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The Question of “Solidarity” in Postcolonial Trauma Fiction: Beyond the Recognition Principle

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Abstract: Dominant theorizations of cultural trauma often appeal to the twinned notions of “recognition” and “solidarity”, suggesting that by inviting readers to recognize distant suffering, trauma narratives enable forms of cross-cultural solidarity to emerge. This paper explores and critiques that argument with reference to postcolonial literature. It surveys four areas of postcolonial trauma, examining works that narrate traumatic experiences of the colonized, colonizers, perpetrators and proletarians. It explores how novelists locate traumatic affects in the body, and suggests that Frantz Fanon’s model of racial trauma in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* remains essential for the interpretation of postcolonial texts, including those to which it is not usually applied. The analysis further reveals tensions between different texts’ appeals for recognition, and suggests that these tensions problematize the claim that solidarity will emerge from sympathetic engagement with trauma victims. As such, the paper makes three key arguments: first, that trauma offers a productive ground for comparing postcolonial fiction; second, that comparison uncovers problems for theorists attempting to “decolonize” trauma studies; and third, that trauma theory needs to be supplemented with systemic material analyses of particular contexts if it is not to obfuscate what makes postcolonial traumas distinct.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature; trauma studies; Frantz Fanon; settler colonialism; African literature; migrant literature; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; recognition; solidarity

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a significant example of postcolonial trauma fiction, a text that examines the complexities of representing catastrophe in non-metropolitan contexts. Set before and during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970, the novel depicts typified instances of the horrors of that conflict, including mob violence, mass starvation, rape and aerial bombardment—events framed as true and historical, epistemological assertions I have analyzed elsewhere ([1], pp. 121–46). Adichie explores both the psychic need for victims (individual and collective) to have their trauma “recognized” by others, and the affective, ethical, and aesthetic tensions inherent in that demand. Adichie's work is thus an archetypal case of what Roger Luckhurst calls our “contemporary trauma culture” ([2], p. 2)—a set of affective dispositions and publishing norms that promote, and sometimes problematize, aesthetic engagement with the pain of others. As the popularity of Adichie's novel attests, trauma culture is now more global than ever—a development that makes the questions it raises all the more significant. This essay explores some of those issues, focusing on the links this novel and others like it draw between trauma, “recognition”, and the production of new forms of ethico-political “solidarity”.

A representative incident in the novel concerns Adichie's protagonist Olanna, an upper-class Igbo woman who in the build-up to war narrowly avoids being murdered in an anti-Igbo pogrom. Visiting relatives in Hausa-dominated Northern Nigeria, she finds them dead, their killer gloating over their corpses, and she must flee South to safety—a terrifying ordeal during which she fears for her life, and is shocked to encounter a woman carrying fragments of a dead child ([3], pp. 146–49). On reaching safety, Olanna, though physically unharmed, suffers the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, including panic attacks, paralysis, and the compulsion to repeat that for Freud was trauma's defining quality ([4], pp. 12–14). To use Cathy Caruth's description, Olanna's trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event” that caused it, “but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt” her ([5], p. 4). In keeping with this model, Olanna's recovery marks step with her growing ability to produce narrative meaning, as she “works through” her experience ([6], pp. 141–46) and “masters the stimulus retrospectively” ([4], p. 32). Her symptoms recede accordingly, suggesting Adichie's debt to the classical trauma paradigm, and her commitment to a notion of the novel as a means to bear witness to suffering. To this extent, her work (as noted, framed explicitly as “truthful” and based on archival sources ([3], p. 435)) is both a way to recognize the reality of Nigeria's historical traumas and, through the healing that comes from such recognition, a move toward more peaceful modes of political belonging [7].

What makes *Half of a Yellow Sun* challenging is its emphasis on how complex this process can be. Olanna's recovery requires her not only to produce narrative, but also to find listeners able to *recognize* meaning in it. Olanna's first audience of friends and well-wishers fail in this task, framing her experience vis-à-vis the racial and religious divisions of post-independence Nigeria. They file dutifully past her sickbed and “shake their heads and mutter about the evils of those Muslim Hausa people, those black-as-he-goats Northerners, those dirty cattle rearers with jigger-infested feet” ([3], p. 157). This response signifies a lack of attention to the singularity of her experience, and is actively harmful to Olanna, whose “Dark Swoops” are “worse on the days she had visitors” ([3], p. 157). This

may be because her guests' racially-inflected narrative perpetuates the hatreds that led to her victimization, or because they have ignored crucial details—most importantly, that she was saved by her Muslim Hausa ex-boyfriend, whose actions make nonsense of universalizing claims about Northern brutality. Her health improves, by contrast, with the emergence of Biafran nationalism. This movement offers Olanna a new identity as a member of a community founded on the recognition of Igbo victimization, which is re-contextualized as the nation's founding trauma. Olanna takes her first steps as political developments push Biafra irreversibly toward secession, and achieves full mobility to attend a pro-independence rally ([3], pp. 159–63). Healing thus comes when the traumatized victim finds validation through recognition, and a narrative that not only makes sense of her experience, but turns it into the basis for interpersonal solidarity (see [8]). In her joyful assertion of restored subjectivity, Olanna observes students burning effigies of Nigerian President Gowon, and feels “with a sweet surge that they all felt what she felt, [...] as though it were liquid steel instead of blood that flowed through her veins” ([3], p. 163).

Yet if this sequence makes recognition the way to restore victims' wellbeing and create solidarity among them, Adichie reveals her ambivalence when she shifts focus to a broader, trans-national frame. The national and ethnic suffering the novel witnesses is separated from its implied audience(s) temporally—by the gap between the 1960s setting and 2006 publication—and, especially for its presumed Western readership, by geography and culture. Adichie foregrounds the problems of distant witnessing by dramatizing the tension that emerges between corporeal (or proximate) and visual (or distant) affects. Thus on the one hand, she emphasizes the centrality of the body as a site where trauma resides. Her novel is replete with evocations of sensual experience, bodies that exist as sites of putative empathy for readers. As Zoe Norridge argues, this stress on physicality makes immediate the reality of traumatic events, conveying psychological affects that might otherwise remain opaque and inviting readers to *feel*, as though they were there, “painful experiences” ([9], p. 30). At the same time, Adichie stresses the blockages that limit witnesses' capacity and willingness to recognize others' pain, especially when mediated by an aesthetic register or technology of representation. Ugwu, one of the narrators, draws attention to this problem in a poem that rebukes foreign readers for their failure to be moved by images of starving Biafran children: “You needn't imagine. There were photos/Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your *Life*./Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly,/Then turn round to hold your lover or wife?” ([3], p. 375). The novel thus betrays an ironical awareness that the African pain it deals in is easy for foreigners to dismiss, especially when geopolitical or economic imperatives lie in other directions. The final section narrates the frantic attempts of the Biafran government to promote international sympathy for its people, in the hope that moral outrage might be parlayed into military backing—and, most important, diplomatic recognition. In this way, recognition acquires an international political dimension that complicates its affective and metaphysical connotations. We are left with the certainty that while the failure of Western citizens to be moved by Biafran trauma is a failure of the imagination, it is also a product of political realism—and perhaps a well-founded reluctance to intervene in distant civil wars.

Much more could be said about this rich and fascinating novel. Rather than pursue that analysis here, though, what I wish to explore are some of the implications of the conjunction of trauma, recognition, and solidarity it brings to light. As the remainder of this paper shows, postcolonial literature is replete with works that represent traumatic suffering, inviting readers to *recognize*

characters' pain, and—perhaps—to use that recognition as the basis for cross-cultural, transnational, or global solidarity. I survey a wide range of texts from four structurally dissimilar sites of trauma, juxtaposing forms of traumatic subjectivity that manifest the concept's wide application, even in situations not normally considered comparable. There exist, I suggest, literary traumas of the *colonized*, of *colonizers*, of *perpetrators*, and of transnational *proletarians*, among other possibilities. My goal with this comparison is to enact, and thereby demonstrate the complexities of, the cross-contextual integration that I argue trauma discourse (in both literary and theoretical incarnations) posits as its progressive ethical/political corollary. By doing so, I demonstrate that contemporary postcolonial literature betrays an ambivalence about trauma, suggesting that recognition is more complex than it may appear and that, even when it seems unquestionably desirable, it does not necessarily lead to solidarity.

