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Decolonizing Trauma: A Study of Multidirectional Memory in Zadie Smith’s “The Embassy of Cambodia”

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Abstract: The present article analyses Zadie Smith’s short story “The Embassy of Cambodia” (2013) as a narrative that contributes to the decolonization of trauma studies. In the introduction I will lay out briefly the state of affairs in trauma studies and the relevance of trauma in Smith’s work as represented in *White Teeth* and *NW*. For the purpose of this paper, I will provide a close reading of “The Embassy of Cambodia” and I will rely on Michael Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional memory to illustrate how the history of genocide in Cambodia and the history of the protagonist of the story, which is effectively one of slavery, conflate in Smith’s text to bring to the fore silenced histories in a more ethical manner that seeks to put an end to competition and hierarchies within traumatic histories and trauma theory. This paper will explore the different juxtapositions that the story offers between individual and collective experiences of trauma and, in its explorations of multidirectional memory, the juxtaposition of collective histories of suffering.

Keywords: Zadie Smith; trauma; multidirectional memory; decolonization

1. Introduction

Trauma, be it individual or collective, has been a constant framework in criticism and literature for the last two decades. As Herrero and Baelo-Allué have remarked, “trauma studies became prominent in the early to mid-1990s as an important sub-strand of ‘ethical criticism’, whose most defining feature was an intense concern with the demands of otherness” [1]. Trauma was indeed believed to be able to provide a bridge across cultures [2] which may thus acknowledge others’ suffering ethically. However, some critics have challenged of late the prevalence of trauma theories and their adequateness to some

contexts, namely non-Western and postcolonial ones, thus questioning its potential bridging qualities. Most criticism has challenged an event-based model of trauma in favour of an analysis of what Maria Root defined as insidious trauma, that which “refers to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit.” [3]. More recently, Stef Craps has referred to the trauma of the everyday, which calls attention to the structural violence that results in “daily micro-aggressions [...] [which] can build to create an intense traumatic impact” [4]. Similarly, Mengel and Borzaga have argued that “trauma is deeply linked to economic and political issues [...] inseparable from institutions and structures” and that what is required is “an understanding of trauma that sees it not only as a result of an identifiable event but as the consequence of a condition that came about historically” [5]. Conscious of the recent criticism of trauma theory as inherently Western and Eurocentric, Mengel and Borzaga have argued as well that the way forward in trauma studies does not go only through their decolonization, but through the acknowledgment of “the systemic denial and exclusion from the canon of fundamental and insightful studies on the relationship between trauma, colonialism, and racism” ([5], p. ix). Craps and Mengel and Borzaga all coincide as well in acknowledging the fact that situations that Westerners may regard as traumatic are the everyday reality for many subjects who, nevertheless, continue to live through them either without recurring to coping mechanisms or by choosing some that differ from those set out by Western theories, such as silence.

Trauma has equally been a constant in Zadie Smith’s work. The narrator of her first novel, *White Teeth*, uses the term “original trauma” [6] to describe the migrants’ experience of diaspora: “immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition—it’s something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you’re still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There is no proper term for it—*original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats” ([6], p. 161). The novel points to the “tragedy” ([6], p. 162) that migration may represent and, as Ulrike Tancke has argued, it “conceptualises migration as an experience that constitutes a fundamental shattering of identity and a threat to selfhood” [7]. However, the narrator’s hesitation and the fact that it is difficult to find the correct term to describe the migrants’ experience may also point to the impossibility that trauma theory describe it properly in its entirety. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator doubts between “sin” and “trauma” may point to the fact that, from the perspective of trauma theory, the migrants’ experience is censored, diminished, since trauma theory ultimately looks for a centred, unified subject. Indeed, Stef Craps relies on Claire Stock’s argument that trauma theory has been based on a Western idea of the self, according to which “a psychologically healthy subject is unified, integrated, and whole, and questions the notion that healing from trauma consists of overcoming the fracturing of the self and the resulting division in identity caused by an extremely disturbing event” ([4], p. 33). *White Teeth* portrays the lives of characters permanently caught in a state of in-betweenness that can only hope for a balanced relationship between two selves, which from the perspective of trauma theory can thus be traumatogenic.

