared, and made us, the descendants, one people amongst others. Peoples do not live on exception. . . . This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange (8). Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990) can thus be read as an important precursor of Caruth's theory of traumatic implication. However, Glissant, like Ingold and Vivieros de Castro, draws on Deleuze rather than Freud, casting his theory of relationality as rhizomatic (11). What is important for us is not the choice of Deleuze over Freud, but rather Glissant's related call for a deterritorializing "aesthetics of the earth" (151) in which trauma becomes the link not simply between different peoples and cultures but between the human and the nonhuman, culture and nature—which moves beyond trauma theory's myopic focus on the human. As we shall suggest in our reading of *Tancred and Clorinda*, and in our readings of

Omeros and *Beasts of No Nation*, traumatic wounds are not something to be claimed exclusively by this or that (human) subject (and that then become, following Mowitt, the subject of trauma envy): wounds are inherently and unendingly relational, or, to use our own phrase, cosmological.

Cosmological trauma thus emerges as the key term for a properly postcolonial trauma studies in so far as it extends the very principle of extension at the heart of Caruthian trauma theory. For Caruth, trauma is not something that happens *to* subjects (whether individual or collective) but something that happens *between* subjects, something that exposes the subject's inaccessibility to itself, its radical incompleteness. Cosmological trauma extends this sense of irreducible implication beyond the human subject to which Caruth remains anchored even in her more recent shift toward the "life drive" (2013). In its narrowest definition, cosmological trauma simply constitutes another category of trauma, denoting a rupture within a non-Western, non-secular belief system—for example, the breakdown of animist worldviews that canonical African texts such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Death and the King's Horseman* take to be central to the trauma of colonization. Following Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and many other postcolonial writers toward a broader definition, one might say that cosmological trauma is the direct result of colonialism and the destruction of indigenous belief systems. In this sense cosmological trauma might also be termed ancestral trauma, denoting both a breach in the relation between the present and the past, the living and the dead, and a rupture of the mechanisms by which a culture inherits itself. Mbembe describes the necropolitical conditions of postcolonial life in similar terms: extending Foucauldian biopolitics, he argues that the postcolony is governed not (only) by the political capture of life itself under the logic of sovereignty, but of death—including the agency of those long dead: the ancestors. More perverse than biopolitical subjection, the aim of necropolitics is "to abolish any idea of ancestry and thus any debt with regard to the past" (Mbembe, 2002:269, see also Durrant 2019 and Topper 2020).

In its broadest definition, in so far as animacy is a principle of life or "spiritedness" rather than a specific human belief system that "endows" non-human entities with spirit, all trauma is cosmological (Rooney: 2000, Ingold 2011). While this last definition potentially eclipses the specificity of (post)colonial trauma, it also points most strongly towards a postcolonial world view in which the deanimating trauma of modernity takes centre stage.

Freud and Monotheism

Freud spent his final months attempting to uncover the origin of Judaism. This project was his psychoanalytic response both to the anti-Semitism at the heart of the Third *Reich*'s mass psychology and to his own diasporic displacement from Vienna to London. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, he calls this origin the “historical truth,” as opposed to the “material truth,” of monotheism (qtd. in Santner, 4). This historical truth is revealed, he argues, by unraveling the unspoken yet foundational truth of the biblical narrative: Moses was not a Jew. As he admits in the opening sentence of *Moses and Monotheism*, aiming such a depropriative act at a prophet is risky, but necessary. “To deprive a people of the man whom they take pride in as the greatest of their sons is not a thing to be gladly or carelessly undertaken,” he writes, “least of all by someone who is himself one of them. But we cannot allow any such reflection to induce us to put the truth aside in favour of what are supposed to be *national interests*” (243, our emphasis). Instead of defending Jewish cultural purity, Freud exegetes from the biblical narrative an original impurity, emblemized by Moses’ position as both a gentile and the first prophet of the Jews. Contra the Nazi insistence on Jewish impurity to which he is responding, however, Freud celebrates this lack by pinning the “historical truth” it reveals against the desire for purity within the mass psychology of fascism and, in the quote above, the nation-state. This celebratory depropriation, in other words, casts Jewish monotheism as a tradition built upon the undoing of identitarian binds, thereby demonstrating a foundation for community beyond the parameters of communitarianism.