I intend this survey as a contribution to the emerging critical and theoretical scholarship of postcolonial trauma studies. It seems to me that this field is shaped around an implicit hope: that recognizing traumatic pain will facilitate new forms of solidarity; or, to put it differently, that the unexpected comparisons trauma enables will be, themselves, a kind of progressive politics in action. My main interlocutor here is Frantz Fanon, a key figure for recent critical attempts to forge a postcolonial trauma studies free of Eurocentrism (see [10,11]). I suggest that foregrounding “recognition” and “solidarity” as objects of analysis facilitates critical reflection on what we hope to achieve by bringing together trauma and postcolonialism. It is not my argument that the trauma-recognition-solidarity nexus is misguided or ill-conceived *in toto*; on the contrary, this paper is constructed as a wide-ranging survey precisely to demonstrate trauma's *value* as a mobile “ground of comparison” [12]. Nonetheless, I argue that postcolonial texts demonstrate the need for attention to specificity and a willingness to deal in ambivalence, and the final section of this paper builds upon Fanon's insights to suggest that we may need to consider the possibility of thinking cross-traumatic solidarity *without* recognition. Such an approach might offer a different angle of view on the complicated, unsettling tableau of bodies in pain that is, so often, the subject matter of postcolonial literatures.

2. Trauma, Recognition, Solidarity: Critical Contexts for Postcolonial Trauma Studies

Few intellectual fields seem to have as much to offer each other as trauma and postcolonial studies. From its origins in Freud, the language of much trauma theory relies on an imagery of invasion that brings it close to postcolonial studies' concern with empire. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—the most culturally influential of Freud's accounts—relies at crucial moments on the metaphor of foreign occupation, characterizing the relationship between stressor and subject as one of intrusion, disruption, and chaotic defense. Trauma occurs, he argues, when “excitations from the outside [...] break through the protective shield” of the ego, and “provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy”—an attack that must be met, like any invasion, by “every possible defensive measure” ([4], p. 29). Though Freud conceives of traumatic invaders in biological terms, his metaphor also invokes colonialism as a source of mental disorder. While his work has been superseded in clinical contexts, it remains influential for those who, like protagonist of Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole's *Open City*, look to it for “literary truths” ([13], p. 208). Hence, the ubiquity in trauma studies of imperial metaphors, as in this example from Kai Erikson: “Something alien breaks in on you. [...] It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape” ([14],

p. 183). As Caruth points out, what is traumatic in such invasions is not the self's encounter with foreignness per se, as the overwhelming, absorptive quality of that encounter, as the invader takes up residence in the self like a settler who resists assimilation ([5], p. 4). "Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication" ([2], p. 3); the victim's neurotic symptoms are attempts to control the domineering "foreign body" ([15], p. 121). Ogaga Ifowodo has taken the logical step of literalizing this metaphor, arguing that colonialism ought to be understood as an intrinsically traumatizing force, a disruption par excellence in which one is forcibly reconstituted by the demands of an outsider. "[S]lavery and colonialism shattered the world of the colonized", he observes, producing "utter chaos" and a "sense of being unmoored and cast adrift from any frame of reference" ([10], p. 132)—the historical origin, we might infer, of Caruth's "catastrophic age" of trauma ([16], p. 11).

The relationship between the two fields becomes more complex when we move to consider the ethical responses demanded by such invasion(s). Trauma studies often highlights to some degree the role of the sympathetic witness. For psychoanalytically-inflected models, the reader or listener of traumatic narrative takes the role of analyst, who plays a transferential role by offering recognition to victims and entering into an affective relationship with them—helping to "work through" trauma in the process of understanding it ([6], pp. 141–46; [17], pp. 11–12). It is this relationship of recognition that forms a potential basis for solidarity between victims and their witnesses—a possibility first implied by Freud's argument, in *Moses and Monotheism*, that shared trauma lies at the root of Jewish nation-building ([15], pp. 101–17). It appears likewise in Erikson's claim that trauma "can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can" ([14], p. 186), and in Luckhurst's view that trauma has a "demonstrable power [...] in creating communities"—"volatile and temporary" as they may be, and "weak against the merciless logic of military-industrial complexes" ([2], p. 213). Caruth herself makes much of this possibility, presenting trauma as an "encounter" across boundaries of difference, one that connects disparate experiences of pain and forges a "link between cultures" that might otherwise remain separate ([5], pp. 26, 56). As she puts it elsewhere, trauma means "passing out of the isolation imposed by the event," insofar as its affect "can only take place through the listening of another" ([16], p. 11). In the strongest formulation of this view, Judith Butler suggests that witnessing trauma, and thus acknowledging the capacity for pain that all people share, might ground a new humanism, one critical of exclusionary identities that deny the other's suffering [18]. In the words of Nouri Gana, "Vulnerability becomes [...] a potential psychosocial concept for re-envisioning socio-political, communal and human ties [...] along trauma ties" ([19], pp. 83–84). A trajectory thus lies beneath much trauma theory, moving from pain to recognition to solidarity.

This nexus of concepts also suggests why aesthetics have been so important to trauma critics, for it requires them to explain how, exactly, trauma narratives might elicit recognition from, and establish solidarity with, putative readers. A representative response comes from Gana, who argues that the formal qualities associated with literary modernism are essential to generate the "estrangement" from reality that encodes traumatic memory, and which allows "a transformational and generative formation of subjectivity and community" to emerge in the process of reading ([19], p. 87). Greg Forter makes similar claims, avowing that it is insufficient merely to "*represent* traumatizing events—since representation risks [...] betraying the bewildering, imperfectly representational character of traumatic

memory”; rather, he argues, literary works must “transmit *directly* to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption” if they are to elicit recognition of affective disorders ([20], p. 260; original emphasis). Hayden White argues that literary realism mystifies traumatic experience, claiming that only non-linear forms can encode its perplexing affects [21]. Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega similarly argue that by the skillful deployment of modernist “indirection, [...] the art of trauma attempts to re-establish the severed empathetic dialogue with the internal and external Other without which there can be no representation” ([22], p. 4). In this way, and in keeping with the analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun* above, trauma critics avow that aesthetic forms mediate the representation of trauma, and are crucial to eliciting recognition. At the same time they betray an anxiety, like Adichie’s, that pain, like starving Biafran children, may easily be ignored.

