

# FROM REVENGE TO JUSTICE: PERPETRATOR TRAUMA IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *THE ROUND HOUSE*<sup>1</sup>

LAURA ROLDÁN SEVILLANO  
*Universidad de Zaragoza*  
l.roldansevillano@gmail.com

Received 21st September 2016

Accepted 20th November 2016

## **KEYWORDS**

Native American literature; Louise Erdrich; *The Round House*; perpetrator trauma; postcolonial trauma

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Literatura nativo-americana; Louise Erdrich, *The Round House*, trauma del perpetrador, trauma postcolonial

## **ABSTRACT**

Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012) is not only an original detective novel but a moving postcolonial narrative which denounces the individual and collective trauma that sexism, gender violence and racism cause to Native American communities in the USA. The novel's interest also lies in how Erdrich problematizes the stereotypes traditionally attached to Indians as well as the victim/victimizer dichotomy by including a protagonist who is simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator traumatized by his own acts. The purpose of this paper is precisely to explore the figure of the protagonist from the perspective of perpetrator trauma—a neglected approach by critics—through a non-Eurocentric viewpoint in line with the current tendency of the decolonization of trauma studies. By so doing, I will demonstrate that under the novel's numerous layers lies Erdrich's core denunciation: the complex and unfair long-process situation of (neo)colonialism that Native Americans still endure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **RESUMEN**

*The Round House*, escrita por Louise Erdrich, no es solo una original novela detectivesca sino una conmovedora narrativa postcolonial que denuncia el trauma individual y colectivo que el sexismo, la violencia

---

<sup>1</sup> The research carried out for the writing of this article is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (METI) in collaboration with the European Regional Development Fund (DGI/ERDF) (code FFI2015-65775-P), and the Government of Aragón (code H05).

de género y el racismo causan en las comunidades nativo-americanas en los EE.UU. El interés de la novela también yace en cómo Erdrich problematiza los estereotipos tradicionalmente asociados a los indios así como el binomio víctima/victimizador al incluir a un protagonista que es al mismo tiempo una víctima y un perpetrador traumatizado por sus propios actos. La finalidad de este artículo es precisamente explorar la figura del protagonista desde la perspectiva del trauma del perpetrador—una aproximación ignorada por los críticos—mediante un punto de vista no eurocéntrico en línea con la actual tendencia de la descolonización de los estudios del trauma. Con ello, demostraré que debajo de las numerosas capas de la novela se esconde la principal denuncia de Erdrich: la compleja e injusta situación de (neo)colonialismo a la que los nativos-americanos todavía se enfrentan en el siglo XXI.

### **NEW TRENDS IN TRAUMA THEORY**

Trauma theory, which emerged as an area of cultural investigation in the early 1990s, has become established due to its huge impact on literary theory. Nonetheless, many are the theorists and critics who have pointed out its limitations and contradictions. For instance, in the last few years there have been two points of departure from canonical trauma theory. On the one hand, postcolonial trauma theory has arisen as a new theoretical framework through which colonial traumas can be more accurately tackled and, on the other hand, attention has started to be paid to an element of trauma neglected by critics until recent years: perpetrator trauma. These revisions have supposed the recovery of marginalised voices and the consideration of socio-cultural components absent in the analyses by traditional trauma critics, evidencing the new direction trauma studies are heading towards nowadays.

In relation to the former, in 2008 Michael Rothberg suggested postcolonial theory needed a redirection towards the decolonization of trauma and the achievement of a more global and responsible paradigm. According to him, trauma theory, as conceptualized by Cathy Caruth and other scholars such as Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, is “tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework” which distorts histories and “threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism” behind those histories (227). Part of trauma theory’s Eurocentrism lies in the fact that this model of trauma is based on a single historical event and does not take into account

“the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism” which are not relegated to the past, but rather, still persist into the present (Visser 252). Scholars such as Stef Craps, Irene Visser or Silvia Martínez-Falquina have remarked the importance of a continuing postcolonial criticism of historical and political processes as the origin of trauma for postcolonial communities. As a result, postcolonial scholars have recently moved away from Freudian psychoanalysis and deconstruction, approaches that characterised the foundation of classical trauma theory and have started to embrace less prescriptive theories from other fields, including sociology and anthropology. All these changes have led to a redirection towards decolonization which has meant an advance in Postcolonial Trauma Studies because it has rethought trauma as “collective,<sup>2</sup> spatial and material” rather than “individual, temporal and linguistic” as traditional trauma theory has maintained for years (Rothberg 228).

Regarding the second point of departure from canonical trauma studies, it has been remarked that, although Caruth and her followers defined and studied trauma bearing in mind the symptoms and experience of the victims, they paid little attention to the other side of the binary, that is, perpetrators. As Bernhard Giesen puts it, “every subject needs the recognition of others for its own self-consciousness, and it is exactly this recognition that is denied to the perpetrators” (114). The reason for the scarcity of scholarly study on perpetrators is due, according to Jenni Adams, to scholars and authors’ “doubts concerning the risk of obscuring or de-emphasising victim perspectives and experience,” their refusal to “legitimise or exonerate perpetrator viewpoints” as well as their “concern that an attention to the figure of the perpetrator might manifest more sinister fascinations than that of clean-eyed critical enquiry” (2). Moreover, writers run the risk of being disrespectful to the victims as their works may lead readers to empathize, or even identify<sup>3</sup> with the perpetrators represented in their works, and so, to exculpate them.

