(Post)colonial Trauma, Memory and History in Léonora Miano’s *Contours of the Coming Day* [Contours du jour qui vient]

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Canonical trauma theory has been employed to examine the literary inscription of trauma since its emergence in the 1990s. However, recent work in postcolonial trauma studies indicates that it is not adequate for responding to readings of trauma in non-Western postcolonial writing for it is based on a Euro-American-centric corpus and methodology. In this article, I propose to examine the extent to which both classical and more contemporary developments in trauma theory can account for the literary inscription of trauma in the work of a present-day Francophone Sub-Saharan author, Léonora Miano. I consider Miano’s representation of historical Trans-Atlantic slave trade trauma and that related to continuing (post)colonial oppression in her 2006 novel *Contours du jour qui vient*. I demonstrate that, although classical trauma theory does find echoes in this text, it cannot alone adequately account for Miano’s literary portrayal of Sub-Saharan traumas which is greatly enriched by a postcolonial perspective.

Decolonising Trauma Studies

If the experience of trauma is not in itself a novel concept, its theorisation as a distinct academic discipline is. Trauma theory arose in the early 1990s in response to the ‘so-called ethical turn’ in humanities studies which aimed to reinvigorate literary scholarship by concretely linking it to life ‘outside the text’. The turn away from poststructuralism and towards the association of textual analysis with real-world contexts is present in the work of many of the founding trauma theorists—in that of Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and others—who sought to access through text the great narratives of violence, oppression, and dispossession having shaped the world. Trauma theory developed almost uniquely in relation to the 20th century experiences of Westerners, with the Jewish Holocaust having retained trauma theorists’ collective attention more so than any other event. Yet, as underscored by Rebecca Saunders, ‘…while trauma theory has primarily been produced in Europe and the United States, trauma itself has, with equal if not greater regularity and urgency, been experienced elsewhere’. Indeed, the ethical turn in trauma studies is framed around the notion advanced by Caruth that ‘trauma itself

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1 All translations in this document from French to English are my own. All references to slavery/the slave trade refer to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.
3 Ibid., p. 9.
may provide the very link between cultures’.\(^5\) In other words, that the acknowledgement of the trauma of others emerging from distinct historical experiences and contemporary contexts can foster a sense of intercultural solidarity and understanding. As many theorists have underscored, trauma theory’s Euro-American frame of reference and its employment of corresponding critical methodologies risk jeopardising the discipline’s aspiration for cross-cultural engagement.\(^6\) Accordingly, recent work in the field has sought to broaden, reconstitute, and redefine trauma theory’s basic tenets in order to render it more accommodating of non-Western populations and their own experiences of trauma. Inherent to this movement is the belief that colonisation, a traumatic occurrence experienced by much of the non-Western world, could and should be conceptualised as a collectively inflicted trauma and postcolonisation as a ‘post-traumatic cultural formation’.\(^7\)

Such a conviction was the driving force behind Stef Craps’ and Gert Buelens’ 2008 edition on ‘Postcolonial trauma novels’. This volume brought together the work of literary scholars in an effort to examine the extent to which trauma theory could ‘break with Eurocentrism’ and prove itself effective in bearing witness to the colonial traumas inscribed in non-Western postcolonial literature.\(^8\) The conclusions drawn from the individual studies indicate that there is great potential in ‘postcolonizing’ trauma studies, which retains much of its usefulness in regard to the examination of colonial-specific traumas including slavery, political violence, apartheid, and dispossession. However, there are also many challenges that must be addressed if trauma theory is to reach its ‘self-declared ethical potential’.\(^9\) These findings were reiterated in Craps’ 2014 book *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, which proposes an ‘expanded model of trauma’ infused with a ‘postcolonial perspective’.\(^10\)

This approach is said by the researcher to be more adequate vis-à-vis the textual representation of non-Western experiences of trauma and, therefore, more respective of the discipline’s ethical objectives.

The aforementioned studies identify postcolonial novels as literary sites that invite the reading of trauma as these texts are by their very nature ‘concerned with articulating the ongoing after-effects of colonial domination and violence in contemporary societies’.\(^11\) While spanning works from a number of postcolonial societies, there is a notable accent placed on the traumatic experiences of Sub-Saharan Africa as recounted in the fiction of namely Anglophone authors.\(^12\) Yet the European colonial project South of the Sahara was a colossal enterprise that went well beyond

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\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 3.