Trauma theory and the fragmented self are again both central to Smith’s latest novel, *NW*, in which one perceives, I would argue, a more conscious criticism of trauma theory. At the beginning of the “Host” chapter, the narrator describes how Keisha Blake, one of the protagonists and a third generation

diasporic subject, almost drowns and is saved by another child, Leah, who will later become her best friend: “There had been an event. To speak of it required the pluperfect [...].

It was in this ellipsis that the event had occurred: a child nearly drowned. Yet the significance of the event lay elsewhere [...]. Keisha could neither contradict nor verify this account—she had no memory of it. However, the foreshadowing could be considered suspicious” [8]. Furthermore, later on the narrator emphasises that Leah and Keisha become “best friends bonded for life by a dramatic event and everyone in Caldwell best know about it” ([8], p. 204). This passage clearly becomes a criticism of the event. Although the fact that Keisha almost drowns as a child may be traumatic, the narrator is careful to remark that the significance lays, not in the event itself, but rather in the socio-economic context as portrayed in the fictional Caldwell estate, where the novel takes place. This in turn draws attention to the micro-aggressions and insidiousness of some attitudes found in neo-liberal Western societies, which may be more traumatizing than any particular event. In addition, I would argue that the high concentration of trauma vocabulary on these pages, together with the fact that the narrator uses trauma as the foreshadowing of Keisha’s life may indicate that, in recent years, trauma theory has been one of the most common frameworks used to analyse the lives of diasporic subjects of different generations.

I would argue that the novel sets a frame which seems to be forced upon the characters, especially Keisha, who looks for wholeness in her identity but cannot find it and develops a new personality as Natalie once she is immersed in a more liberal, upper-class environment. The novel cunningly employs fragmentation, split personality, and excessive intertextuality, among other techniques which have been recurrent in trauma narratives. However, at the end of the novel, after Keisha has allegedly worked through her split personality, the novel refuses to provide her with a unified sense of self and points towards the micro-aggressions that stem from neo-liberal economies and discourses. Therefore, *NW* draws attention, as is the case of *White Teeth*, to how trauma theories have been based on the Western model of the unified, centred, stable self, it criticises how some critics have the lives of migrants as inherently traumatic, and further points to the insidiousness of neo-liberalism.

Smith’s short story “The Embassy of Cambodia” also provides examples of how the lens of trauma has been used, albeit in a different manner from Smith’s previous narratives. “The Embassy of Cambodia” is set mostly in Willesden, in North West London, in the weeks during and after the Olympic games of 2012. Smith’s short story narrates the life of Fatou, an immigrant from Ivory Coast who works as a domestic servant for the Derawals, a wealthy Arab family who employs Fatou in conditions that resemble those of modern-day slavery: they hold her passport, they retain her wages, abuse her verbally and physically, and only allow her to go out to do the shopping, and to go to church on Sundays, when she meets her friend Andrew. Fatou also sneaks out of the house on Mondays to go swimming to a nearby health centre using stolen passes from her employers. It is one Monday that Fatou notices a game of badminton being played behind the walls of the Embassy of Cambodia. The game of badminton, as well as the building itself, had already attracted the attention of some of the neighbours of Willesden. In fact, the story makes both the game and the building of the embassy and Cambodia’s history of genocide central to the narration of Fatou’s story as a migrant and a “slave” in contemporary London. The story, however, does not only refer to the genocide in Cambodia but to other genocides of the twentieth century, such as those perpetrated in Rwanda, Hiroshima, and the Holocaust.

“The Embassy of Cambodia” opens up with this rhetorical question: “Who would expect the Embassy of Cambodia?” [9]. My aim in this paper is to explore, not so much *who*, but rather *why* the Embassy of Cambodia and the connections made with genocide and mass atrocities are so fundamental to the narration of a migrant’s story in contemporary times. I will argue that the text’s intermingling of different memories and stories of suffering works as a reflection of Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory, which might work as an effective model to decolonize trauma studies. In addition, I will relate the text to Ella Shohat’s concept of relationality as a complement to Rothberg’s theory of multidirectionality. I will also argue that this short story is Smith’s most conscious attempt towards the decolonization of trauma studies, not only in its use of multidirectional memory, but also in the way in which it represents the gaze with which characters, and readers, look at traumatic experiences. For this purpose, in what follows I will provide a close reading of the short story, and connect it with the recent theoretical trends that support a decolonizing view of trauma theory in their attempt to call attention towards the stories which still remain unheard.