---

<sup>2</sup> Kai Erikson has defined collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (187).

<sup>3</sup> Dominick LaCapra notes that testimonies of traumatic events raise the problem of sympathy turning into an unethical over-identification, and, accordingly, he draws a distinction between two types of texts. On the one hand, he refers to those texts that promote identification, that is, the listener or reader’s unethical act of taking the victim’s place. On the other hand, he alludes to those that promote empathy, that is,

Nevertheless, this situation has started to change in the last decade. For instance, despite his limited analysis on perpetrators, in his work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra points out that “not everyone traumatized by events is a victim” and acknowledges the possibility of perpetrator trauma (79). Other scholars like María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro have also explored the figure of the Nazi perpetrator and his or her descendants in different Holocaust novels. As she claims,

[p]erpetrator trauma has progressively become a distinct focus of interest in fictional and non-fictional literature alike, and the same goes for the related theme of how past acts of victimisation can affect succeeding generations of the victimiser’s family. (Martínez-Alfaro 117)

Another scholar who has defended the existence and interest of perpetrator trauma is Saira Mohamed, who argues that perpetrators should be considered as a part of the victim/victimizer dichotomy which needs to be focused on so as to better comprehend our history, human evil and trauma (1208). What is more, I contend that, to give voice to the perpetrator could be considered an ethical act in which the victim’s “other” is given back his or her own voice, previously silenced as a way to prevent critics and readers from identifying with him or her. Similarly to Mohamed, Rachel MacNair also acknowledges the existence of perpetrator trauma. Nonetheless, she regards it as a subsection of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and gives it a more specific nomenclature: Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS). As she contends, both victims and perpetrators are possessed by intrusive thoughts and images and try to avoid any situation which resembles the traumatic event (1-7). In other words, regardless of their differences, perpetrators can undergo a process of acting out and working through, just as victims do.

Despite the great ethical challenge set to writers, readers and critics of literature dealing with perpetrator trauma, some authors have gone against the grain for they have not only included perpetrators as the main characters of their novels, but also, they have portrayed these protagonists as victims of PITS. Perhaps, the most numerous group of authors who have felt the need to write

---

an understanding of the traumatic events and its victims which does not entail the listener or reader’s appropriation of their experience but rather, their “empathic unsettlement” (78).

about such a delicate topic are Holocaust literature writers like Martin Amis, W. G. Sebald, Rachel Seiffert, or Ian McEwan, to name a few. In postcolonial fiction however, although novels which present perpetrator protagonists exist, as it is the case of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) (Australian literature), Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) (Haitian-American literature) and Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) (African American literature), not many of them deal with perpetrator trauma, Morrison's novel being an exceptional case: one of the protagonists and narrators of the story is a young African American veteran in the Korean War who presents PTSD symptoms and who also suffers from perpetrator trauma after killing a Korean girl during the war.

Moreover, although trauma is very much present in Native American literature, (a classic example is the protagonist of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Tayo, who suffers PTSD after coming back from World War II), it is not frequent to find perpetrators in Native American novels, perhaps due to the ethical dilemma they entail. Nevertheless, Louise Erdrich's penultimate novel *The Round House* (2012) is an exception, since it precisely revolves around a character who not only is a perpetrator but who also suffers from perpetrator trauma or PITS. The novel presents the story of a 13-year-old Native American boy, Joe, and his family, who have to cope with a traumatic event on the reservation where they live: the brutal sex assault on Joe's mother. As an adult, the protagonist-narrator accounts retrospectively for his mother's processes of acting out and working through of trauma, as well as the investigation process he carries out together with his father, friends and other members of the community with the purpose of discovering the perpetrator's identity. Nonetheless, by killing the rapist as a way to bring the peace and justice that conventional law cannot provide his mother with due to the problematic legal system over reservation territory, Joe, who is a secondary victim of Geraldine's attack, will become a perpetrator traumatized by his acts.

This paper aims to analyze Joe's character from the perspective of perpetrator trauma in order to show how indirect victims of trauma can become victimizers, who in turn, become traumatized by the violence they commit and witness. Drawing on trauma theory as well as on Rachel MacNair's notion of PITS, I will analyze the origin and symptoms of the protagonist's trauma as represented in the text, always taking into account the redirection that trauma theory is undergoing nowadays towards its decolonization, that is, towards the

necessary detachment from its Eurocentrism. By so doing, I will offer a new outlook which complements other scholarly studies on justice conflict in Erdrich's novel such as Julie Tharp's article "Erdrich's Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*" and Thomas Matchie's article "Law versus Love in *The Round House*." The first article describes Erdrich's novel as a politically engaged narrative which denounces through Joe's testimony the numerous sexual attacks that native women suffer on reservations. For his part, Matchie maintains that Joe's love for his mother drives him to take revenge as a way to bring her justice. Nonetheless, neither Tharp nor Matchie analyze Joe as a perpetrator who is doubly traumatized by his mother's attack and Linden's killing. Likewise, some reviewers such as John Greenya have considered that it is the seeking of revenge and not justice which drives Joe to plot what the author calls a "plan of revenge."<sup>4</sup> Such a reading of the novel, however, reinforces the stereotype of the violent and revengeful Indian, which Native Americans are always trying to fight. Thus, by paying attention to the context and history of Native Americans, I will also attempt to demonstrate that Erdrich complicates stereotypes of Native Americans as Joe's atrocious action cannot be easily categorised as the result of a vengeful behaviour.