\(^10\) Craps, pp. 126, 127.


\(^12\) Including Ayi Kwei Armah (Ghana), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), Achmat Dangor (South Africa), Uzodinma Iweala (American of Nigerian descent), Ishmael Beah (Sierra Leone), Christopher Abani (Nigeria), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria).
the boundaries of the former British-controlled territories. One can therefore speculate whether the findings are also applicable to non-Anglophone contexts, especially given the prominence of English-language texts in postcolonial literary analysis. It is with this in mind that I propose to extend upon the past research by examining the applicability of both classical and postcolonial approaches to trauma theory in the work of a young Francophone Sub-Saharan author. The fictional texts of Léonora Miano, I believe, lend themselves equally well to the study of trauma, colonial and other, and its articulation in contemporary African postcolonial literature.

**Miano’s Fictional Recuperation of African Traumas**

Born in 1973 in Cameroon and living in France since 1991, Miano has been writing prolifically since her first publication in 2005. Her literary corpus boasting novels, theatre pieces, short stories, and critical essays recounts the experiences of African and Afro-descendant characters both in Africa and across the diaspora. Despite the varied modes her writing takes, there are common threads underlying the entirety of her literary oeuvre for which she received the prestigious Grand prix littéraire de l’Afrique noire in 2011. Whether her Afro-/descendant characters are situated in Africa, Europe or the Americas, they are nearly always haunted in some manner by the history, memory, and trauma of European imperialism in Africa. Such a preoccupation with colonisation and its destructive after-effects is most certainly influenced by Miano’s upbringing in Cameroon, a nation that distinguishes itself from its Sub-Saharan neighbours through its particularly intense colonial past. As the author recalls in her collection of critical essays Habiter la frontière, Cameroon is the only former French colony in Sub-Saharan Africa to have lived through a war of independence to rid itself of European rule. This colonial past, despite its notable non-integration into the history curriculum of Cameroonian schools, has ‘left traces in memory’.13

While acknowledging that European imperialism left a mark on continental memory, Miano stresses that specific aspects of colonisation also led to voluntary amnesia in communities fundamentally marred by trauma that they are unable or unwilling to articulate. The author inscribes her fiction under the banner of continental memory rehabilitation, for she perceives the lack of acceptance of past traumas as having contributed to the development of a diminished African self-consciousness.14 Furthermore, she does not hesitate to call attention not only to European culpability, but also Sub-Saharan responsibility and thus complicity, often ignored or dismissed, in continental traumas. Some critics have interpreted Miano’s denunciation of African implication in past crimes as a means to align her novels with Western doxa and therefore secure more sales among Western readership. In a 2015 article, Étienne-Marie Lassi suggests that the accent placed on African complicity in slavery and colonisation throughout Miano’s Suite africaine trilogy portrays African people as inherently ‘auto-destructive’, thereby legitimising European intervention in Africa.15 Yet Miano has clearly stated that her literary representation of African involvement is

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14 Ibid., p. 6.
not intended to diminish European accountability, nor to render obsolete Sub-Saharan demands for compensation.\textsuperscript{16} The author is driven by the conviction that the advancement of postcolonial Sub-Saharan societies deeply marked by trauma is dependent on the exposure and acknowledgement of troubling pasts. As she stated in a 2010 interview, to subscribe to the contrary and attempt to ‘…live in silence [and] build a future without analysing the past that produced the present’ is akin to lunacy.\textsuperscript{17} The author’s drive to shed light on ‘all the realities, even the darkest ones’ is clearly reflected in her 2013 novel \textit{La Saison de l’ombre} which considers African complicity in slavery through the desperate quest of the Mulongo tribespeople to locate and recover their men captured and sold to European slavers by a neighbouring tribe.\textsuperscript{18} African recuperation of slave trade memory similarly features as the central theme linking the three parts of her 2015 play \textit{Red in blue trilogie}.