When viewed from the perspective of postcolonial studies some of these claims become problematic. Rosanne Kennedy and Jill Bennett point out that the dominant psychoanalytic model of trauma is predicated on an individualized relationship between victim and witness that is both limiting and potentially Eurocentric ([23], p. 3; see also [24]). They argue moreover that privileging literary modernism as the only form adequate to trauma results in criticism that is both “surprisingly prescriptive, and blind to the cultural contexts in which practices of representation and commemoration are produced and enacted” ([23], p. 10). For this reason, the encounter between trauma and postcolonial studies is both essential and potentially fraught. Many postcolonial theorists share Butler’s commitment to critical humanism, and the field derives to a large extent from earlier traditions of cross-cultural, international solidarity in opposition to empire [25]. Like trauma studies, postcolonialism is a comparative sub-discipline, and many of its canonical works (like Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, or *The Empire Writes Back* [26,27]) are predicated on the desire, analogous to Caruth’s, to bring examples of distant suffering into conjunction. The same is true of postcolonial literary works, which, at the risk of a gross generalization, are more often committed to the possibility of “deep seated affinity and community” than to exclusion or isolationism ([25], p. 19). Yet the field is also predicated on its critique of the epistemic violence that occurs when metropolitan formulations (like Freud’s theories) are treated as trans-human universals. This branch of postcolonialism avows the singularity of the other’s experience (see [28]), and stands opposed to the aggression of the demand that the “subaltern speak” in language amenable to *our* recognition [29]. From this perspective, Craps points out that Caruth’s model of cross-traumatic solidarity in *Unclaimed Experience* can be seen less as a successful example of cross-cultural connection than as an act of erasure, in which non-European experience is subordinated to the desires of the European self ([11], p. 18). Others have pointed out that the dissemination of traumatic narrative can in some situations lead not to community-building, but to the hardening of exclusions—as in the case of Israeli settler colonialism, where, as Dirk Moses has shown, the circulation of Holocaust memories produce not a “cosmopolitan effect” but the justification of “pre-emptive” violence against Palestinians, whose own suffering is eclipsed by the Nazi genocide ([30], p. 96). Notwithstanding the problems this postcolonial perspective reveals, Craps himself remains committed to trauma’s potential to enable imaginative boundary-crossing and solidarity, including with those outside the metropolitan centre. He dedicates three chapters of *Postcolonial Witnessing* to “cross-traumatic affiliation” ([11] p. 72), suggesting that a trauma theory purged of Eurocentrism may yet be forged into a “link between cultures” ([5], p. 56), enabling “visions of cross-cultural solidarity and justice” ([11], p. 101) to emerge from the recognition of pain.

To focus this discussion further, I follow Craps and Ifowodo in suggesting that a crucial resource for pursuing these goals lies in the work of Frantz Fanon, whose books are at once a critique of Eurocentric psychiatry and an avowal of anti-imperial humanism. Fanon's work enacts the trajectory outlined above, beginning in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) with an exploration of how colonialism produces a traumatizing distortion of practices of recognition, before moving in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) to a celebration of the de-alienating effects of solidarity in resistance to empire. Fanon's theories manifest both the potentials and pitfalls of postcolonial trauma narratives, and offer a lens through which to read a wide range of textual examples—starting, as he did, with the trauma of the colonized, but also, I show, connecting colonizers, perpetrators, and proletarians as well. What is at stake here is whether the links trauma draws between disparate subject positions amount to anything of substance: whether or not, that is, they form a basis for achieving what Said sees as Fanon's ultimate goal—to go beyond colonial trauma to a form of solidarity that would “bind the European as well as the native together in a new non-adversarial community of awareness and anti-imperialism” ([26], p. 274).

3. The Ambivalence of Recognition: Trauma and the Colonized

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* draws on the phenomenological existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to explain how, exactly, colonialism causes mental disorders in the colonized. Recognition is fundamental to Fanon's analysis, as he argues that colonialism is traumatizing insofar as it entails the interpellation of subjects by a racialized social order predicated on their non-existence. Fanon reconfigures Hegel's account of the Master/Slave dialectic to account for the material realities of empire, observing that what the master of a colonial setting “wants from the slave is not recognition but work”—meaning the imperial dialectic is not one of “reciprocity” but of domination and the negation of the humanity of the colonized ([31], p. 195). In the words of his biographer, David Macey, the white gaze for Fanon “reproduces the primal experience of [Caribbean] history: slavery and a colonization so brutal as to be a form of trauma or even annihilation” ([32], p. 166). Fanon's key chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”, describes the denial of recognition in precisely these terms, as a traumatic intrusion in which “inside and outside” come into conflict ([2], p. 3). The colonized subject “appeal[s] to the Other so that his liberating gaze [...] would put [him] back in the world”, but is instead addressed as a raced object—a “Dirty nigger” whose inferiority is attested to by the “thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” of the dominant order, which he cannot help but consume ([31], pp. 89, 91). “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man”, Fanon observes, meaning that the identity returned to him by the gaze is a kind of non-being, a split subjectivity which is at once *nothing* in itself, and a site upon which the white world attaches its paranoid fantasies ([31], p. 90). This denial of recognition causes the collapse of the “bodily schema”, the internalized imaginary correlate of the physical self, and its replacement by a “historical-racial schema” that is “solely negating”, “an image in the third person” with which the subject can only identify at the expense of self-harm ([31], pp. 90–91). To be colonized is thus to be “overdetermined from the outside” and “fixed” into an identity that is a source of “shame and self-contempt” ([31], pp. 95–96).

Fanon's account, like the models summarized above, makes trauma a product of first literal and then metaphorical invasion. His colonized man is the victim of material domination that produces a

correlating psychic occupation; the colonizer is present to him not only as an external ruler, but as a pathological presence inside his own skin. In Fanon's words, "the black child subjectively adopts the white man's attitude", and "a way of thinking and seeing that is basically white *forms and crystallizes in*" him ([31], p. 126; emphasis added). Ifowodo points out that this model reworks Freud's oedipal scene for the colonial context. Interpellation by the "racial-epidermal schema" is a moment of symbolic castration, one that occurs not (as in Freud) from the prohibition of desire, but from "the self-abnegating effect of racism and political domination" ([10], p. 10). Fanon, thus, avows that "a normal black child [...] will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world" ([31], p. 122). We might observe that insofar as this makes trauma a product of colonial *penetration*, it produces a profoundly gendered theory, one suspicious of both gender and sexual difference and hostile to, for example, black women whose sexual intercourse with white men seems to literalize the traumatic intrusion ([31], pp. 29–35). Indeed, for Fanon non-recognition gives birth to a pathological feminization, as black men are reduced to the order of the "biological" ([31], p. 143) or even "become homosexuals"—a sign, Fanon implies, of the deranged desire for penetration that comes from internalizing the white world's hatred of blackness ([31], p. 158).

Fanon's later work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, shares with *Black Skin, White Masks* its view of colonial trauma as a product of material and psychological non-recognition. He observes that colonialism, "because it is a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, [...] forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: 'Who am I in reality?'" ([33], p. 182). What shifts between the two works is his understanding—in light of the Algerian War of Independence—of how trauma might be resolved and masculinity regained. *Black Skin, White Masks* focuses on the colonized subject's attempts to *compel* recognition from the colonizer. Fanon explores the desire to prove to Europeans the stupidity of their racism, and when this inevitably fails he turns to Negritude as a movement committed to the recognition of black culture as valuable in its own right ([31], pp. 102–11). Yet he remains dissatisfied with this response, noting Sartre's characterization of Negritude as "the weaker upbeat in a dialectical progression," an embrace of the particularizing category of race as but a step on the path to the universalizing humanism of "a society without races" (see [31], pp. 111–13; [34], p. 182). For Fanon the demand of the colonized for recognition in his or her concrete, raced particularity is a necessary but incomplete stage of dis-alienation—one destined to fail because it does not disrupt the Master/Slave binary from which trauma originates. *The Wretched of the Earth* completes the dialectic accordingly, by affirming the necessity that the colonized unite to destroy the colonial order and liberate themselves from the colonizer's gaze altogether. Revolutionary solidarity in war becomes Fanon's cure for imperial trauma: "At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force", he avows. "It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude" ([33], p. 51). Trauma can be overcome, in other words, through the masculinist assertion of self in opposition to the colonizer, resulting in a (gendered) national movement that overthrows the material structures that instantiated trauma in the first place.