### **TRANSGENERATIONAL AND PERPETRATOR TRAUMA IN *THE ROUND HOUSE***

Erdrich's *The Round House* aims to call readers' attention to the "huge case of injustice" that Native American women living on reservations underwent and keep on experiencing nowadays, as Erdrich herself admitted in her acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 2012, which she dedicated to Native women (Chapman). As Erdrich notes in the epilogue to her novel, according to the statistics reported by Amnesty International in 2007, one in three Native American women are raped at least once in their lives and 86 percent of those rapes and sexual assaults are perpetrated by non-Native men (319). Sadly, just a few of those men are prosecuted on account of the tribal legal system's incapability to prosecute crimes committed by non-Native perpetrators. Thus, as Erdrich recognised in the aforementioned acceptance speech for the National Book Award, her novel has made these women's problematic

---

<sup>4</sup> See also the reviews by Julie Eckstein, Mary Gordon and Carla K. Johnson.

situation visible to “a wider audience” (Chapman). Furthermore, the novel also shows how contemporary Native Americans deal with conditions of poverty, racism and oppression; a historical trauma or “historical unresolved grief” (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 68) passed on for generations. Such a historical trauma is the consequence of a long history of personal and cultural annihilation caused by colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

The novel, which starts with the rape and attempted murder of Geraldine Coutts, an Ojibwe woman who lives on a Reservation in North Dakota together with her husband and her 13-year-old son, Joe, is narrated by the latter. Because Joe, who is the focalizer in the story, did not witness the attack and recounts the events as he discovers them, at first readers are not able to learn who raped and tried to kill Geraldine and the reasons why he committed such a barbaric act. Readers will learn what really happened as the investigation carried out by Joe, his friends, his father and other members of the community for finding out the attacker’s identity, develops: Geraldine, who works as a tribal record keeper and has access “to everybody’s secrets” (149), was raped by a racist white man called Linden Lark when she tried to prevent him from seizing a file containing private information about Mayla Wolfskin, a young Indian girl from the Coutt’s family reservation. As Julie Tharp contends, it is not clear in the novel whether Linden wants to run away with Mayla and the hush money her employer, the South Dakota governor, Curtis Yeltow, gave her under the condition to enrol her baby in the tribe and register him as the father, to save him or to blackmail him (34). What becomes clear in the novel, however, is that when Geraldine gets involved in Linden’s business, she is brutally attacked together with Mayla. Yet, although unlike Mayla, whose body disappears after having been brutally killed by Linden, Geraldine manages to escape, she becomes traumatized.

In Caruth’s classical definition, trauma is “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (*Unclaimed*, 3) caused by a traumatic event which “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who

---

<sup>5</sup> As argued by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, the European colonisation derived in “the decimation of the indigenous population”, the loss of their lands and the forced assimilation of the settler’s culture (62). All these blows resulted “in a long legacy of chronic trauma and unresolved grief across generations” (60).

experiences it" (*Explorations*, 5). Nonetheless, although it is difficult to overcome trauma and the traumatic repetitions of the experience—what LaCapra calls "acting out"—victims of trauma can work towards a process of healing by "working through" their trauma. During this process, the memory work entailed in the narrativization of traumatic memories allows the subject to distinguish between the traumatic past and the present, and therefore to work through his or her trauma (LaCapra 66).

Trauma gained official disease status in 1980, when it was included in the third edition of the authoritative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although at first PTSD included only the experience of war veterans, it has been redefined in each subsequent version of the DSM. According to the fourth edition (DSM IV), more often than not, traumatic events are followed by immediate psychological responses such as terror, loss of control, and intense fear of annihilation and long-term effects such as physiological responses of hypervigilance, sleep disorders as well as psychological responses such as depression and a general sense of emotional numbing, the inability to concentrate plus a sense of foreclosed future (12). Furthermore, not only does trauma disrupt memory and consequently identity, but it also makes the sufferer persistently re-experience the event through intrusive flashbacks, recurrent dreams, or later situations echoing the original (Luckhurst 1) during the phase of acting out.