2. Contextualizing Trauma

“The Embassy of Cambodia” contextualizes the story of Fatou at the time of the Olympic Games of 2012. The first time reference in the short story is 6th August, right in the middle of the Olympics. The second is 20th August, just eight days after the Olympics have finished, but which the narrator describes as “long after the Olympians had returned to their respective countries” ([9], p. 11), as if they had altered temporality. The Olympic Games were heralded as both the triumph of multiculturalism and the triumph of patriotism. During the Olympics, the world also saw an asylum seeker wrapped in the Union Jack. This occasion projected an image of homogeneity despite the fact that, for many, multiculturalism had allegedly failed, and that a year before the Olympics many thought of the Britain of the riots as a nation in crisis. Indeed, some journalists considered at the time that with the Olympics “a new Britain [was] being born out of the best of the old Britain” [10]. It is in this professed celebration of multiculturalism that the story of Fatou and the history of Cambodia are told, and that the story unveils reminiscences of that *old* Britain. It should not be forgotten that Fatou’s life journey goes through three different French and British ex-colonies—Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Libya—which still suffer the consequences of the colonization process. However, it is in one of the colonial metropolis that her story is laid out, that her vulnerable life continues, and that her individual tale of suffering is seen through the eyes of the collective traumatic suffering of a “foreign” genocide. By setting such context, “The Embassy of Cambodia” already points towards a multidirectional understanding of memory which, according to Michael Rothberg, represents a form of “remembrance [which] cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites” [11].

In this entanglement, it is first of all necessary to consider Fatou’s status as an immigrant and modern-day slave, as well as her traumatic past. Fatou’s legal status in England is never revealed in the story, but her journey from Ivory Coast to Ghana, then to Libya, Italy and, finally, England, follows one of the routes of illegal migration from Africa into Europe. Her alleged status as an illegal immigrant puts her in a position of heightened vulnerability, which is further increased by her working status. As mentioned in the introduction, Fatou is employed as a domestic servant by the Derawals, a wealthy Arab family who keeps her as a modern-day slave. However, Fatou does not regard herself as

such. Upon reading in the paper the story of a “slave” working in a rich man’s house in London, Fatou wonders if she herself is a slave, led by such evidence as the fact that her passport and wages are retained, and the occasional verbal and physical abuse that she suffers. However, Fatou refuses to identify as a slave on account of her relative freedom—after all, the girl in the paper was a prisoner and she is able to get out of the house, if only for brief periods of time. From a theoretical stance, Fatou is a modern-day slave according to current definitions of slavery [12,13], and most certainly she is a victim of what Michal Rothberg regards as “exploitation in the age of globalized neo-liberalism”, which he defines as a “system of violence neither sudden nor accidental” that can be opposed to particular violent events [14].

This violence makes of Fatou an “other”, who has been made “other” in two ways: first, she is a dislocated (illegal) immigrant and second, her subjectivity is denied in her condition of modern-day slave, whereby she is objectified and commodified, and thus made invisible. In addition to this structural violence, Fatou also suffers the violence of particular events. The story narrates how she was raped by a Russian tourist when she was working as a maid in a hotel resort in Accra, a crime that went unpunished: “He (the Devil) came, this time, in Russian form. Afterwards, he cried and begged her not to tell anyone: his wife had gone to see the Cape Coast Castle and they were leaving the following morning. Fatou listened to his blubbering and realized that he thought the hotel would punish for his action, or that the police would be called” ([9], p. 44). The story portrays the Russian tourist as perpetrator and as victim, an ambiguous relation that is also being currently explored in trauma studies, and further points to systemic gender and structural violence and to the remembrance of slavery, Cape Coast Castle being the door of no return in the transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, “The Embassy of Cambodia” presents these types of violence as inseparable and comes to show, as Rothberg argues, that “an event-focused trauma theory needs to understand the conditions of structural violence” ([14], p. iv).