As Edward Said points out, Freud’s argument is profoundly anti-Zionist. “[I]n excavating the archeology of Jewish identity,” Said writes in his late work *Freud and the Non-European*, “Freud insisted that it did not begin with itself but, rather, with *other identities*”—better yet, with an Arab (44). This view of “Moses as both insider and outsider” (16), Jew and Arab, suggests, Said writes,

[T]here are inherent limits that prevent [community] from being incorporated into one, and only one, Identity. Freud’s symbol of those limits was that the founder of Jewish identity was himself a non-European Egyptian. In other words, identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian, and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood [. . .]. (54)

Consequently, for Said, Freud leaves us with urgent questions that reach beyond the Israel/Palestine debate: “[C]an so utterly indecisive and so deeply undetermined a history ever be written? In what language, and with what sort of vocabulary” (55)?

Such questions resonate with those Caruth raises in the first chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*. Like Said, Caruth argues that Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* reaches beyond Jewish history, demonstrating a more universal historiography rooted in the idea that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own” (24). Many critics have faulted Caruth for positing through such seemingly universalizing claims an apolitical theory of trauma. According to Dominick LaCapra, for example, Caruth fails to differentiate between structural and historical trauma. For Ruth Leys, she fails to differentiate between victim and perpetrator. And for Craps, as previously noted, Caruth’s universalization of Jewish trauma is a sign of its irrevocably Western focus. But Said’s convergence with Caruth complicates such claims. If Freud excavates from Jewish history a “diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community,” as Said puts it, then the Judaic bent of trauma theory is less a sign of its Eurocentrism than a sign of its interest in histories that destabilize identitarian claims (53). If Caruth construes this destabilisation in terms of poststructuralist historiography, Said does so in more explicitly political language. Furthermore, given that Freud’s focus is monotheism, Caruth’s and Said’s readings of Freud imply a similar paradox: monotheism is unconsciously animist—at least in structure: Judaic monotheism is animated not by a sovereign voice, but by an enmeshment of multiplicities. For Freud, the nomology of Western culture is a Judeo-Christian inheritance formed around the trauma of being subjected to the sovereign—be it the father (as in the Oedipal family structure), or, more effectively, an archetypal presence of the father (as in monotheistic theology). But Freud’s thesis that Moses was not a Jew, Caruth and Said argue, casts this inheritance as fictive, and in reality a process of becoming traumatically co-implicated in fictive formations of sovereignty. The problem for a fully decolonised postcolonial theory, the problem so presciently raised by Horkheimer and Adorno, thus becomes how to go beyond the logic of (human) sovereignty.

Perhaps the strongest sense in which trauma theory is inherently postcolonial is thus that it presents trauma as an opening up of the self to the world, as an undoing of the fiction of sovereignty Freud places at the core of Western culture’s monotheistic structure. This opening explains the recent appeal of Judith Butler’s work to both trauma and postcolonial theorists. As

she argues in *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, trauma constitutes a political opening, a potential opening of the polis to that which, and those who, lie outside its walls. By destabilising the fiction of a bordered, sui-generis subject, trauma reveals the implicated nature of our existence, something often elided by our culturally bordered subject positions. Butler's call to embrace our "common corporeal vulnerability" is powerful precisely because it frames itself in more directly political terms than Caruth's, speaking as it does to 9/11, the subsequent war on terror and xenophobic reaction to the so-called refugee crisis. But there is also a sense in which Butler's work is limited by its desire to turn a deconstructive ethics into a political opening. As Pieter Vermeulen points out, borders have a crucial function in mediating the relation between the outside and the inside; even in the Freudian model, it is precisely the process of exposure to external excitation that deadens or "bakes" the outer layers of the organism and thus reinsulates the internal layers of the psyche. What is needed—and here Vermeulen is decisively influenced by Hartman's claim that Wordsworth's poetry mediated the trauma of modernity and thereby inoculated Britain against the pastoral idealisations at the heart of Fascism—is an aesthetic framing device that can allow a working through of our constitutive vulnerability, our co-implication, without provoking the violent immune reactions that currently structure our political landscape. For us, this is the impulse behind what Graham Harvey terms the "new animism": to find a way of defusing the pathology of human exceptionalism by re-embedding subjectivity, or better, our co-spiritedness, in the world. Soyinka describes this co-spiritedness as "the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness" (145). Only through an understanding of our irreducible interfusion or co-animacy will we grasp that our feelings of vulnerability are produced precisely by our conceptions of ourselves as bordered.