As a victim of trauma, Geraldine undergoes a process of post-traumatic acting out, since she is haunted by the compulsive repetition of the traumatic event and presents some of the aforementioned PTSD symptoms, which are depicted in certain passages along the novel through Joe's perspective. He portrays his mother as a skinny, "disoriented" and "invaded" woman (112) and describes her state of depression provoked by the traumatic event by referring to her erratic sleep habits and loss of appetite: "She slept and slept, like she was sleeping for a sleeping marathon. She ate little. Wept often, a grinding and monotonous weeping that she tried to muffle with pillows but which vibrated through the bedroom door" (45). The protagonist also refers to his mother's fear and responses of hypervigilance, which are common symptoms among traumatized subjects as they tend to lose their trust in the rest of humanity (Brison 44): "My mother sunk in such a heavy sleep that when I tried

to throw myself down next to her, she struck me in the face. It was a forearm back blow and caught my jaw, stunning me” (23).

Even though Geraldine eventually starts a process of working through, as evidenced in her return to her family and job, she also transmits her trauma to her son. Experts such as psychiatrist Vamik Volkan have acknowledged the possibility of a transgenerational transmission of trauma which takes place “when an older person unconsciously externalizes his traumatized self onto a developing child’s personality” and the child becomes “a reservoir for the unwanted, troublesome parts” of the older generation (43). Volkan goes further and states that such transmission eventually makes “the traumatized self-images passed down by members of the group [...] become part of the group identity” (43). Significantly, in Erdrich’s story, Joe finds himself wishing he could turn the clock back to the days when his mother cooked dinner every night and she laughed (43), and he seems unable to cope with his mother’s behavior after the attack since he tries to avoid having contact with her most of the time: “I didn’t want to look at my mother, propped up staring wearily at us as if she’d just been shot, or rolled into a mummy pretending to be in the afterlife” (152).<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, as if it were a defense mechanism for fighting his secondary traumatization, Joe takes refuge in his and his pals’ investigation aimed at finding out the perpetrator’s identity, a research which runs parallel to law enforcement and FBI’s investigation with which Joe’s father collaborates. Indeed, Joe himself confesses to his mother that his aim is to put an end to Linden’s life: “I’m going to find him and I’m going to burn him. I’m going to kill him for you. [...] There is nothing to stop me” (89). During his own eager investigation, Joe learns that Linden might never be brought to court due to the land dilemma over reservation territory which makes crime prosecution difficult. Linden decided intentionally to intimidate and humiliate Geraldine and Mayla in the round house, a place located in “a legal limbo between competing jurisdictions” (Tharp 36) as it covers three classes of land: “tribal trust, state and fee” (160). As a consequence, firstly because conventional justice cannot bring peace and justice to his mother,

---

<sup>6</sup> Through Joe’s secondary traumatization, Erdrich’s novel reinforces the idea that, rather than simply an individual phenomenon, trauma is a process that may also affect the community and its identity (Erikson 186-88; Rothberg 228).

and secondly, because his father is unable to protect them due to his coronary problem, Joe decides to take justice into his own hands.

Influenced by the tale that his grandfather, Mooshum, tells in his sleep about Nanapush and his mother who is falsely accused of being a wiindigoo—an evil human-bodied spirit that devours other humans and that, according to tradition, has to be killed so as to protect the tribe—Joe decides to kill his mother’s attacker. At first, Joe struggles with his conscience—“Three times I put [the thought] out” (249)—for he knows that by killing Linden, and therefore, becoming “part of [all] this” (90), he will be failing his family and tribe. Nonetheless, two ideas from Father Travis’s lessons—human beings are free to choose “good over evil, but the opposite too” and “every evil, whether moral or material, results in good” (253)—end up convincing Joe of the righteousness of his desire to kill his mother’s attacker: “I was dedicated to a purpose which I’d name in my mind not vengeance but justice” (260). These words evidence Joe’s secondary trauma because, as Volkan maintains, due to the traumatized elders’ influence on the child, he or she “absorbs their wishes and expectations and is driven to act on them” to such an extent that “it becomes the child’s task to mourn, to reverse [their] humiliation and feelings of helplessness” (43). Hence, following Volkan’s insights, we could regard Joe’s decision to kill Linden as an attempt to change the helpless and humiliating situation that his parents (especially his mother) are undergoing and that conventional justice seems unable to palliate. Erdrich reinforces this idea when she comments that Geraldine’s rape

catapults [Joe] into an adulthood. [...] [A]s he sees that the adults cannot find justice, it becomes clear to him—and then it becomes clear to his best friend, as well—that they may have to seek justice on their own. (“House”)

By killing his mother’s attacker—although the novel suggests that it is his friend Cappy who actually gives the coup of grace to Linden—Joe positions himself in the “gray zone in which victims become executioners and executioners become victims” (Agamben 17). Therefore, he becomes the story’s second perpetrator.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>It is worth noting that Joe’s facet as a perpetrator had been previously revealed in the attitude he adopts towards Sonja, (the ex-stripper who goes out with Joe’s uncle, Whitey, and who treats Joe almost as an adopted son), particularly when he sexually humiliates her in the striptease scene. At that moment, Joe’s behaviour denotes his

Nevertheless, this act brings him limited relief as it makes him suffer from perpetrator trauma. In fact, by mimicking the belatedness pointed out by Freud, Caruth, LaCapra and other trauma theorists, Erdrich presents Linden's killing as a haunting or possessive influence which continuously makes Joe's past present through intrusive imagery such as flashbacks, nightmares and unwanted thoughts. MacNair notes that these intrusive symptoms and sleep problems are greater for those who are involved in a killing act due to the anxiety that their executions provoke in themselves (97). This is the case of Joe, who recurrently dreams of his victim: "I was not exactly safe from Lark. Neither was Cappy. Every night he came after us in dreams" (307).