In her most recent trilogy of novels, Miano addresses, through one of her central protagonists, the trauma of living with the knowledge that one’s family collaborated with the former colonial power in what appears to be postcolonial Cameroon judging by the textual reference to a country subjected to ‘the domination of three imperial nations’.\textsuperscript{20}

If the above works address the effects of colonial history, memory, and trauma rather explicitly, this is not the case for all of Miano’s texts. In the remainder of this paper, I will consider the more implicit inscription of (post)colonial trauma, including that of the slave trade, in an earlier text of Miano’s, \textit{Contours of the coming day (Contours)}.\textsuperscript{21} How does Miano illustrate the lingering effects of colonial trauma in contemporary African postcolonial societies and to what extent can trauma theory, both classical and postcolonial, account for its representation in this text? Is colonial trauma and the manner in which it manifests itself uniform or does Miano indicate the existence of different categories of trauma? Finally, what solutions does the author propose for moving beyond trauma? In addressing these questions, I hope to demonstrate that, although classic trauma theory does find echoes in \textit{Contours}, it cannot alone adequately account for Miano’s inscription of postcolonial trauma which eclipses canonical trauma theory on several levels.

Winner of the \textit{Prix Goncourt des Lycéens} and the \textit{Prix de l’excellence camerounaise}, \textit{Contours} (2006) is the second published novel of Miano’s \textit{Suite africaine} trilogy set in the fictional Equatorial African nation of Mboasu. Whereas \textit{L’intérieur de la nuit} (2005) recounts Mboasu’s plunge into civil war and \textit{Les aubes écarlates} (2009) the war’s conclusion, \textit{Contours} relates the social, psychological, and material devastation during the war’s immediate aftermath as witnessed through the eyes of the young female protagonist named Musango. Narrated in the first-person, the novel opens in a particularly violent manner with Musango recounting her mother’s frenzied physical attack against her then nine-year-old self. Her mother, Ewenji, has again accused

Musango of harbouring a demon which she holds responsible for her partner’s death and their subsequent destitution. Badly beaten, Musango is thrown out of home and onto the streets by Ewenji. The narrative that ensues recounts Musango’s long vagrancy as she moves between different social circles bringing her into contact with the war-weary and desperate population. While some of the people encountered by the protagonist attempt to assist in the reconstruction of their traumatised society, others take advantage of the postcolonial chaos to better their fortunes upon the suffering of others. After a brief passage at a humanitarian organisation, nine-year old Musango is captured and sold to a group of traffickers who dissimulate their trade in human beings behind the front of an evangelical church. After three years in captivity, the protagonist eventually escapes and continues her campaign to find and confront her mother again coming into contact with both charitable and malicious components of Mboasu’s population. The now 12-year-old’s quest for maternal acceptance is concretised in a return to the home of her grandmother, Mbambè, who is able to reconstitute her daughter Ewenji’s traumatic past marred by poverty and interpersonal conflict. The recognition of her mother’s own suffering eventually aides Musango to arrive at a point of understanding and forgiveness.

Belated Repetition of Collective Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Trauma

Miano has spoken at length in interviews and essays of her ‘obsession’ with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.22 This tri-continental enterprise, described by historian Michel Deveau as ‘the most gigantic tragedy of all human history in proportion and duration’, resulted in the capture, deportation, forced enslavement, and death of millions of African men, women, and children from the 15th to the 19th century.23 In a 2013 interview, Miano explained that certain coastal tribes in the region corresponding to modern-day Cameroon were complicit in the capture of individuals from other tribes thereupon sold into European bondage.24 The knowledge of this complicity—coupled with the shame of having been subsequently colonised by former commercial partners—have resulted in the subject becoming taboo in Cameroon.25 Cameroonian political scientist Achille Mbembe extends this silence to the whole of West Africa going as far as to state that there is ‘no African memory of slavery’.26 Like Miano, Mbembe attributes this voluntary continental amnesia to underlying sentiments of guilt, shame, and unassumed collective responsibility. While scholars of English-language texts from West Africa have challenged Mbembe’s claims, the observation of persistent silence regarding slavery persists in Francophone African cultural

25 Ibid.
In his investigation into cultural and literary representations of the slave trade across the French Atlantic world—in metropolitan France, its former Caribbean, and West African colonies—Christopher Miller claims that the ‘alleged “silence” of African writers’ on this subject ‘is in fact rather noisy’. However, he devotes a relatively small portion of his book to examining African representations of slavery and his analysis is majoritarily based on film studies. The exception to this is his reading of Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène’s 1956 novel Le docker noir, ‘one of the most significant and explicit considerations of the world the French slave trade left behind’.