Fatou’s reaction towards an event which would certainly be regarded as traumatic from a Western perspective is also worth analysing for the purpose of this paper. First, it should be taken into consideration that, for some subjects who suffer from what Don Foster has called “continuous traumatic stress syndrome” ([5], p. 106), this is an everyday reality [15]. Fatou registers rape as a sin and finds solace in religion which, although possibly allowing for some numbing effect, can nonetheless work as an alternative coping mechanism. Furthermore, the only apparent traumatic symptom that can be observed is how “fast and angry” her swimming becomes when she thinks about the Devil, as she refers to the Russian tourist and other perpetrators. Fatou shows great resilience, even at the end of the story when she is fired. The narrator describes this uncertain moment in the following terms: “Walking out into the cold grey, Fatou felt a sense of brightness, of being washed cleaned that neither the weather nor her new circumstances could dim” ([9], pp. 68–69). Nevertheless, Fatou’s obsession with water and swimming, together with the continuous references to water throughout the story, may suggest that she is still acting-out, since she repeatedly hopes to “be[ing] washed clean” ([9], p. 68) of the sin of having been raped. From another point of view, the water imagery in the short story may also be read as a reference to migration and diaspora. Paul Gilroy and John McLeod have argued that “aquatic metaphors” could be read either as a symbol of “restlessness”, even of hybridity, in diaspora, or as a negative view of migration, calling to mind “dangerous floods, waves”, rivers of blood [16]. “The Embassy of Cambodia” brings together once again the relationship between the

trauma that Fatou experiences at an individual level and the collective experience of migration, reinforcing the idea that one cannot be understood without the other.

As has just been discussed, Fatou's traumatic experiences are exposed in the short story, but always mediated by the voice of the narrator. It is also quite significant that the only time in the short story we hear her direct testimony is when she recounts two different reactions to a confrontation with death. She tells this story to Andrew, her friend from church: "I went out and saw nine children washed up dead on the beach. Ten or eleven years old, boys and girls [...]. Some people were crying, maybe two people. Everyone else just shook their heads and carried on walking to where they were going. After a long time, the police came." Some time later, in Rome, Fatou narrates that: "I saw a boy who was about fifteen years old knocked down on his bike. He was dead. People were screaming and crying in the street. Everybody crying. They were not his family. They were only strangers. The next day, it was in the paper". Andrew then replies by affirming that "A tap runs fast the first time you switch it on" ([9], pp. 47–48). This story exposes different reactions to a traumatic experience and shows how much context-specific they can be. It also confirms that non-Western subjects have assumed the witnessing of traumatic experiences as something usual, while Westerners insist on claiming some distance from such events, no matter how theorized they may have been.

In its depiction of two ways of looking at two different traumatic events, although the drowning of the nine children in Ghana verges on the insidious facet of trauma, "The Embassy of Cambodia" exposes the privileged gaze with which Western subjects observe and experience trauma. Many Western subjects will observe trauma from the privilege that security and generalized welfare provide. I would argue that here lies a first possibility for the decolonization of trauma studies since the short story reminds readers how trauma is context and experience specific and, in turn, it forces them to reflect on their own situatedness within particular cultural and socio-economic contexts, which will affect the way they look at and experience trauma. At the end of "The Embassy of Cambodia" the use of the first person plural narrator addresses and involves readers in the act of looking at Fatou, homeless and waiting for Andrew: "Many of us walked past her that afternoon, or spotted her as we rode the bus, or through the windscreens of our cars, or from our balconies. Naturally, we wondered what this girl was doing, sitting on the damp pavement in the middle of the day" ([9], p. 69). The ending of the short story portrays a mere act of looking, not at a traumatic event, but at the embodiment of an insidious trauma which many will fail to acknowledge, and even more, to accept. The story suggests that the Western understanding of trauma is still centred on an event-based model and rejects an insidiousness which is the historical consequence of imperialism, liberalism and globalization. Thus, a privileged, colonial gaze is exposed. In addition, "The Embassy of Cambodia" exposes the failure to take action to solve this problematic situation. The narrator and the implied readers continue to observe Fatou, as a character who has been dehumanized in her condition as a slave, whose life cannot, or will not, be considered grievable, to use Judith Butler's idea [17]. Therefore, the decolonization of trauma studies can be partly achieved by recognizing the privilege from which trauma is observed and experienced. Nevertheless, the failure to take action at the end of the story, may also point out to the gap between theory and action, a gap which must be bridged in order to achieve a better and complete decolonization of trauma.

As this section demonstrates, the story of Fatou already points to the necessity to see individual and traumatic memories in dialogue, for this is the only way in which the structural and institutional links

between individual and insidious traumas will actually come to the fore. If Fatou's individual traumas are analysed in the light of institutional and structural violence, one can clearly acknowledge the pervasiveness of colonial discourses which, implemented by a neo-liberal system, still allow for the existence of slavery. This reading already shows the decolonizing potential of "The Embassy of Cambodia", which is further increased by the use of multidirectional memory.