Fanon's work thus represents a complex reflection on the nexus between trauma, recognition and solidarity. At our distance from Fanon's revolutionary context, the exclusions of his model are obvious. Not least is its dependence on a homophobic masculinity that would seem to limit its potential for inclusiveness with other groups subject to traumatic non-recognition, especially those

denied existence precisely for their gender or sexual nonconformity. Nonetheless, his account of how non-recognition produces trauma, and his emphasis on the need to disrupt traumatizing structures at the systemic level through collective action, remains powerful. What happens, therefore, when we turn from this theory to examples from postcolonial literature, and read them in dialogue with Fanon's work? What, in other words, is the narrative of the "native" who in Sartre's phrase lives in the "neurosis introduced and maintained by the colonist" ([35], p. liv)?

An excellent if unexpected example can be found, I suggest, in the work of Afghan writer Atiq Rahimi, who explores the psychological effects of occupation and civil war in novels such as *Earth and Ashes* (2000 [2002]) and *A Curse on Dostoevsky* (2013 [2011]). It may seem unusual to turn immediately from Fanon and his Caribbean/European/African context to Central Asia—but Fanon himself declares that imperial trauma "can be found in any race subjected to colonization" ([31], p. 9), and Afghanistan is an example of a society that has been victorious (at least temporarily) in the kind of anti-colonial war that Fanon celebrates. As such, Rahimi would seem a fine place to start.

Earth and Ashes narrates the mental suffering of an elderly farmer travelling cross-country to inform his son that their family has been killed by Russian soldiers [36]. His trauma is depicted formally by a constant slippage between first and second person narration, as though he does not know whether he is himself or an other—an effect that signals his alienation from himself and objectification before the military power that sees in him "no ontological resistance" ([31], p. 90). Rahimi's later novel expands this insight. Set in the early 1990s in the chaotic interregnum between the Soviet defeat and Taliban takeover, *A Curse on Dostoevsky* shows the psychological consequences of an invasion that has turned Kabul into a place where killing is an "insignificant act" ([37], p. 181). The symbolic persistence of the Russian presence is marked by the continuing importance of ideological and political structures generated by the anticolonial jihad. The victorious Islamic militias are eager to purge the remnants of the old regime, making each individual's membership of a rival collectivity—as Afghan patriot or traitor to Islam—a matter of life and death. Reflecting this context, the novel is replete with instances of interpellation, as characters are addressed according to the position vis-à-vis the anticolonial struggle they are recognized to hold. Even an entrant to the *saqi-khana*, or house where marijuana is smoked, must therefore declare whether he is "*dabarish*, bearded," or "*tavarish*, military", before admittance ([37], p. 26).

This situation places the protagonist Rassoul in a precarious, traumatizing position. The subjectivity he wishes to embody is that of "a man, a savior, and a protector" of his girlfriend Sophia ([37], pp. 35–36). But as the son of a communist, Rassoul, who studied in Leningrad during the war and is an admirer of Dostoevsky, is viewed suspiciously by others. His friends gesture toward his alienation from the national community by calling him "Rassoulovsky," and when he fails to pay his rent he is arrested by the leader of an Islamic militia who accuses him of foreign sympathies:

If you were in my shoes, you wouldn't want to hear a single word of Russian, my friend. They burned down our village. I found my family's remains, burnt to ashes! [...] And while we were mourning our dead, the destruction of our villages, the humiliation of our sisters...you, you were having a grand old time in the arms of little blond white girls, soft and lively as fish...isn't that right? ([37], p. 63).

The Islamist's accusation makes victimization by Russian forces the defining attribute of Afghan-Islamic identity. Rassoul's physical presence in the Soviet Union during the war, and his resulting immunity from colonial violence, renders him abject to the national community. There is nothing he can do to challenge his exclusion, for the novel makes clear that his subjectivity is a product of how he *is recognized* by others, rather than of his own agency. Thus when Rassoul tries to distance himself from communism by attributing belief in it solely to his father, he is further excluded—because for the militants, disrespecting one's father means disregarding Islam. In these ways Rassoul is alienated from his community, interpellated by externally-constituted social identities (Russophile, atheist, traitor) that deny him a place in post-occupation Kabul.

This alienation has psychological consequences. As in *Earth and Ashes*, Rahimi signals his protagonist's mental distress by repeatedly switching narrative voice, making much of the novel a dialogue between Rassoul's first-, second- and third-person subjectivities. Even more striking is the degree to which his supposed Russian identity—imposed by his father and Islamic militias—colonizes his selfhood and controls his actions. The defining moment occurs when Rassoul kills an elderly pawnbroker for her money. As he strikes her with an axe, Rassoul realizes that he is re-enacting Raskonnikov's deeds in *Crime and Punishment*. He curses his "naive identification with a fictional character" ([37], p. 16), but finds himself nonetheless compelled to repeat the novel's actions. The futility of his identification is apparent: Rassoul is aware that *Crime and Punishment* "only made sense within the context of [Dostoevsky's] society, [and] his religion", ([37], p. 211) meaning that to recreate it in Afghanistan produces nothing but an "absurd pastiche" ([37], p. 144). This meaninglessness is reinforced by the fact that after the killing Rassoul becomes mute, unable to respond to the interpretations other people impose on his actions.

Rassoul's trauma can thus be read as an instance of what Fanon calls the "non-being" of the colonized subject, who "hail[s] the world, and the world amputate[s] [his] enthusiasm" ([31], p. 94). The novel traces Rassoul's attempts to demand recognition from his interlocutors, and their continual refusal to concede it. This makes it, I argue, an analysis of the traumatic impact of colonization on Afghanistan. Though technically independent at the time of the narrative, Afghanistan's recent history of colonial control—and looming future of theocracy and American re-occupation—makes Rassoul an example of how the colonized subject is negated by his or her non-recognition within frameworks of affiliation structured according to the Master/Slave binary (in this case, Russian-communist-atheist on one hand, Afghan-Muslim-patriot on the other). At one point, Rassoul visits a doctor for help and is told that his problem is psychological, the cure for which is to "relive the situation" that caused it ([37], p. 95). Yet working-through by repetition is impossible, for his attempts to do so meet with confusion and disregard from those to whom they appeal for recognition. When he returns to the scene of the crime, for example, he finds the body has disappeared, and "no one is talking about" his victim's death ([37], p. 181). Similarly, when he tries to confess to Sophia she interprets his written narrative—for he cannot speak—as poetry ([37], p. 143), then denies he could be guilty for he is but "an innocent little ant. A nothing" ([37], p. 145). His final attempt to impose selfhood comes when he turns himself in and demands a trial. This fails when the court cannot find a place for his actions in the canons of sharia law. The judge sums up Rassoul's problem when he declares "I don't give a damn about your story. Tell me which faction you're from!" ([37], p. 193). Rassoul's answer—"None"—"makes

absolutely no sense” in this “war-torn land” ([37], p. 193), and so condemns him to perpetual non-being within the postcolonial Afghan imaginary.

Rassoul is thus forced to ask himself the question that for Fanon is symptomatic of the trauma of colonial non-being: “Who am I in reality?” ([33], p. 182). His trauma is indeed both a literal and symbolic effect of invasion, insofar as it reflects the destructive impact of Russian occupation and anti-colonial war, events that generate a form of psychic colonization in which the Afghan subject becomes a farcical imitation of a character in one of *their* novels. On this basis, we could compare *A Curse on Dostoevsky* to any number of literary works from other postcolonial settings—such as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), which depicts the psychological alienation of native Rhodesians in a white-dominated school system [38], or V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967), which presents Caribbean politics as the acting-out of a “fragmented, inorganic” society in which each person is an “intruder, [...] born for other landscapes” ([39], pp. 206–7). Rahimi’s work foregrounds the physicality of colonial trauma, offering the protagonist’s corporeal pain for readers’ affective engagement. But he makes clear that recognition cannot lead in any straight path to solidarity. After all, it is not only that Rassoul is colonized by an imperial Russian identity, but also that he is excluded from the anti-colonial collective that, with the invader expelled, has now turned on itself. The novel thus asks questions that Fanon, who died before seeing the results of Algerian independence, could not answer: Who, exactly, are we *recognizing* in a protagonist unsure if he is or is not a native—and what collective subjectivity would emerge were it even possible to do so?