Another symptom evinced by Joe's haunted mind is an apparent sense of fear, guilt and shame illustrated by his intruding nightmares: "As always I woke shouting Cappy's name [...]. Each dream was more real every time it occurred, like it was wearing a track into my brain" (308). Victims of shame feel inferior since they perceive themselves as deeply flawed and defective or as bad individuals. Likewise, they may experience "a brief moment of painful feeling" followed by a compulsive and often repetitive "replaying" of the shaming scene together with a "painful confusion and unwanted physical manifestations" (Scheff 110-11). Timothy Schroer explains that killers' reactions such as rages, vomiting, substance abuse and intrusive dreams are responses caused by a mixture of disgust, guilt and pity for the victim which form the basis of their self-pity at having to assume the burden of these stress-inducing acts (35). Hence, precisely because Joe presents a similar behavior and he becomes sick with episodes of high temperature, these symptoms evidence the overwhelmingly presence of feelings of shame and remorse in the protagonist's mind:

---

unconscious assimilation of the patriarchal values so overwhelmingly present in his environment and which Joe himself has seen materialised in his mother's rape. Hence, even though Joe manifests his interest in Sonja from the very start, the sexual attack suffered by his mother could be regarded as the inflection point which makes him treat Sonja in a sexist way and behave, in Sonja's words, as "another gimme-gimme asshole" (223). This episode together with the killing of Linden reflects then, that through Joe's ambivalent position as a victim and victimiser, Erdrich's text is a complex novel which problematizes the victim/victimiser binary. Nonetheless, this problematization is temporary because at the end, as it will be further explained in the subsequent sections, readers regard Joe as a victim of his context and Linden as the actual villain/victimiser in the story.

I was down. I was sick for real now, with the summer flu, just as I had pretended. [...] I was running a fever of alternating sweats and chills and my sheets were sodden. While I was ill, I watched the golden light pass across my walls. I could feel nothing, but my thoughts ran wild. (293)

In addition, “peritraumatic dissociation” is a major predictor for PTSD and PITS (MacNair 33). As claimed by Sandra Bloom, when confronted with a traumatic situation or event, individuals can use dissociation as defense mechanism to cope with the “physiological overload” of the brain and the body provoked by it (200). Therefore, because Joe’s depiction of Cappy and himself after Linden’s death reveals dissociative symptoms, which according to MacNair “include distortion and a sense of unreality and detachment from the event and from other people” (33), Joe’s trauma becomes evident: “We were speaking without emotion. Like we were talking of other people. Or as if what we did had just happened on television. But I was choking up” (287). Erdrich’s novel also reflects the protagonist’s traumatic dissociation when he goes back home after shooting Linden and feels he is “separating [himself] from who [he] was” (291-92), from his former self, the one before Linden’s death and the attack against his mother. Joe’s dissociation, provoked by his repression of guilt and anxiety, is also illustrated through a passage in which he narrates one of his intrusive dreams:

We are back at the golf course in the moment I locked eyes with Lark. That terrible contact. Then the gunshot. At the moment, we exchange selves. Lark is in my body, watching. I am in his body, dying. (307)

The fact that he turns into the victim in his dream is noteworthy since, as Hillel Glover explains, those who feel guilty tend to have dreams in which they are killed (17).

Furthermore, firstly because Joe is haunted by the traumatic event his mother endured as well as its aftermath, and secondly, because he has killed a man, his sense of self breaks. This self-fragmentation is so severe that Joe experiences an identity crisis, and so does Cappy. This identity crisis is illustrated when Cappy asks Joe, “What are we? [...] What are we now?,” and Joe answers back “I don’t know man, I don’t know” (90). In fact, Joe, like many victims of trauma, tries to mitigate his anxiety and identity crisis through the use of alcohol because, as he admits, it sterilizes his

insides and makes everything look amber (290), soft brown “as in a photograph” (311). Alcohol, then, makes Joe feel safe, but only temporarily.

Besides, because adult Joe, the narrator, addresses readers straightforwardly halfway through the story—“You have read this far and you know that I’m writing this story at a removal of time” (142)—his mature narration, through which he reflects upon his past life, could be regarded as a confession of the killing which haunts the protagonist until his adulthood. Bloom points out that, after a traumatic event, individuals lose their capacity to put the traumatic experience into words and therefore to remember that terrifying experience, talk about it and share it with others (204). However, drawing on Freud’s talking cure and LaCapra’s understanding of working through, Susan J. Brison explains that when the traumatized individual is able to create a narrative memory, this act defuses traumatic memory as it gives shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self (40). Thus, because Joe is able to create a narrative memory by telling to empathic listeners his traumatic memories in relation to the attack against his mother and his atrocious act, his confession could be interpreted as part of his healing process.