In Contours, Miano’s inscription of slave trade trauma draws on both canonical interpretations and postcolonial developments in trauma studies. One of the most resistant tenets of trauma theory is the notion that trauma experienced in relation to one event has a tendency to repeat itself in a later event. This hypothesis finds its roots in the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud and has been taken up in varying degrees by contemporary theorists including Caruth and LaCapra. The ‘repetition compulsion’ involving a period of latency is attributed to the mind’s inability to grasp the trauma-inducing events as they occur and can affect both victims and perpetrators of trauma for, as underscored by LaCapra, perpetrators ‘may also be traumatized by their experience’. This in turn results in trauma’s initial repression or amnesia and ultimate return ‘in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena’. Scholars of postcolonial trauma have similarly drawn attention to the relevancy of psychoanalytical models of trauma as characterised by forgetting, latency, and repetition in the texts of postcolonial writers. Yet whereas classical trauma theory tends to insist on limiting ‘the extent of trauma to the life of the individual who suffered the initial “wound”’, recent developments suggest that trauma may exceed an individual’s lifespan and be transmitted collectively across generations. This is the basic premise behind Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’, which describes how the grief of Holocaust survivors is passed down to their children. In the Black Atlantic context, Ron Eyerman has suggested that slavery as a form of collective cultural trauma has shaped and continues to shape African-American identity. Hundreds of years later, the trauma of the slave trade, which engendered ‘a dramatic loss of identity and meaning’ for African-Americans, passes through generations without ‘necessarily be[ing] felt by everyone in [the] community or experienced

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32 Murphy, ‘The curse of constant remembrance: The belated trauma of the slave trade in Ayi Kwei Armah’s “Fragments”’, p. 53.
directly by any at all’. \(^{34}\) References to the compulsive repetition of slave trade related trauma are scattered throughout *Contours* and may appear, at least initially, to manifest themselves rather arbitrarily across narration. Yet non-linearity has been identified as a key representational technique in the works of postcolonial authors who wish to challenge ‘naively redemptive accounts in which colonial trauma is easily and definitively overcome’. \(^{35}\) The continual and at times unexpected resurfacing of slave trade trauma in *Contours* serves to highlight the degree to which Miano’s fictional society has repressed historical involvement in slavery, the vigour with which this past incessantly returns to haunt the present, and the urgency with which the author believes it must be actively addressed.

After being driven from her home and onto the streets by her mother, nine-year-old Musango is rescued briefly by a humanitarian association before being kidnapped and sold to a group of young male traffickers. She is taken from Sombé, a large city in Mboasu, to an isolated house in a rural location where she is set to work performing arduous domestic chores. It is at this point in the narration that the ‘repetition compulsion’ inherent to repressed trauma becomes most apparent for the protagonist-narrator is confronted with the violent realities of modern-day slavery. Here a trio of young African men sequester and abuse young African women before trafficking them to Europe to work as prostitutes. Some of these women have come on their own accord, desperate to reach Europe—seen as the promised land, capable of hoisting both themselves and their kin from the depths of postcolonial poverty. Others are sold into servitude by indebted families in what Miano has referred to as a ‘present not alien to the past’. \(^{36}\) Whether they come willingly or not, all have been reduced to the status of mere commodities, black bodies again exploited in the name of profit. The terms employed by Musango to describe these women are particularly revealing of Miano’s concern regarding the slave trade’s ‘repetition through contemporary modalities’; they are ‘zombies’ or ‘shadows’ condemned to reside somewhere between life and death—not unlike the victims of Trans-Atlantic slavery sent across the ocean some 150 years earlier. \(^{37}\) Her reference to zombies is especially noteworthy, for the figure of the zombie can be traced back to 18th century Saint-Domingue (Haiti), once France’s most lucrative colonial asset. As noted by Elizabeth McAlister, zombies in Haitian culture are ‘inextricable’ from the horrors of the plantation representing ‘the boundaries between life and death, repression and freedom, and the racialized ways in which humans consume other humans’. \(^{38}\) There is a distinctly African element to this modern-day slave trade as depicted by Miano; the masters have no need of any device of physical torture to control their slaves as the women systematically provide them with hair and nail clippings. This gesture is significant, for it is commonly

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\(^{35}\) Craps and Buelens, p. 5.