4. Aggressive Recognition: Trauma and the Colonizer

As Homi Bhabha suggests in his preface to the recent re-translation of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon’s greatest insights are usually seen to lie in what they reveal about colonial situations in which inequality is raced, and domination is made visible as the divide between black and white ([40], p. xiii). But as I have noted, Fanon saw his work as widely applicable, and Bhabha notes the “universalizing, generalizing tendency” of his theories ([40], p. xvii). Fanon saw race as an *effect* of colonization rather than its cause, avowing that the object of the racist gaze is fixed into his identity “the same way you fix a preparation with a dye” ([31], p. 89). Identity is the product of power; it is *existence* rather than *essence*, meaning “the black man is not. No more than the white man” ([31], p. 206). This understanding of race makes Fanon’s theory potentially applicable to a situation like Afghanistan, where race is a minor factor in a social context violent for quite different reasons. What matters is rather the traumatic effect of material domination, as the colonized is disarticulated by the intrusion of identities produced and disseminated *by the colonizer*, who, as Fanon argues and Rahimi dramatizes, takes up residence within the psyche as a kind of unclean foreign matter. Traumatic alienation is a reflection of inequality, which is why Fanon argues that national liberation—the destruction of the imperial hierarchy and seizure of the material determinants of recognition—is the only way to overcome it.

From this point of view, to suggest that within the structures of that hierarchy the colonizer him- or herself could *also* be a trauma victim seems outrageous, an affront to political realities and a distortion of Fanon’s model. Yet consider the following passage by the Australian historical novelist Kate Grenville. It describes the moment, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when her English

convict protagonist—a white, working-class man—arrives on the shores of New South Wales as an involuntary settler and encounters his first Aborigine:

It seemed at first to be the tears welling, the way the darkness moved in front of him. It took a moment to understand that the stirring was human, as black as the air itself. His skin swallowed the light and made him not quite real, something only imagined ([41], p. 5).

This passage reproduces the imperial racial binary. William Thornhill, the poor white Londoner, is initially unable to categorize the Aboriginal man, who hovers between the status of human and non-human, real and unreal. The encounter poses an ontological and epistemological challenge to Thornhill on a par with the material obstacles he faces: he must make sense of this strange human in the same way that he must learn to understand the “alien stars” and “cold earth” of his new home ([41], p. 4). The passage continues in a way that shows how Thornhill attempts ontological mastery by projecting an objectifying “racial epidermal schema” to make the Aborigine comprehensible:

His eyes were set so deeply into the skull that they were invisible, each in its cave of bone. The rock of his face shaped itself around the big mouth, the imposing nose, the folds of his cheeks. Without surprise, as though he were dreaming, Thornhill saw the scars drawn on the man’s chest, each a neat line raised and twisted, living against the skin ([41], p. 5).

Thornhill’s lack of surprise signals the ease with which the Aboriginal man is subsumed to the settler imaginary. Metaphors like “cave of bone” and “the rock of his face” allow the black body to be grouped together with the landscape as elements of the foreign environment. At the same time, Thornhill’s hyperawareness of the Aborigine’s scarification foregrounds his existence, for the settler, as a being made of *skin*. The passage thus demonstrates how the settler manages his encounter with racial difference by reducing blackness to the status of object, against which his own subjectivity shines forth.

To this extent, Grenville’s narrative accords with Fanon’s model, albeit with the psychological consequences of objectification on the Aboriginal man left undescribed. Where *The Secret River* becomes provocative—and in so doing problematizes the link between recognition and solidarity outlined thus far—is in its suggestion that Thornhill, the settler, is *also* traumatized by the encounter. The passage continues:

He took a step towards Thornhill so that the parched starlight from the sky fell upon his shoulders. He wore his nakedness like a cloak. Upright in his hand, the spear was part of him, an extension of his arm.

Clothed as he was, Thornhill felt skinless as a maggot. The spear was tall and serious. To have evaded death at the end of the rope, only to go like this, his skin punctured and blood spilled beneath these chilly stars! ([41], p. 5).

Despite his success in subsuming the Aboriginal man into a “racial epidermal schema”, Thornhill still perceives in him a physical materiality and power to cause harm that belies Fanon’s claim that “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” ([31], p. 90). On the contrary, it is Thornhill, in this moment, who finds himself reduced to corporeality. He becomes “skinless as a maggot” before the black man’s spear—a phallus that threatens to penetrate his body and put “inside

and outside into a strange communication” ([2], p. 3) in a way that recapitulates Fanon’s gendered anxieties. As a convict, Thornhill is in Australia only because he has narrowly avoided execution in England. His encounter with the black man—above all, Grenville’s imagery makes clear, with his terrifying *blackness*—reinforces his awareness of vulnerability. His body, already subject to manipulation and confinement, is again rendered incomplete—“skinless”—by an external force that reveals his inability to maintain subjective boundaries.

The settler’s trauma emerges here not only from the abuses of imperial power, but also from the psychic shock of encounter with Australia’s Indigenous population. It is worth noting that the scene has a real-life counterpart. Grenville is building upon her own experience in early-2000s Sydney, in which she made eye contact with an unknown Aboriginal woman and felt “a sudden blade of cold” go through her ([42], p. 12). Unlike the settler’s literal vulnerability, Grenville’s imaginary penetration comes from her recognition that the Aboriginal woman has a more authentic claim to possession of Australia than she—that in comparison to the woman’s “sixty thousand years” of history ([42], p. 12), Grenville is “foreign” to her land of birth ([42], p. 194). Thornhill’s panicked recognition of his exposure to penetration is a similar moment of castration anxiety, as he discovers his physical and psychic incompleteness when compared to the confident black man, as at home in his own skin as he is on his own soil. This power of blackness to alienate recurs throughout the novel. When Thornhill occupies farmland beyond the frontier, he is forced to acknowledge that his ignorance of the Australian environment undermines his ability to provide for his family, and hence undercuts his masculinity, especially compared to the Aborigines who hunt and eat without effort. Thornhill tries to establish possession of the land by “drawing a line” ([41], p. 235) around his space, but he can never maintain this boundary, as the Aborigines persistently—and eventually violently—breach his flimsy defenses.

Within the symbolic economy of the novel Aborigines are metaphorically indistinguishable from land—a pattern that makes it ambiguous whether the settler is traumatized by the threat of real anticolonial violence, or by his own lack of control in the foreign environment: “Their bodies flickered among the trees, as if the darkness of the men were an extension of bark, of leaf-shade, of the play of light on a water-stained rock. The eye could peer but not know if it was a couple of branches over there, or a man with a spear, watching” ([41], p. 198). By employing such metaphors, Grenville is mobilizing a colonial convention that conceives of the male settler as traumatized by settlement itself. As Ann Curthoys describes,

In the [Australian] pioneer legend, the obstacles the settler-hero must fight are mainly the land itself. [...] While the unknown interiors of colonised places exercised explorers and colonisers everywhere, as in the notion of “darkest Africa”, the Australian conception was marked by a sense that it was less the unknown Indigenous people than the waterless interior of the country itself that could induce disorientation, madness, suicide, death ([43], pp. 153–55).

This notion is central to the Australian settler imaginary, which is replete with such declarations as “no human being can ever know heart’s ease in a foreign land” ([44], p. 144), and the novelist Patrick White’s famous suggestion that “true knowledge” of the continent “comes only of death by torture in the country of the mind” ([45], p. 446). Indeed, White’s archetypical colonist Voss, the psychic vehicle of this claim, ends his attempt to cross Australia in pieces—beheaded by the Aborigines who block his

dis-alienation from the country ([45], p. 394), and thus foreclose on the possibility of a unified colonizing subjectivity.