Tree Spirits

Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* famously begins with Freud's analysis of a scene of haunting from Tasso's *Jerusalem Liberated*. In Tasso's epic of the First Crusade, Tancred accidentally kills his beloved, Clorinda. After the burial, Tancred enters a magical forest and slashes a tree with his sword. As blood streams down the tree, Tancred hears Clorinda's voice cry out. To Tancred's horror, Clorinda's spirit resides in the tree. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud interprets this haunting as a representation of the repetition compulsion. Like trauma victims who

return to their catastrophes through dreams, Tancred returns to the scene of trauma, re-wounding his beloved against his conscious will.

Caruth goes further, interpreting the scene as a parable of the ethics embodied in witnessing trauma. Tancred's trauma arises through his responsibility for Clorinda's death, and through this implication a haunting voice arises to address Tancred. Just as Clorinda's voice—or, more precisely, the voice of the wound (and thus Clorinda's absence)—cries out to Tancred, trauma structurally opens new modes of being addressed by the other. Leys, on the other hand, argues that through their universalizing interpretations, Freud and Caruth mistakenly represent Tancred, the perpetrator, as a victim. For Leys, Clorinda is the “undisputable victim of wounding,” not Tancred, and Caruth's mistake has larger consequences (294). Following Caruth's logic “would turn other perpetrators into victims too,” Leys writes, “for example, it would turn the executioners of the Jews into victims and the ‘cries’ of the Jews into testimony to the trauma suffered by the Nazis” (297). In sum, Leys replaces Caruth's emphasis on implicated subjectivity with a politically charged instantiation of bordered subject positions. Though extreme, Leys' argument is emblematic of what has become the standard critique of psychoanalytic, deconstructive trauma theory—which, as we previously suggested, too readily fuels the identitarian trauma envy undergirding contemporary politics. The (ostensibly) postcolonial critique of trauma theory largely follows Leys' cue in rejecting Caruth's deconstructive approach to the subject of trauma, casting Clorinda, an Ethiopian princess, as “the female voice of black Africa” (Novak 2008: 32, Craps 2013: 15).

In *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg intercedes in this debate, attempting to articulate a middle ground. Like Leys, he is predominantly concerned with the cultural politics of representing trauma, yet he recognizes a category mistake in Leys' interpretation. The diagnostic category of trauma does not translate neatly into the legal/moral categories of victim and perpetrator, he insists (perpetrators often become traumatized, for instance); furthermore, Caruth's conflation of subjectivities demonstrates the messy yet necessary process through which memories of cultural trauma (e.g., colonial expansion and the Holocaust) become entangled in the public sphere. We wish to intervene in this debate by questioning Rothberg's most mundane point: Clorinda cannot be traumatized because she is dead. “The dead are not traumatized,” he writes, “they are dead” (90). What if Leys is misguided in her conflation of trauma and morality, political justice and stably bordered identities, but correct (perhaps

unwittingly so) in her claim that dead people can be traumatized? If trauma studies is not yet postcolonial, it is because its secular, anthropocentric coordinates cannot conceive of trauma as a spiritual, environmental and cosmological rupture, as something that happens—and keeps on happening—not simply to individuals, nor even to a people, but to the broader network of relations by which life itself is animated.