equated in Sub-Saharan societies with eternal submission to the power of the possessor. The repetition of this ritual results in the gradual descent of these victims of sexual slavery into emptiness with Musango remarking that, even if they do survive the perilous trans-continental journey, they will be ‘the living dead’ upon their arrival in Europe.\(^3^9\)

After witnessing, being subjected to, and surviving the perpetration of African-on-African crimes against Mboasu’s vulnerable women for three years, the now 12-year-old protagonist decides to fight for her freedom. Likening her decision to a ‘second gestation’, a symbolic rebirth, Musango escapes and returns to live on Sombé’s streets.\(^4^0\) The haunting memory of the slave trade again manifests itself here as Musango witnesses the violent confrontation between a Mboasuan man and his Antillean wife. The protagonist does not know this couple, yet their tragic micro story is telling of a much greater, painful narrative linking both shores of the Atlantic. For Sub-Saharan reticence to engage openly and honestly with Trans-Atlantic slave trade memory does not only affect continental African populations, but also their rapport with their descendants who endured the Middle Passage. Indeed, this remains a point of contention in Black Atlantic politics with Mbembe stressing that, as long as this uncomfortable past remains repressed in collective Sub-Saharan consciousness, it will be impossible to establish any true inter-continental race-based solidarity along the lines of that promoted by Pan-African models.\(^4^1\)

The couple’s confrontation is plotted explicitly against the contentious issue of African complicity in slavery. As her husband insults her for being ‘without genealogy’ in reference to her slave origins and the family destruction wrought by the Middle Passage, the Antillean woman retorts that she and her people, at least, have ‘no crime on their conscience’ for they ‘have never sold anyone’.\(^4^2\) Looking on, Musango notes to herself (and the reader) that the woman’s words seem to hurt the African man ‘directly in his heart, as only the truth can’, thereby drawing attention to the persistent affective wound plaguing contemporary Sub-Saharan consciousness.\(^4^3\) The violence of the past to which the Antillean woman refers resurfaces as she is viciously beaten and left for dead by her husband. Her physical injuries and the brutal acts behind them are accentuated; the woman’s face is ‘covered with bruises’, her ‘lips are swollen’ and blood flows from her head.\(^4^4\) Yet the narrative accent is placed above all on the psychologically violent consequences that the repression of traumatic memories, and their belated, uncontrolled repetition, can generate. As she lies dying, the Antillean woman talks to herself within earshot of Musango who has come to sit by her side. She reveals that, in marrying this man, she thought that she had found ‘an original Negro’, one as proud as Alex Haley’s\(\textit{Roots}\) protagonist Kunta Kinté, yet that this was merely an illusion for they have all ‘turned to dust’.\(^4^5\) Musango realises that this woman has understood, as has she, that ‘we were living in the kingdom of the dead’ drawing a direct parallel between the woman’s brutal murder and abandonment

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\(^4^0\) Ibid., p. 81.

\(^4^1\) Mbembe, p. 33.


\(^4^3\) Ibid., p. 122.

\(^4^4\) Ibid.

\(^4^5\) Ibid., p. 123.
and that of millions of Africans centuries earlier. Though her sadness at having witnessed the woman’s tragic killing is evident (she starts to cry), Musango is unable to intervene vis-à-vis the deeply-seated and collectively relived trauma of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that persistently pervades the social fabric of her postcolonial society. If the woman’s body is not reclaimed by her husband, it will be thrown into the river and end up ‘lying on top of those of millions of others who left these shores without ever reaching another’, this submerged nation of forgotten victims mourned by no one. Musango returns to the haunting presence of this ‘other Africa’ at several points in narration in what could appear to be unprompted eruptions of this repressed memory in the text through the narrative technique of non-linearity. Departing from the individually traumatic experiences that are inherent to canonical accounts of trauma theory, the narrator-protagonist’s systematic use of the plural first person pronoun ‘we’ highlights the collective responsibility in the forsaking of the victims of slavery and the collective necessity to reinstate them in continental memory. Endowed with exceptional lucidity at such a young age, the child challenges her society rhetorically stressing the intergenerational consequences that the repression of traumatic slavery-related memory is responsible for engendering even hundreds of years after the event underscoring, perhaps more importantly, the impossibility of finding peace as long as this history remains silenced:

How are we supposed to survive them, we who believe so strongly that the dead are living? There is in the river that throws itself into the ocean an entire nation of forgotten living [people]. Family griots do not sing their names. When they relate the memory of those long bloodlines of which we are so proud, they never say the name of the young girl, the young man who left to pick medicinal plants in the bush and was never seen again. Nowhere have we erected a stele for the disappeared who never became without genealogy. They lie in torment [and] we are refused any peace.