White Australian fiction thus presents settlers as at least as anxious about their bodies “in a spatial and temporal world” ([31], p. 91) as Fanon’s colonized “Negroes”—but for different, indeed contradictory, reasons. In fact, Fanon himself seems to have considered this possibility, noting in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “the body of the black man hinders the closure of the white man’s postural schema at the very moment when the black man emerges into the white man’s phenomenal world” ([31], p. 138). As we would expect from his anti-colonial focus, however, he does not build on this insight. We can nonetheless look to settler colonial literature for evidence in support of this view. Depictions of the settler’s disunity and castration anxiety can be found in numerous colonial contexts, from Naipaul’s dismay at the “artificial and fragmented” people of Argentina, “made deficient and bogus by [their] myths” of purity ([46], p. 361), to Stephen Turner’s characterization of New Zealand settler culture as defined by “corrosive doubt” about its own legitimacy ([47]; see also [48]). What these discussions reveal is that insofar as the settler is rendered incomplete by the prior and superior presence of the Indigene, so the Indigene becomes psychically indispensable to the settler as the only subject who can grant the right to *be* in the colony (see [1], pp. 58–68). Hence, as Naipaul observes, the paradox of Argentines inventing a “mystical, purifying claim” to identity with the Indians their ancestors destroyed ([46], p. 354), or of Thornhill, at the end of Grenville’s narrative, searching for a sign that the Aborigines he himself killed might yet live to grant absolution ([41], pp. 332–34). Fanon’s colonized person is negated by the racist gaze; the colonizer, these settler narratives suggest, is likewise fragmented before those he colonized, to whom he must now address the humiliating plea: *make me whole!*

Is solidarity to be found in this asymmetric traumatic binary? Each side seeks recognition from the other, yet as the elision of native and landscape in the examples above suggests, the acknowledgement the colonizer demands in no way entails recognition of the humanity of the colonized. What is wanted is symbolic acquiescence; nothing—and certainly no restoration of conquered lands—is offered in return. Indeed, it is precisely to colonize *better*, to occupy place *more completely*, that the colonizer requires recognition from the native. From the other side of the binary, what the colonized needs—according to the Fanon—is not really the colonizer’s recognition but the end of his domination: “To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist’s sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory” ([33], p. 6). Fanon accepts that settlers can make a place for themselves within the decolonized community ([33], p. 95)—but only to the extent that they abandon their superiority, and the demand for recognition it entails. For colonists, in other words, solidarity with the native does not mean their trauma is resolved via recognition, but rather it entails the very negation of their subjectivity itself.

5. The Limits of Recognition: Trauma and the Perpetrator

The idea that a colonizer might also be seen as a trauma victim—despite the massive privileges this subject position entails—provokes the kind of discomfort we normally associate with the most troubling figure of trauma discourse: the perpetrator. I suggest that if settler colonialism presents difficulties for the idea of cross-traumatic solidarity by exhibiting an aggressive, negating demand for

recognition, the trauma of the perpetrator marks the limits of the recognition ethos. Fanon himself accepts that colonial soldiers could be traumatized by their own actions, and in the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* provides examples of French torturers haunted by their victims' screams. Yet it is not clear how recognition of such suffering makes for a meaningful response. Notwithstanding Craps' assertion that "calling someone a trauma survivor or trauma victim does not in and of itself confer any moral capital on that person" ([11], p. 15), the overwhelming tendency of trauma narratives—those discussed above and below—is to demand recognition for suffering. Examples of perpetrator-trauma literature, however, show that such figures problematize recognition, forcing us to ask what "cross-cultural solidarity" ([11], p. 2) could mean in this case.

Postcolonial literature is replete with traumatic narratives predicated on recognition for the suffering of perpetrators. Perhaps the most iconic examples come from child-soldier novels. These texts foreground the ambivalence of their readers' response to the perpetrator by making questions of affective engagement central to their narratives. In Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000)/*Allah is Not Obligated* (2006), for example, the narrator Birahima draws obsessive attention to the linguistic and affective dimensions of his story, stressing how difficult it is to create an idiom adequate to the contradictions of his colonial-perpetrator identity, while nonetheless demanding from readers their recognition of his self:

Suis p'tit nègre. Pas parce que suis black et gosse. Non! Mais suis p'tit nègre parce que je parle mal le français. C'é comme ça. Même si on est grande, même vieux, même arabe, chinois, blanc, russe, même américain; si on parle mal le français, on dit on parle p'tit nègre, on est p'tit nègre quand même ([49], p. 9).

I'm a little nigger. Not 'cos I'm black and I'm a kid. I'm a little nigger because I can't talk French for shit. That's how things are. You might be a grown-up, or old, you might be an Arab, or Chinese, or white, or Russian—or even American—if you talk bad French, it's called *parler petit nègre*—little nigger talking—so that makes you a little nigger too ([50], p. 1).

Birahima's story (in its English edition further mediated by translator Frank Wynne) blends Ivoirian French with Malinké vocabulary—"Black Nigger African talk" ([50], p. 2) used, unlike the Negritude considered as a path to authenticity by Fanon ([31], pp. 102–11), primarily to curse. This mix invokes both linguistic virtuosity and cultural distance to question the implied audience's urge to sympathize with the narrator, even as it implies—ironically—that bad French might be a source of cross-cultural solidarity: a shared identity in which everyone, whether "arabe, chinois, blanc, russe, même américain", is un "p'tit nègre".

The ambivalence of this call for recognition is reinforced by the difficult ethical position into which Birahima inserts his readers, making them at once witnesses to his crimes and complicit with his jokes:

Suis pas chic et mignon parce que suis poursuivi par les gnamas de plusieurs personnes. (Gnama est un gros mot nègre noir africain indigène qu'il faut expliquer aux Français blancs. Il signifie, d'après Inventaire des particularités lexicales du français en Afrique noire [one of the four dictionaries Birahima regularly consults], l'ombre qui reste après le décès d'un individu. L'ombre qui devient une force immanente mauvaise qui suit l'auteur de celui qui a tué une personne innocente.) Et moi j'ai tué beaucoup d'innocents au Liberia

et en Sierra Leone où j'ai fait la guerre tribale, où j'ai été enfant-soldat, où je me suis bien drogué aux drogues dures. Je suis poursuivi par les gnamas, donc tout se gâte chez moi et avec moi. Gnamokodé (bâtardise)! ([49], p. 12).

I'm not some cute kid on account of how I'm hunted by the *gnamas* of lots of people. (*Gnamas* is a complicated Black Nigger African Native word that I need to explain so French people can understand. According to the *Glossary*, a *gnama* is the shadow of a person that remains after death. The shadow becomes an immanent malevolent force which stalks anyone who has killed an innocent victim.) And I killed lots of innocent victims over in Liberia and Sierra Leone where I was a child doing tribal warfare, and where I got fucked-up on lots of hard drugs. The *gnamas* of the innocent people I killed are stalking me, so my whole life and everything around me is fucked. *Gnamokodé*! ([50], p. 4).

Birahima's confession of perpetrator status is rendered ambivalent by his self-positioning as the persecuted victim of spirits. Even as he denies his appropriateness as an object of sympathy ("I'm not some cute kid"), his naivety of phrasing turns killing into something like a game ("j'ai fait la guerre tribale"/"I was a child doing tribal warfare"). At the same time, he demonstrates his comedic control over language by punning on *gnama* (spirit)/*gnamokodé* (bastard)—or, in the French, constructing sentences in which serious content is undercut by playful form, as in the alliterative "je me suis bien drogué aux drogues dures". All the while, he is parodying the language of Western descriptions of Africa ("immanent malevolent force") and poking fun at how much he has to explain "aux Français blancs" who think they know everything. This "cheeky foul-mouthed attitude" ([50], pp. 4–5) makes his story immense fun to read, as scenes of horror are punctured by multilingual profanity and an ironic disregard of the sensitivities of his audience. Kourouma's humor calls into question the ethics of his Western readers' consumption of war stories, especially those told by self-proclaimed killers. Birahima invites our complicity, and asks us to ignore the fact that his victims, unlike him, can tell no more jokes. The novel thereby unsettles our presumption of solidarity, problematizing the ethical ambiguity of the traumatized perpetrator even as it constantly reminds us that we are listening to a child—one whose moral culpability is an open question.