Omeros

Cosmological rupture is at the heart of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). If epic is irrevocably tied to the ideology of empire (Quint 1993), then Walcott's poem is an anti-epic, what Robert Hamner describes, almost oxymoronically, as an "epic of the dispossessed." Like *Moses and Monotheism*, it is a deconstructive story of origins, an anti-foundational story about the foundation of a people. Its aim, like all epics, is homecoming, but a homecoming that is only possible through the dismantling of the fiction of a homeland. While epic poetry traditionally sings a people into being, Walcott wishes to "sing the deep hymn/ of the Caribbean" (321): on the one hand, the Caribbean is a geopolitical space of Relation that binds together all those implicated in the transatlantic slavery and colonialism (Glissant: 1992). On the other, the Caribbean is (also) a posthuman space: at the end of the poem, it is not a people but the sea itself which survives its abyssal history. The last line of the poem thus reconfigures Caruth's exploration of departure and survival: "When he [Achille, Walcott's (anti-) epic hero] left the beach, the sea was still going on." The goal of Walcott's poetry turns out to be the cessation of poetry itself, that "light beyond metaphor" (271) in which the Caribbean would sing itself, the paradox of a wholly "green" poetry in which human sound gives way to the sound of nature: only in this act of creative amnesia can what Walcott calls the "wound of history" find its cure.

In 1974, Derek Walcott was arguing against the same wound culture that is the subject of Brown and Mowitt's contemporary critique: "In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters" (37).

Omeros begins with its own ironic take on the trauma industry: Philoctete, a St. Lucian fisherman ignorant of the wounds of his classical forebear, shows off his scarred shin to tourists in exchange for "some extra silver". The wound was apparently made by a rusty anchor, but we later learn that he believes its refusal to heal is because "its swelling came from the chained

ankles of his grandfather” (19). The poem will go on to retell this history of ancestral wounding and its cure, a story that remains withheld from the tourists of the opening scene: “‘It have some things’—he smiles—‘worth more than a dollar’” (4).

The tale that Philoctete does tell the tourists is instead seemingly more befitting of epic, a story of origins. The poem begins: “‘This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes’”. He narrates how he and his companions became fishermen by felling and hollowing some trees, a story of implication rather than victimage, a story not of slaves but of “murderers” (3). In felling the trees, the men inscribe themselves in the history of Man’s domination of nature. As in Freud’s reading of Tasso’s epic, tree-hacking is a form of repetition compulsion: the poem explicitly parallels the wounding of the trees with the wounding of Philoctete’s shin and thus with the ‘originary’ wound of slavery. This parallel deepens when Achille imagines himself as a “Buffalo Soldier” in the American West—his boat his steed, his oar his rifle—shooting at palm trees he takes to be Indians “until the shore/ was littered with palm spears, bodies: like Aruacs/ falling to the muskets of the Conquistador” (162). Contra Leys, perpetrator and victim cannot be separated: the descendants of slaves are seemingly destined to re-perpetrate both the caesura of the Middle Passage and the colonisation of the entire New World.

The trees themselves understand their own felling as an act of genocide irrevocably entangled with the genocide of the indigenous inhabitants of the islands:

The bearded elders endured the decimation
Of their tribe without uttering a syllable
Of that language they had uttered as one nation. (6)

But the tribe being decimated here is not only the Aruacs whose “patois crackled in the smell/ of a resinous bonfire” but also those African tribes decimated by slavery and their Carribean descendants. The indigenous iguana for which the island was first named provides the only perspective from which this trauma can be witnessed:

Although smoke forgets the earth from which it ascends,
and nettles guard the holes where the laurels were killed,
an iguana hears the axes, clouding each lens

over its lost name, when the hunched island was called
“Iounalao,” “Where the iguana is found.”

But, taking its own time, the iguana will scale

the rigging of vines in a year, its dewlap fanned,
its elbows akimbo, its deliberate tail
moving with the island. The slit pods of its eyes

ripened in a pause that lasted for centuries,
that rose with the Aruacs' smoke till a new race
unknown to the lizard stood measuring the trees.