Miano’s inscription of trauma relating to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in Contours draws on both canonical and more recent developments in trauma theory. This trauma is re-experienced hundreds of years after the initial wounding seeping hauntingly and repetitively into the lives of the contemporary descendants of both victims and perpetrators. Yet not all of the trauma present in Contours stems from a historical context as clear-cut as that of the slave trade. In the next section, I will turn my attention to the textual representation of (post)colonial trauma, a form of trauma that, though not necessarily attributable to an historical event, is depicted as no less destructive in Miano’s novel.

Insidious (Post)colonial Trauma

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p. 125.
Canonical models of trauma, including those of both Caruth and LaCapra, have tended to be event-based meaning that the infliction of trauma is attributed to ‘a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event’ which can be located in both space and time.\(^{49}\) The Holocaust and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, despite the latter’s very long duration, are prime examples of such historical events. Yet recent studies suggest that event-based models are problematic as some traumas, such as (post)colonialism, are impossible to locate ‘in an event that took place at a singular, historically specific moment in time’ and instead form ‘part of a long history of racism and exploitation that persists into the present’.\(^{50}\) Feminist psychotherapist Laura Brown has been particularly active in underscoring the inherent deficiencies of event-based models in accounting for the vast array of traumas from which individual people and groups can suffer. For Brown, the privileging of isolated, sudden events (wars, natural disasters, car accidents etc.) restricts our understanding of trauma and its effects to certain categories of victims who retain a socially dominant position. She calls for the need to expand trauma theory to take into account the ‘private, secret, insidious traumas’ of minority groups including women and girls, people of colour, homosexuals, disabled people, and the poor.\(^{51}\) The ‘insidious trauma’ to which these groups are exposed is not ‘necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being’ but does nonetheless ‘violence to the soul and spirit’.\(^{52}\) Craps and Buelens cite Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and namely the author’s rendition of an encounter with the racial fear of a white child as a ‘classic example of insidious trauma due to systematic oppression and discrimination’ which leads to the development of ‘feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred’.\(^{53}\)

Brown’s notion of insidious trauma is valuable for exploring Miano’s inscription of (post)colonial trauma in *Contours*. Unlike the author’s portrayal of trauma linked to the specific case of repressed Trans-Atlantic slave trade memory, the trauma of (post)colonialism is inscribed much more implicitly. Not associated with any single, extraordinary event, the destructive effects of this trauma manifest themselves within the intimate circle of Musango’s family and, singularly, through the character of her mother Ewenji. As mentioned, the novel opens in a particularly violent manner with nine-year-old Musango relating her mother’s hysteria as she prepares to immolate her only child whom she accuses of hosting a demon. This is the first of many physical attacks that Musango has been subjected to by her mother and that the protagonist-narrator recounts over the novel’s opening section entitled ‘Absence’. Despite the initial parallels that can and have been drawn with slavery, it soon becomes apparent that Ewenji’s behaviour is the result of a very different type of trauma, one that tends to ‘fly under the trauma theoretical radar’.\(^{54}\) Though the source

\(^{49}\) Craps, p. 31.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 63.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 107.

\(^{53}\) Craps and Buelens, p. 3.

\(^{54}\) Sylvie Laurent suggests that Miano draws on the destruction of the ‘vulnerable’ Black female body (epitomised by Musango’s beating at the hands of her mother) as a metaphor for the violence inflicted on Africans during both slavery and colonisation. For Laurent, Miano’s use of the trope of infanticide (rather than filicide) reflects the substantial influence that feminine Afro-diasporic authors of the New World and their works, such as those of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison and Maryse Condé, have had on the
of Ewenji’s trauma is not revealed directly, certain textual clues suggest that it stems from the ‘ongoing humiliation and degradation in interpersonal relations’ that characterise insidious trauma.59 Musango alludes throughout the novel to her mother’s difficult relations with those closest to her; with her partner, Musango’s father, who neglected to plan for Ewenji’s and his daughter’s futures by not naming them in his will, and her partner’s family who refuses to recognise Ewenji and her daughter and humiliates them by laying claim to all of Musango’s deceased father’s assets thereby plunging mother and daughter into dire poverty. The humiliation Ewenji experiences also emanates from relationships with members of her own family including the eleven sisters she hardly has any contact with and who, on the rare occasions does see them, continuously degrade her by comparing her to another sister, ‘the only one that ever managed to be anything other than a mistress or a concubine’, Ewenji’s ‘rival’.56