3. Decolonizing through Multidirectional Memory

Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory implies the juxtaposition of two or more disturbing memories that work dialogically to bring together different histories of suffering, and is based on an "ethics of comparison that can distinguish politically productive forms of memory from those that lead to competition, appropriation and trivialization" [18]. "The Embassy of Cambodia" juxtaposes two disturbing histories, Fatou's and Cambodia's genocidal past, which operate according to a multidirectional understanding of memory, while also calling attention to the competition and appropriation that, more often than not, still exists when it comes to representing traumatic memories. The first person narrator in Smith's story uses the forced division between Old and New people under the Khmer Rouge regime—that is, the enforced division between rural and urban people—to describe the people of Willesden: "In Willesden, we are almost all New People, though some of us, like Fatou, were until recently, Old People, working the land in our various countries of origin" ([9], p. 40). Although this could be read as an appropriation of the history of others, the division between Old and New People might on the other hand make reference to contemporary constructions of old and new migrants, and to the not so clear-cut distinction between old and new slavery. In addition, I would argue that the fact that the narration chooses Cambodian history and genocide, one that according to Ben Kiernan can be read, as most genocides, as a history of "deportation" [19], suggests a critique against forced global displacements and the current governmental policies which seek the deportation of migrants and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, so often criticised by Smith [20]. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge regime was built around race and class divisions, which may draw attention to how immigrants are increasingly divided on a class basis, between those who can afford to become immigrants and those less desirable immigrants who cannot. I would also suggest that the fact that the narrator refers to the inhabitants of Willesden, a suburb in North West London, in terms of Old and New people may also imply that there is a persisting regime which imposes similar dividing terms. Hence, by recurring to Cambodia's history to explain Fatou's and other migrants' situation in contemporary London, the short story denounces the political and socio-economic discourses that allow the persistence of such dividing terms.

In addition, the narrator makes reference to the Khmer Rouge motto "To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss", and to how New People should show no weakness or vulnerability when turned into Old People. Save for these brief remarks, the first person narrator is only able to connect Cambodia with genocide, which shows that trauma has not only become a master narrative in contemporary history, but also a narrative deeply rooted in our unconscious. In fact, upon the appearance of the Embassy in Willesden the narrator writes that "if we were poets perhaps we could have written some sort of ode about this surprising appearance" ([9], p. 6), but then observes that "we are not really a poetic people. We are from Willesden. Our minds tend towards the prosaic" ([9], p. 6). The

narrator thus confirms Adorno's contention about the barbarity and the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz: "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today" [21]. The narrator also points to the traumatizing zeitgeist of the twentieth century. Moreover, s/he assumes that all the neighbours in Willesden make an automatic connection between Cambodia and genocide, thus reinforcing the idea that traumatic histories are part of our unconscious. At the same time, the narrator shows a homogenizing attitude that may become dangerous, since it can lead to generalizations and abstractions, two problematic issues in trauma studies according to some critics.

The narrator's attitude contrasts with Fatou's curiosity about Cambodia, which arises after she sees a woman exiting the Embassy. Because of her interest in this particular woman, the narrator accuses Fatou of having a "local, narrow scope" ([9], p. 23) since she is interested in this woman and ignores Cambodia's traumatic past. The narrator admits to having sympathy for her attitude because "if we followed the history of every little country in this world—in its dramatic as well as its quiet times—we would have no space left in which to live our own lives or to apply ourselves to our necessary tasks, never mind indulge in occasional pleasures, like swimming" ([9], p. 23). The narrator attacks Fatou directly in her/his reference to swimming, and her/his condescending attitude ignores the fact that Fatou does not know Cambodia's history because she has had no access to such information. The short story could therefore imply that in our knowledge of global traumatic histories there exists a certain privilege which, ironically, ignores the reality of those subjects most negatively affected by globalization. This would confirm Rothberg's contention that in competitive models there exists "a form of cultural capital that bestows moral privileges" ([11], p. 87). It would seem that, even though the narrator presents Fatou's story through the history of Cambodia, competition persists. It is not only a competition between traumatic histories, but a competition between the collective and the particular, and between those who have access to knowledge and power.