These were their pillars that fell, leaving a blue space
for a single God where the old gods stood before. (4-5)

The passage collapses Freud's readings of Tasso and the Hebrew Scriptures into one another. The about-to become-fishermen are unaware that the trees were once gods. What they are repeating in felling the trees is not only the severance of the New World from Africa, but the violence of the transition from polytheism to monotheism—which the language of fire and smoke in the passage above casts as a holocaust in its theological definition: a burnt offering. Leaving aside important distinctions between gods and spirits, polytheism and animism (see Vetlesen 2019), the fundamental movement of the passage is from a cosmology in which all matter is potentially spirit to a monotheism in which spirit is abstracted from the earth and sublimated into a sky-God, a "blue space" that signifies only through its absence, through the "hole" it leaves in the forest canopy. If Freud's vision of the origin of monotheism is the undoing of *monos* itself, Walcott's vision of colonization emerges both as a hole left by the discursive formation of (Western) sovereignty and as the repression of this theological undoing: in short, *catachresis at the origin*.

Walcott's poem thus offers a simultaneously dialectical and deconstructive—rather than Manichean—theory of trauma in which the postcolonial subject, entangled within mutually ruptured frames of reference, is forever caught between indigeneity and diaspora, enchantment and disenchantment, victimhood and complicity. Cosmological trauma, for Walcott, thus points towards the impossibility of indigeneity or authentic dwelling in the world. Nevertheless, hope lies in the fact that all cosmologies, as Freud intimates, contain memory traces of the systems

they have displaced. Walcott's pragmatic tree-fellers are irrevocably implicated in Enlightenment's extirpation of animism. But Achille's punning commentary on his labour—"Tree! You can be a canoe! Or else you cannot" (6)—and his subsequent naming of his canoe "In God we Troust" suggests sublimation rather than extirpation, a process of transformation experienced even by the trees themselves: "now the trunks in eagerness to become canoes/ploughed into breakers of bushes.../ feeling not death inside them but use—to roof the sea, to be hulls" (7). Walcott's poem, like Tasso's, thus *gives voice* to cosmological trauma, simultaneously narrating the history of disenchantment and reenchanting the world through the compulsively anthropomorphic drive of poetry itself. This drive, this survival of cosmological trauma, is emblematised in the poem by the swift that crosses the newly rent hole in the canopy, foreshadowing the way in which it, like the poet's own "chirping nib" (321), will cross and recross the Middle Passage, frantically stitching together the multiple times of its wounding.

Beasts of No Nation

Like Philoctete, we will not disclose how, or even if, such cosmological wounds are healed. Instead, we will close by turning to the ending of Uzodinma Iweala's 2005 novella, *Beasts of No Nation* and its resistance to the trauma industry in which it finds itself inscribed. Child-soldiers are the subject *par excellence* of both the "empire of trauma" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) and "humanitarian reason" (Fassin 2011), the victims not only of civil war but also of international psychiatrists and counsellors parachuted in by international NGOs and tasked with the job of rehabilitation without pausing to ask what kind of subject needs rehabilitation and into whose worlds.

"Time is passing. Time is not passing" (65). Agu's disoriented, present tense narration reveals a young boy for whom time has lost all meaning because he has severed himself from his own cosmology. He has become the titular beast of no nation not because he has regressed into animality—a colonial mythology of regression dependent on a vertical understanding of the relation between animal, human and spirit—but because he has transgressed ancient taboos concerning indiscriminate violence. His village traces its origins to the fratricidal death of two magical twins who had the ability to shape-shift. They accidentally kill each other when one turns into a leopard and the other an ox, a scene of fatal misrecognition annually reenacted by the village as an anti-foundational story of origins, a remembrance of the potentially infinite nature

of kinship. The dance of the leopard and the ox marks the passage of adolescent boys into manhood, culminating in the ritualized, and thus sanctioned, hacking to death of an ox and the smearing of its blood on the initiates. Manhood is thus figured as a rite of implication. War has meant not only that Agu is unable to participate in this rite, but that he is forced to participate in indiscriminate acts of violence, doomed to repeat the alienated familial violence of his ancestors. A memory of the initiation rite is triggered just before he hacks down a woman whose potential kinship must be disavowed:

you are not my mother, I am saying to the girl's mother and then I am raising my knife high above my head. I am liking the sound of knife chopping KPWUDA, KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is splashing on my hand and my face and feet. I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark. (63)