### **POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA AND JUSTICE IN *THE ROUND HOUSE***

Despite the trauma endured by Joe due to his mother’s suffering, his feelings of guilt and Cappy’s death during the trip westwards that he and his group of friends set out on in order to find Cappy’s girlfriend, *The Round House* ends on an optimistic note. Indeed, its final line—“We just kept going” (317)—on the one hand dismounts Caruth’s formulation that trauma narrative leads to increased indeterminacy, an affirmation problematized from postcolonial trauma theory because of the way it denies the possibility of resolution and recovery “for individuals and entire nations” (Mengel and Borzaga xiii). On the other hand, it demonstrates that, as the aforementioned new approach to trauma in favor of a redirection towards the decolonization of trauma studies defends, in postcolonial trauma narratives, resilience, growth and healing are possible in the aftermath of trauma thanks to family, the community and the narrativization of the traumatic event (Visser 255-57).

In line with postcolonial trauma theory's claims that accuse Caruth's trauma model of Eurocentrism and of focusing on the single traumatic event rather than on the long processes of colonial trauma, Joe's traumatic behavior should not be simply interpreted as a consequence or response to the single event of his mother's sexual assault and subsequent suffering. Instead, any analysis of Joe's character should take into consideration the social and historical relations related to Native Americans and colonialism since, as Visser contends, colonialism's traumatic aftermath continues until our current days (258). To put it differently, analyses of Joe's character should depart from the conventional emphasis in trauma studies on the individual's symptoms and healing process. Rather, scholars should explore the ways in which Joe's process connects to Native peoples' historical trauma and unresolved grief—a cultural trauma<sup>8</sup>—so that their analyses are more accurate and less biased.

In their article entitled "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief," Brave Heart and DeBruyn argue, that similarly to the Holocaust, which had traumatic effects on those who survived and the following generations, American Indians' grief resulting from colonial times has been passed on across generations of Indians who now suffer "a pervasive sense of pain from what happened to their ancestors and incomplete mourning of their losses" (66-68). Further, because the present American Indian generations also have to endure "repeated traumatic losses of relatives and community members through alcohol-related accidents, homicide, and suicide" (68) and other self-destructive behaviors which have accompanied for decades their community's chronic trauma and unresolved grief, their misery is double (69). Hence, given that Joe forms part of that generation, his suffering and subsequent search for justice could be interpreted not only as a consequence of the attack against his mother and the lack of justice on reservations, but also of society's prejudices against Indians together with his ancestor's pain and trauma.

---

<sup>8</sup>According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, cultural trauma occurs "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event" which marks their group consciousness, their memories and changes their identity "in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). Following this definition, Native American unresolved grief could also be regarded as a cultural-specific example of cultural trauma as this community's memories and identity have been deeply marked by colonialism and its aftermath.

In Erdrich's novel, the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism are illustrated through different characters' actions and discourses which reveal the latent racism within North American society. For instance, at the beginning of the story, while waiting to see his badly injured mother, Joe confronts a racist woman who does not bear sharing a room with Native Americans: "Don't you Indians have your hospital over there? Aren't you building a new one?," she asks Joe, to which he replies, "The emergency room's under construction," an answer followed by a disdainful reply from the woman: "Still, she said" (8). Likewise, not only do ordinary citizens manifest a racist behavior towards American Indians but also, important public figures like Governor Yeltow manifest racist attitudes. As Geraldine explains, the governor "is well known for his bigoted treatment of Indians," an image he tries to mitigate through "public relations stunts like sponsoring Indian schoolchildren or giving out positions in the Capitol" (157). In fact, his ultimate and perhaps most insulting strategy, although truncated by Linden's attack, is his adoption of the Indian child Mayla Wolfskin gives birth to as a strategy to gain more votes.

The most flagrant case of racism in the novel is, nevertheless, illustrated through Linden's discourse and actions, which denote his disdain towards Indians and his ideas of white supremacy:

I suppose I am one of those people who just hates Indians generally and specifically for they were at odds with my folks way back [...]. [T]he strong should rule the weak. Instead of the weak the strong! (161)

This commentary reveals a racist line of thinking still alive in the United States, because, as Ella Shoat and Robert Stam note, racism towards Native Americans is "an ambivalently repressive mechanism [that] dispels the anxiety in the face of the Indian, whose very presence is a reminder of the initially precarious grounding of the American nation-state itself" (118). Consequently, in order to consolidate their sovereignty over the Indian lands, colonizers justified and continue justifying the theft of Native lands on account of Native people's inferiority, as denounced in the passage where Bazil, Joe's father who works as a tribal judge, tries to explain tribal disenfranchisement to Joe by using utensils and food in their kitchen:

Take *Johnson v. MacIntosh*. It's 1823. The United States are forty-seven years old and the entire country is based in grabbing Indian land as quickly as possible in as many ways as can be humanly devised. Land speculation is the stock market of the times. [...] Justice Marshall went out of his way to strip away all Indian title to all lands viewed -i.e. "discovered"- by Europeans. [...] Marshall vested absolute title to the land in the government and gave Indians nothing more than the right of occupancy, a right that could be taken away at any time. Even to this day, his words are used to continue the dispossession of our lands. [...] [T]he language he used survives in the law, that we were savages living off the forest, and to leave our land to us was to leave it useless wilderness, that our character and religion is of so inferior a stamp that the superior genius of Europe must certainly claim ascendancy on and on. (228-29)

By the same token, Linden's aversion for Native women, who, according to him, "have no standing under the law for a good reason and yet have continued to diminish the white man and to take his honor" (161), reflects yet again a colonial line of thinking since colonizers considered Native women threatening due to their ability "to reproduce the next generation of peoples who can resist colonization" (Smith 78). Thus, Geraldine's rape can be read as Linden's attempt to colonize the native body, just as colonizers colonized Native American lands.

It is noteworthy that the inclusion of characters with such an ideology is by no means accidental. On the one hand, throughout *The Round House*, Erdrich denounces the increasing figures of sexual attacks against Native American women on reservations due to the juxtaposing of three different jurisdictions (tribal, state and federal), whose application depends on the precise location of the crime and the race of the perpetrator. On the other hand, Erdrich also denounces through the novel the government's inaction to solve jurisdiction problems so as to avoid losing white sovereignty over those territories. In other words, she denounces the long historical and political problem related to colonialism, white supremacy and the sovereignty over Indian land in the United States. Insisting on this point is essential, as proved by the fact that some reviewers emphasize revenge as an explanation for the protagonist's behavior. This emphasis on revenge proves not only that a proper study of context—with a special attention to the intricacies of racism—still needs to be vindicated in analyzes of Native American literature; but also that a careful attention to Indian stereotypes is still necessary

too. As opposed to providing an explanation for his acts, reading Joe's terrible act as moved by revenge problematically reinforces the stereotype of the savage, the revengeful and violent blood-thirsty warrior which dates back from the time of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus (see Todorov 36-40), which unfortunately survives, in various forms, until today, and which authors like Erdrich are constantly striving to subvert.

### **CONCLUSION: THE TURN TO PERPETRATORS**

In the light of the analysis conducted so far, it seems apt to claim that Joe's story contains several layers which have to do with the power relations that determine both racial and gender violence in relation to Native American groups. Accordingly, Joe's actions should not be simply considered as motivated by revenge, but as a painful consequence of the problematic conditions of that liminal position which Homi Bhabha called the "Third Space" (36) and which are here shown as requiring a difficult negotiation between two imperfect moral codes: the "ideal justice" that does not respond to Geraldine's case, and "the best-we-can-do-justice" (306) that Joe has no choice but to embrace.

It cannot be denied that Joe's atrocious act poses a difficult ethical choice to readers: clearly he is a perpetrator, but as we recognize this we have no choice but to forgive him. In this respect, Erdrich's novel could be compared to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whose protagonist, Sethe, decides to kill her daughter so as to prevent her from returning to slavery. As James Phelan puts it, with this scene, "Morrison provides a highly unsettling experience for the audience," who had sympathised with Sethe from the very start (323). However, because along the novel readers are made aware of the horrible situations which Sethe and her family had to endure in their master's plantation, they come to understand that Sethe's act was the result of her outrageous context. Hence, in Phelan's words "we turn our judgment on the institution that pushed her beyond the limits: slavery" (228). Similarly, because in *The Round House*, the 13-year-old protagonist is an ordinary and non-problematic boy who kills a man, readers are motivated to reflect on the reasons pushing him to commit such a terrible act. By paying attention to the racist and sexist context in which Erdrich's story is framed, readers end up understanding that, in spite of becoming a perpetrator, he never fully stops being a victim of the unfair situation going on in the reservation territories. For that reason, when Joe, a protagonist

whose innocence and rebelliousness echoes that of other characters in classical American novels such as Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield or Scout Finch (Martínez-Falquina, "Roots"), kills his mother's attacker, readers cannot simply condemn his barbaric action. After all, this murder provides his family and community with the justice that the conventional legal system cannot provide, and so, at the end of the novel, readers are able to eventually forgive Joe and the victim/victimizer binary is re-established.

A second reason why Joe is not condemned by readers stems from the way in which the text is written. Because the story is focalised through the innocent eyes of an autodiegetic narrator, readers empathize with the protagonist from the very start. Likewise, the story is told chronologically, which not only contributes to the creation of suspense but also allows readers to know about Joe's suffering before he kills Linden. These narratological aspects together with the protagonist's innocence and youth as well as his continuous Hamletian dilemmas predispose readers to believe in his innocence and forgive him regardless of his behavior. Thus, it can be said that Erdrich purposely guides readers to turn their judgement on what she really wants to denounce through her novel: the terrible situation that Native Americans, and especially Native American women, still experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the unfair long-process situation of (neo)colonialism which has remained largely forgotten in the United States.