Fatou's interest, however, goes beyond the Cambodian woman. The story makes it clear that she is especially concerned about suffering. She befriends Andrew, a Nigerian immigrant, after he gives her a leaflet with the title "WHY IS THERE PAIN" ([9], p. 46), and in one of their conversations Fatou asks Andrew "Are we born to suffer? Sometimes I think we were born to suffer more than all the rest" ([9], pp. 26–27). It is clear that this "we" includes all Africans, whom she considers to be underrepresented in the history of past and present suffering. In fact, when she is wondering about the suffering of others she starts a conversation with Andrew about the Holocaust. Fatou may ignore Cambodia's history, but the Holocaust comes up as a universal tale of suffering that may be linked to all others. Indeed, this conversation leads them to talk about Rwanda and Hiroshima, even the corrupt Nigerian government. Here, Fatou argues that "more people died in Rwanda [...]. And nobody speaks about that. Nobody" ([9], p. 26), thus rejecting, even within a particular and limited context, the centrality of the Holocaust. Although I would argue that "The Embassy of Cambodia" uses multidirectional memory in its comparison of the history of Cambodia and Fatou's individual and insidious trauma, I would also contend that it criticises hierarchy in trauma and memory studies, which often give the Holocaust a superior position which may silence other histories.

For many critics, the Holocaust has acted as a screen memory which hides other traumatic realities. In the case of Great Britain, Dan Stone, among other scholars, has argued that "the recent focus on the Holocaust in British cultural life has until recently acted as a screen memory for the darker side of

Britain's imperial past" [22]. Dan Stone warns that "selective interpretation of the British Empire is a direct consequence of the rise of Holocaust consciousness, since the latter clearly seems to identify extremism and evil as something committed by others" ([22], p. 189). Similarly, Paul Gilroy has identified a case of "postcolonial melancholia" in Britain, and argues that the memory of World War II has prevailed "so that Brits can know who we are as well as who we were and then become certain that we are still good while our uncivilized enemies are irredeemably evil" [23]. Furthermore, Gilroy argues that empire and its loss have not been properly mourned, and that the "postcolonial melancholia" affecting Britain has meant that "the nation's intermittent racial tragedies become part of an eventful history" ([23], p. 106). Nevertheless, the perception of the Holocaust as a screen memory is nowadays changing towards a more multidirectional understanding. What is more, Michael Rothberg argues that even screen memory itself is multidirectional since "it both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed" ([11], p. 14).

"The Embassy of Cambodia" refers briefly to the Holocaust and concentrates mostly on genocide in Cambodia which, as Dan Stone has remarked, is now considered to be part of the "canon" of genocide studies, together with the Holocaust, Armenia, Rwanda, and other colonial genocides [24]. However, the Cambodian genocide has by no means the relevance that the Holocaust does. The short story confirms this by emphasizing the location of the Embassy in the suburbs; its de-centralized position may indicate that, although Cambodian genocide has made it into the canon, it still is not as central as other Western genocides. Therefore, the story may suggest that, when it comes to reading traumatic experiences derived from empire, choosing "de-centralized" histories may be more suitable. However, although the references to genocide, canonical or marginal, can be read as multidirectional, their pervasiveness in Smith's short story seems to camouflage the reality of the individual tragedies occurring at home, not in a distant place, and more specifically the tragedies experienced by those subjects from countries that once belonged to the empire but who now find themselves trapped within a violent neo-colonial and neo-liberal system. Smith's short story brings to the fore the flaw of competitive memory and also points towards the potential failure of multidirectional memory. First of all, I would argue that the alleged dialogical relationship of multidirectional memory fails because Fatou is a subject who cannot give voice to her story, she is a subject that has been left out of history in her condition as a, most likely, illegal immigrant and slave. Secondly, Rothberg argues that "When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed [...] it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" ([11], p. 5). The end of the story hints at two possible outcomes for Fatou, "a violent conclusion" or a "hopeful return" ([9], p. 69). Where she could return to is not specified, but in any case this is not a fair ending for her, who is left alone and abandoned after being fired by the Derawals—if a slave can be possibly fired. Although it could be argued that the narrator, in its reading of Fatou's life through the lens of Genocide in Cambodia, makes an attempt to use multidirectional memory appropriately, it is nonetheless clear that s/he remains observing Fatou from a distance, thus avoiding any action that may lead to true solidarity. Lastly, the short story is structured like a game of badminton, in twenty-one sets. This structure, together with the centrality of the game of badminton that Fatou and the neighbours observe in the Embassy, seems to favour a competitive model of memory that invalidates the potential of multidirectional memory. According to Rothberg, competitive memory "understand[s] the articulation of the past in collective memory as a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and

losers” ([11], p. 3). In this way, “The Embassy of Cambodia” makes it clear that some subjects are still struggling for recognition, not only as part of a potentially traumatized collective, but also as human beings and that, as such, they are wholly entitled to be treated with respect and to preserve their dignity.