Like Philoctete and his fellow “murderers”, Agu has severed himself from his own relationality, his own *cosmos*. However, unlike in *Omeros*, no new light is cast and no new belief system comes to take the place of the old.

The novel ends in a rehabilitation camp. Despite his Christian upbringing, Agu is unable to find meaning in the ministrations of Father Festus: “I am always thinking Confession, Forgiveness and Resurrections, I am not knowing what all these words are meaning” (174). His counsellor's attempts to get him to recount his story are similarly ineffectual, as retelling his story would only re-consign him to the realm of the beast: “If I am telling this to you it will be making you think that I am some sort of beast or devil (177). The only way out of this alienated limbo is not his rehumanisation but rather his *redistribution*, the dispersal of his personhood in nature:

And I am wanting to stay in this same place forever, never moving for anything, just waiting waiting until the dust is piling on me and grasses is covering me and insect is making their home in the space between my teeth. I am telling her [his counsellor] that one Iroko tree will be growing from my body, so wide that its trunk is separating day and night, and so tall that its top is tickling the moon until the man living there is smiling. (176)

What a Western-trained counsellor might understand as suicidal melancholia, as the cessation of what Freud termed “self-regard,” is in fact a creaturely affirmation of life, a powerfully post-sovereign image of his own resacralisation and thus reancestralisation. The Iroko tree is sacred

for the Ibo culture that has only partially been displaced by the Christianity of Agu's childhood. Iroko trees are ancestral shrines. Known as "Ozonde" ("life-wire"), their growth is symbolic of connection itself: to hack down such a tree would be to hack down life itself. Day and night, right and wrong have become confused in and by Agu's experience. To dream of seeding an Iroko tree is to dream of restoring such distinctions, of "[re-]separating night from day", but in such a way as to recover the possibility of connection, the reciprocal, life-affirming pleasures of "tickling".

To return to Tasso by way of conclusion, what postcolonial theory and literature has to offer trauma studies is the insight that it is the violent disavowal of our relatedness that Tancred is doomed to repeat as he returns from the Crusades. He strikes out not 'simply' at Clorinda but at his own irreducible enmeshment in 'her' world, his unwitting kinship with that magical forest of spirits which modernity has never quite been able to extirpate. Coming to terms with this trauma is not a matter of diversifying the identities examined within trauma theory, but of undoing identity itself, a decolonization of human sovereignty that aims to re-enchant the question of where subjectivity ends and the cosmos begins.

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Further Reading

Fanon, F. (1986 [1952]) *Black Skin, White Masks*

The seminal exploration of the traumatic impact of colonialism on the colonized.

Bhabha, H. (1990) *The Location of Culture*.

See in particular the essay entitled “DissemiNation” for an account of the migrant as the traumatic return of colonial history,

Craps, S. (2013) *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*.

See our discussion above. An important step towards the decolonization of trauma theory.

Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

One of many studies concerned with the trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage

Glissant, E. (1997 [1990]) *Poetics of Relation*.

A pivotal theorisation of the trauma of Middle Passage and how this links the Caribbean to other cultures.

Harvey, G.. (2013) *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*.

Brings together many of the anthropologists who have advocated for the renewed importance of animism.

Rothberg, M. (2009) *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*.

A seminal study arguing for the non-competitive interrelation of different cultural traumas.

Spivak, G. (2013) “Imperative to Reimagine the Planet,” in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*.

One of many arguments in favour of planetary thinking. Even while planetary community remains for Spivak a catachrestic experience of the impossible, we should deploy “the responsibility-thinking of precapitalist societies” to disrupt the logic of global capital.