A similar set of anxieties can be seen in the motif of silence, central, as for Rahimi's *A Curse on Dostoevsky*, to Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2006). Abani's child-soldier protagonist, My Luck, begins with the declaration that "what you hear is not my voice" ([51], p. 1). Like Rassoul, and in contrast to Birahima, he has been rendered mute by his wartime experience. He must therefore struggle to make himself understood to his implied audience, which, he makes clear, is separated from him by linguistic and cultural barriers:

Of course if you are hearing this any of this at all it's because you have gained access to my head. You would also know then that my inner-speech is not in English, because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo ([51], p. 3).

The novel is structured around this tension between words and understanding, with each chapter headed by a title drawn from the sign language My Luck composes to grasp the "atavistic" experience of war. This corporeal language strives to communicate affect directly, transforming abstractions into

embodied signs. Hence “fear is an open hand beating over the heart” ([51], p. 143), and “lonely is a cold, itchy back” ([51], p. 61). The most striking example of embodiment lies in My Luck’s mechanism for remembering his losses. He cuts a series of crosses into his arms, producing a “mnemonic device” or “graveyard” that, “like Braille on my arm” ([51], pp. 7–8), records deaths—left arm for loved ones, right “for each person that I enjoyed killing” ([51], p. 21). My Luck’s body thus becomes the medium through which we gain access to the “unrecognizable yet familiar objects” of traumatic memory ([51], p. 21). It also foregrounds the unreliability of that memory, for as the novel develops we learn that My Luck is not the embodied subject he claims to be, but a spirit wandering in search of its corpse.

My Luck’s alienation points to one of the sources of deepest ambivalence in perpetrator-trauma narrative. As his muteness and scarification suggest, My Luck’s trauma resides in his (imagined) flesh, as both a wound and secondary skin that distances him from full possession of his memories. The most disturbing part of that experience is thus inaccessible to him, except insofar as it is encoded as a set of corporal signs that he, as the medium of transmission itself, cannot access:

What does it mean to hide in a ceiling, in that narrow hot crawl space crouched like an animal smelling my own scent, full of it and grateful for it, while my mother stays below, [...] waiting to deflect the anger of people intent on murder, my murder, [...] and I watch what happens below and I am grateful that I can smell my smell, smell my smell and live while below me it happens [...] ([51], p. 25).

The event witnessed by this passage is the murder of My Luck’s mother, a trauma to which his narrative recurs but never describes. Visual representation of what he *saw* is always blocked by a switch in attention to bodily sensation, whether of smell as described here or, in a later passage, the extreme heat of a “hiding place” that was like “an oven” ([51], p. 73). In this way, My Luck’s body functions less as a vehicle for traumatic communication than as an *obstacle* or *limit* to understanding, both for his implied audience and himself.

The subjective dissociation created by this blockage is most troubling in a scene in which My Luck recalls committing rape:

John Wayne [My Luck’s commanding officer] pulled her out and threw her on the bed. Ripping her clothes off, he ordered me to rape her. I hesitated [...].

“Rape or die”, he said, and I knew he meant it. As I dropped my pants and climbed onto the woman, I wondered how it was that I had an erection. Some part of me was enjoying it and that perhaps hurt me the most ([51], p. 65).

My Luck’s version of events shields him from subjective participation in his crime. Two independent agents intervene between the narrating “I” and the act committed: John Wayne, who orders it, and his own body, the alienated “some part of me” that participates without apparent consent. The involuntary nature of this rape transforms it from a crime against the woman to a trauma of My Luck himself. “I moved, and as much as I wanted to pretend, I couldn’t lie, I enjoyed it” he admits ([51], p. 65). The scene makes his body guilty of raping not only the woman, but, in a sense, My Luck himself—both are forced into non-consensual sex.

In this way *Song for Night* presents trauma as the subjective disarticulation of the perpetrator. To use Fanon's description, My Luck becomes an object, his body "returned to [him] spread-eagled, disjoined, redone", no longer part of his self ([31], p. 93). This overlap suggests a comparison between the object of racism and the perpetrator of traumatizing crimes—yet to make this comparison seems almost obscene, insofar as it elides the vast ethical and political differences between these subject positions. There is something unsettling about My Luck's dissociation. Like Rassoul, who claims that it was not he, but the spirit of Raskolnikov, who murdered, My Luck's alienation seems to exonerate him from responsibility for his actions. My Luck presents the rape as traumatic *for him* rather than for his victim—whom he even imagines comforting him as "a boy lost" and undeserving of his fate ([51], p. 65). Both Abani and Kourouma (and other child-solider novelists like Uzodinma Iweala [52] and Ken Saro-Wiwa [53] present their perpetrator narrators as objects of readers' sympathy. But in doing so they bring those readers' ethical responses into question, asking what exactly they are *recognizing* in a subject whose identity is predicated on the traumatic non-recognition of their own actions. With which entity—the narrating "I" or the perpetrating "it"—are we supposed to forge "cross-cultural solidarity" here ([11], p. 2)? Fanon offers no answers to this question.

A sign of the potential irreconcilability between perpetrator and victim traumas can be found in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004), a novel concerned with the traumatic impact of political violence in Haiti. A limit example of solidarity can be discerned in the narrative's central relationship, in which the eponymous "dew breaker" or torturer is married to the sister of one of his victims. Each is scarred by his or her experiences (he literally, she emotionally), yet their relationship survives on the pretense that neither knows the other's true identity:

He endorsed the public story, the one that the preacher had killed himself. And she accepted that he had only arrested him and turned him over to someone else. Neither believing the other nor themselves. But never delving too far back in time, beyond the night they met. She never saw any of the articles that were eventually written about her brother's death. She was too busy concentrating on and revising who she was now, or who she wanted to become ([54], p. 241).

Danticat reveals how perpetrators and victims are entangled by trauma, but offers no resolution, no prospect that the other might return lost pieces of the self, and no confidence that narrating pain is a necessarily progressive act. Danticat's characters are linked by their refusal to recognize the basis of their connection. In their silence they bear witness to a trauma for which recognition is not a cure, but a limit beyond which survival would be impossible.

6. Beyond Recognition: Trauma and the Proletarian

The examples enumerated to this point show that trauma is a mobile concept, one present in various branches of postcolonial literature. I have suggested that comparison reveals significant tensions between modes of traumatic experience, some forms of which exist along axes of contradiction that make the notion of solidarity via recognition problematic. We seem to have reached a point beyond which Fanon cannot take us. There are, however, other ways to conceive of solidarity than through recognition, and in this final section I want to explore one last subject of postcolonial trauma. I suggest

that the transnational proletarian or third-world migrant offers a different way to think of trauma, one that goes beyond recognition to an alternative, more critical model of cross-traumatic solidarity—a place from which Fanon’s anti-imperial collective comes into view.