As has been shown, “The Embassy of Cambodia” brings together many different histories that may be better understood if read through the lens of multidirectionality. This reading, however, may be implemented by incorporating Ella Shohat’s concept of relationality. For Shohat, the relational approach entitles a twofold reference within the work of literature itself and as a method of reading which implies the intersection not only of histories, geographies and communities, but also between discourses and disciplines [25]. Irene Visser comments that relationality’s “openness to interconnections and interdisciplinarity is based on a firm commitment to a non-competitive approach, aligned with Michael Rothberg’s multidirectionality” [26]. Indeed, as Norman Saadi Nikro argues, Rothberg’s multidirectionality shows that “in the terrain of trauma studies there has been a tendency to produce a non-relational clash of civilizations scenario that pits a notion of the West against the rest” [26]. Therefore, although Shohat’s and Rothberg’s ultimate aim is to bring to the fore productive “relational clashes”, I would argue that Shohat’s concept may help to complete and broaden Rothberg’s multidirectionality.

First, as Norman Saadi Nikro concludes, Shohat’s “relational approach involves an appreciation of how the work of literature that embodies traumatic inflections or indeed thematises trauma has to accommodate not only a time but also a geography crisscrossed by a number of intersecting trails” [26]. I would argue that this emphasis on geography is of the utmost importance in “The Embassy of Cambodia” since it situates in the geographical space of Willesden many other geographies, each with their multiple histories, past and present. Nevertheless, this geographical space is multicultural but not multivocal, which may diminish the potentiality of multidirectionality. Secondly, the double reference of relationality also implies the need to look across Smith’s work. If Smith’s novels are thus set in relation, one can acknowledge better the progressive critique of trauma theory and the progressive politicization in Smith’s narratives. Furthermore, one can ascertain the contrast between a multivocal novel, such as *White Teeth*, and the way in which some speak for others in “The Embassy of Cambodia” while Fatou remains silent, invisible. I would argue that the attempt to decolonize trauma studies is strengthened by a relational reading of Smith’s work, in which many histories, geographies, communities, discourses, and disciplines entangle to create new ways of understanding fiction, history and trauma.

4. Conclusions

In *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg recalls Césaire’s contention that “colonization de-humanizes even the most civilized man” ([11], p. 86). In “The Embassy of Cambodia” Fatou has been de-humanized in her condition as a slave, whereby she becomes an object, a commodity in a neo-liberal and neo-colonial system. Thus, the short story seems to confirm that there is still a regime that imposes divisions between different subjects, and that this regime is still a colonial one. As has been shown, multidirectional memory is a productive tool to bring to the fore and understand other histories of suffering which have not been so central to trauma and memory studies. Reading Fatou’s life story in comparison with the history of genocide in Cambodia provides readers with further

insights into the tragic reality of modern day slaves, while bringing to light the history of Cambodia itself, together with other genocides of the twentieth century.

As has also been shown, “The Embassy of Cambodia” denounces the competition that still exists in many theoretical discussions and the privileged positions that trauma theory may grant. The story also highlights the impossibility of bringing justice to those subjects who are not able to articulate their voices, who are still struggling for recognition, waiting to take part in the dialogue between traumatic histories, waiting to become part of history. The narrator, an old person living at a retirement home, may not be able to do much to help Fatou, but the short story’s use of the first person plural narrator undoubtedly works to address and implicate readers directly, calling their attention to the need to become aware of the silenced histories of those who have been denied representation. In conclusion, “The Embassy of Cambodia” denounces the existence of a pervasive colonial regime, which is brought to light in comparison with the Cambodian genocide, and consequently works as a narrative which decolonizes traumatic histories of suffering by condemning the lack of representation that such regime inflicts upon subjects like Fatou.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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