To conclude, through *The Round House*, Erdrich vindicates justice as she complicates stereotypes of Native Americans and at the same time awakens ethical and moral questions by using a protagonist who blurs the borders between victim and victimizer. Most scholars, authors and readers may consider the creation of connections to perpetrators unethical. Yet, to recognize perpetrators' stories together with the difficult circumstances that lead them to inflict pain to others, and to understand that, just as victims do, they need to work through their trauma, is a necessary ethical exercise. What is more, the consideration and analysis of perpetrators and perpetrator trauma is also an essential task that trauma theory should carry out in order to continue evolving towards a more inclusive and open-minded direction in which all the people and elements involved in the trauma equation are taken into account. Only if trauma theory does so will we be able to better comprehend trauma, human nature and evil and, therefore, to prevent atrocious actions against our fellow human beings from taking place again.

**WORKS CITED**

- ADAMS, Jenni. "Introduction." *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*. Eds. Jenni Adams and Sue Vice. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013. 1-12.
- ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Everyman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Semler, Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley, London: U. of California P., 2004.
- AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone, 1999.
- AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- BLOOM, Sandra L. "Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma: The Evolutionary Significance of the Arts." *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 8.3 (2010): 198-212.
- BRAVE HEART-JORDAN, Maria, and Lemyra M. DeBruyn. "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief." *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8.2 (1998): 60-82. 21 May 2016
- BRISON, Susan J. "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self." *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present*. Eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer. Hanover and London: U P of New England, 1999. 39-54.
- CARUTH, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- CHAPMAN, Keith. "Dartmouth Alumna Louise Erdrich '76 Wins National Book Award." *Dartmouth Now*. 15 Nov. 2012.

- CRAPS, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- DANTICAT, Edwidge. *The Dew Breaker*. New York: Vintage, 2004.
- ECKSTEIN, Julie. "Crime and Revenge in National Book Award-winning *The Round House*, by Louise Erdrich." *Everyday eBook*. Jan 2 2013. Web. 3 June 2016.
- ERDRICH, Louise. *The Round House*. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.
- ERIKSON, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 183-99.
- GIESEN, Bernhard. "The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004. 112-54.
- GLOVER, Hillel. "Guilt and Aggression in Vietnam Veterans." *American Journal of Social Psychiatry* 1 (1985): 15-18.
- GORDON, Mary. "*LaRose*, by Louise Erdrich." *The New York Times*. 16 May 2016.3 June 2016.
- GREENYA, John. "Book Review: *The Round House*." *The Washington Times*. 15 Nov. 2012.3 June 2016.
- "In 'House,' Erdrich Sets Revenge on a Reservation." *All Things Considered*. National Public Radio. 2 Oct. 2012. 10 May 2016.
- JOHNSON, Carla K. "In novel *LaRose*, Louise Erdrich looks at atonement." *St. LouisePost Dispatch*. 14 May 2016. 3 June 2016.
- LACAPRA, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- LUCKHURST, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- MACNAIR, Rachel. *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing*. New York: Praeger, 2002.

- MARTÍNEZ-ALFARO, María Jesús. "This is my Opa. Do you remember him killing the Jews?' Rachel Seiffert's 'Micha' and the Transgenerational Haunting of a Silenced Past." *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*. Ed. Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 115-31.
- MARTÍNEZ-FALQUINA, Silvia. "How Tough Those Roots Had Clung': Reading *The Round House* as a Palimpsest." *Native American Literature Symposium 2016*. Albuquerque, NM, 17-19 March 2016.
- . "Postcolonial Trauma Theory in the Contact Zone: The Strategic Representation of Grief in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*." *Humanities* 4 (2015): 834-60.
- MATCHIE, Thomas. "Law versus Love in *The Round House*." *The Midwest Quarterly* 56.4 (Summer 2015): 353-64
- MENGEL, Ewald, and Michela Borzaga. *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel: Essays*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012.
- MOHAMED, Saira. "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity." *Columbia Law Review* 115 (2015): 1157-1246.
- MORRISON, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. London: Vintage, 2007.
- . *Home*. New York: Vintage, 2012. Print.
- PHELAN, James. "Sethe's Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading." *Style* 32.3 (1998): 318-33.
- ROTHBERG, Michael. "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response." *Studies in the Novel* 40 (2008): 224-34.
- SCHEFF, Thomas J. "The Shame-Rage Spiral: A Case Study of an Interminable Quarrel." *The Role of Shame in Symptom Formation*. Ed. Helen B. Lewis. Hillsdale, NJ, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987. 109-49.
- SCHROER, Timothy L. "Civilization, Barbarism, and the Ethos of Self-Control among the Perpetrators." *German Studies Review* 35.1 (2012): 33-54.
- SHOAT, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge, 1994.

- SILKO, Leslie M. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.
- SMITH, Andrea. "Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples." *Hypathia* 18.2 (Spring 2003): 70-85.
- THARP, Julie. "Erdrich's Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 26.3 (Fall 2014): 24-50.
- TORODOV, Tveztan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*. Trad. Richard Howard. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- VISSER, Irene. "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects." *Humanities* 4 (2015): 250-65.
- VOLKAN, Vamik. *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. Boulder, Co.: Westview, 1997.