The precarious status of migrant workers under neo-liberal globalization has been highlighted recently by the scandal surrounding Qatar’s 2022 soccer World Cup bid. According to contested media reports [55–57], as many as one Nepali migrant worker has been killed every two days on Cup-related building sites. This toll likely underrepresents the true scale of the disaster, as it does not include workers from India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and elsewhere—to name just a few of the countries worldwide that are dependent on remittances from migrant labor. As possessors of nothing but labor power, migrant workers are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, and benefit from few civil or political protections. This has led some reports to describe their experience in Qatar as “forced labor” or even “slavery”, as they are forbidden from leaving the country without their employer’s consent [56]. This case is symptomatic of material conditions in emergent metropolitan zones in the Gulf and South East Asia, and similar circumstances pertain for many workers in China, Europe, and the Americas. It is rare to think of such subjects as the victims of trauma, but literary texts that explore such experiences frequently draw on exactly that model to conceptualize them.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2012 novel *Americanah*, for instance, focuses on two characters who temporarily occupy the migrant proletarian identity—and, in so doing, present a way to think of traumatic solidarity that goes beyond the more “classical” narrative of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Ifemelu and Obinze are not refugees; they migrate in the hope that the United States and United Kingdom, respectively, might offer better opportunities than their native Nigeria. Their status means neither fits the criteria of suffering that metropolitan residents require to extend recognition, making their position on arrival even more precarious:

[The liberal-minded whites Obinze meets in London] all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look toward somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty ([58], p. 276).

Despite their relative privilege compared to ‘genuine’ refugees, both characters experience trauma from the systemic non-recognition of racism, and from their subjection to state institutions designed to harass migrants. For Obinze, life in England is lived “invisibly, his existence like an erased pencil sketch” conditioned by constant alertness to the danger posed by “anyone in a uniform, anyone with the faintest scent of authority” ([58], p. 257). When he is eventually caught and deported he feels “raw, skinned, the outer layers of himself stripped off”—“ashamed” ([58], p. 281) by his reduction to the confined body of the illegal immigrant, just as Fanon feels “shame and self-contempt” for his raced self ([31], p. 96).

Ifemelu, as a woman as well as a migrant, is even more vulnerable (her experience pointing again to the gendered limitations of Fanon’s account). Excluded from legal employment by the terms of her

student visa, and yet unable to survive without income, she has no choice but to attempt sex work. Adichie presents this experience as a trauma that alienates Ifemelu from her own body, but not because (as Fanon suggests) sex with a white man marks her internalization of racism, but because it signals her reduction to proletarian objecthood:

She sat naked on her bed and looked at her life, in this tiny room with the mouldy carpet, the hundred-dollar bill on the table, her body rising with loathing. She should never have gone there. She should have walked away. She wanted to shower, to scrub herself, but should could not bear the touch of her own body, and so she put on her nightdress, gingerly, to touch as little of herself as possible ([58], p. 154).

As in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the body works here as a vector for both Obinze's and Ifemelu's (different but comparable) traumatic experiences. Yet in *Americanah* the body functions not just as a site of sympathetic recognition but also as the point at which capital impinges on the migrant subject, transforming him or her into a unit of labor. For this reason, Adichie makes clear that *mere* recognition is not enough. She dismisses the white consumption of African trauma as "self-indulgence," and attacks the uncritical belief that pity will "smooth all the scalloped surfaces of the world" ([58], p. 163). Recognizing the situation of figures like Obinze and Ifemelu is nothing but a first step: *feeling* their pain does nothing unless supplemented by a critique of the forces that cause it.

Adichie's shift from her position in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is further signaled by her account of how *Americanah*'s traumas resolve. Where Olanna works through her pain via narration and subjective recognition, Ifemelu and Obinze recover when they move out of the traumatizing proletarian subjectivity and into social positions that afford them agency and material comfort—as a successful blogger in one case, and businessman in the other. Recognition is not a significant factor. In both instances the move occurs through the intervention of outside forces, as luck and unexpected help combine to lift them out of poverty and vulnerability. Indeed, Adichie openly signals the role of fantasy and wish-fulfillment at this point in her narrative, describing the relationship between Ifemelu and Obinze—their triumphant embodiment as satisfied lovers—as a time of "heady days full of cliché" ([58], p. 449). I read this departure from realism not as an aesthetic failing, but as a mark of self-awareness, as Adichie notes that while she has rescued her characters from their fate, the structures that led to their trauma remain in place—and in a more naturalistic narrative, would trap them permanently in a cycle of oppression. Ifemelu and Obinze have been plucked free by the author who plays *deus ex machina*, but we cannot doubt that others will quickly filled their places. Trauma, the novel thus implies, persists as a structural effect of the social order, brutalizing victims with disregard for who they happen to be.

I suggest that Adichie's shift in focus in this novel points to a way to approach trauma that might avoid many of the tensions described in the previous sections. A *critical politics of trauma-inducing structures* would not be derailed by the fact that trauma victims may occupy subject positions (like the colonizer) for which recognition reasserts inequality, or who (like the perpetrator) may not be worthy of sympathetic esteem. This would allow us to read critically a novel like Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), whose protagonist is marginalized by his inability to find dignified work in New York City, and who, after looting a shrine in his home village, sells the deity to an American trader. This act of sacrilege leads to Ike's psychic breakdown, but rather than simply a trauma, Ndibe's moral schema

presents his suffering as *both* divine justice *and* an implied critique of the capitalism that reduces sacred objects to commodities, destroys indigenous life-worlds, and exploits workers to whom it offer no hope of social inclusion [59]. In other words, the novel invites readers to respond not merely by recognizing its protagonist's pain (some of which is deserved), but by coming to an enhanced political awareness of the need to change the institutional structures that create it, and that by rendering migrant proletarians abject make their self-destructive acts seem reasonable.

A similar dynamic emerges from Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009), which offers a corresponding critique of British capitalism [60]. As Madhu Krishnan describes, Chikwava resists his readers' desire for affective identification by focusing on a "fundamentally unreliable" first-person narrator ([61], p. 45). As an out-of-favor member of Robert Mugabe's youth militia, the narrator is in London trying to raise funds for the bribes he needs to return home safely; he is at once a victim and facilitator of violence. Nonetheless, his psychic breakdown under the pressures of migrant proletarian existence works effectively as a critique of "the schema of global iniquity" that ensures his "dislocation and dissociation" ([61], pp. 48–49), without obscuring his role as a contributor to political violence in Zimbabwe. Chikwava's novel, like Ndibe's, highlights the fact that no individual can fully inhabit the identity of perfect trauma victim. All, like Adichie's Obinze, "raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction" ([58], p. 276), will be more or less compromised. Yet once we abandon the presumption that *recognition* is a sufficient response to pain, we can see that there is a different way to approach trauma: one predicated less on solidarity *with* the traumatized (who may or may not be an ally for progressive ends) than on solidarity *against* injustice, and *for* a more equal world in which traumatizing structures are destroyed. The affective shift takes us from sympathy to anger—an anger that, as David Macey argues, is necessary to do justice to Fanon's radical humanism ([32], p. xv).

7. Conclusions

This survey thus demonstrates that trauma is one of the most widespread and provocative terms in contemporary postcolonial literature. It can be discerned in a huge variety of material and cultural circumstances, many of which differ sharply from the European context of Freud's original theories and from the raced circumstances of Fanon's postcolonial revision. As these differences reveal, not all traumas are equal, and while the term provides a basis for comparison across national, religious, racial and linguistic boundaries, it cannot reduce the specificity of these experiences to a unitary model. The idea that some form of ethical or political solidarity might emerge from the recognition that others bear vulnerable bodies is admirable; as I have argued, however, the ambivalence of recognition for many postcolonial traumas makes this goal problematic. Trauma theory will only be effective for postcolonial analysis if it is supplemented by a critical materialism that pays attention to the specificities of setting, and which is attuned to the power hierarchies that differentiate experiences and make what is progressive in one context regressive in another. The colonized and colonizer, like the perpetrator and proletarian, may indeed all be victims of trauma—but they are not for that reason alone commensurable. Only when that fact is recognized can a genuine critical solidarity commence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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