The long-term effects engendered by these private, repeated insidious traumas result in a loss of self-esteem and even the development of profound self-hatred. As Musango notes, again addressing her mother and demonstrating wisdom beyond her years, ‘all that anger never had anything to do with me’ and instead betrays the ‘deep hatred that you have for yourself, for everything that comes from you’.57

After witnessing the many ills plaguing her postcolonial society, Musango decides that she needs to shed light on the well-guarded past of her mother in order to comprehend how Ewenji came to be who she is, this ‘deadly mother filled with hate inconsolable in regard to suffering that she is unable to name’.58 Musango’s quest to ‘go to the source’ of Ewenji’s existence leads her to her maternal grandmother Mbambè’s house in Embénoyolo, the desperately poor and ill-reputed area of Sombé from which Ewenji originates.59 It is in contact with this elderly woman that Musango is able to garner the information she requires to reconstitute the traumatic past of her mother whom she discovers like herself, though for different reasons, suffered from a lack of maternal affection during her childhood. Mbambè explains to her granddaughter:

Ewenji was always a difficult child...we never stopped fighting, her and I. Once born, she wanted to stay under my skirts, clinging to my pagne, as if to not see the world in which I had made her come. I had to push her away often. I know I hurt her, that she needed more attention, but there were so many [children]. I couldn’t have preferences...Ewenji wanted a place all to herself, to be distinguished.60

Cameroonian writer. Indeed, Miano has never made a secret of her affiliation with the work of Afro-American and Caribbean authors similarly reflected in her decision to study African-American literature at university where she wrote her Master’s thesis on Morrison’s Beloved. S. Laurent, ‘Le « tiers-espace » de Léonora Miano romancière afropéenne’, Cahiers d’études africaines, vol. 4, no. 204, 2011, pp. 775-776, 784.; Craps and Buelens, p. 3.


56 Miano, Contours, p. 40.

57 Ibid., p. 20.

58 Ibid., p. 125.

59 Ibid., p. 135.

60 Ibid., p. 242-43.
Musango thus learns that Ewenji’s relationship with her own mother was dysfunctional for Ewenji craved special attention that her mother, a single and poor parent to numerous children, was unable to give her. This led to fierce competition between Ewenji and her sisters and singularly with her rival sister. In observing the neighbourhood of Embényolo, Musango similarly comes to better comprehend Ewenji’s hysterical reaction to her partner’s death, which left her in dire financial precarity, for the poverty of this slum is literally terrifying and leaves the protagonist-narrator ‘gripped with fear’. Embényolo is described by the child as a literal Hell on Earth: it is a place that ‘smells like corpses’, where ‘people live bathed in the unbearable scent of their own death’ and where the inhabitants ‘thwart famine’ by absorbing what their bodies secrete. Ewenji’s desperate attempts to create a new life for herself far from the horrors of abject poverty are validated by Musango as she rhetorically asks ‘wouldn’t anyone do anything to escape this hole?’ As such, it is through what LaCapra dubs ‘empathic unsettlement’—the state of ‘being responsive to the traumatic experience of others’—that Musango begins to understand the origin of her mother’s ‘evil’. Yet Musango’s and the reader’s acknowledgement of Ewenji’s very poor upbringing and her tense rapport with her family—all examples of insidious trauma generating ‘feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred’—do not in themselves warrant Ewenji’s trauma being read as (post)colonial trauma. For this connection to be explicitly made, one must refer to paratextual elements of the novel that position Ewenji as a metaphor for postcolonial Africa. The link here between a traumatised Mother Africa ‘adrift’ and the defective maternal figure symbolised by Ewenji is made explicit on the novel’s back cover and has previously been noted in literary criticism on this text. It is similarly recalled in the words that Mbambè addresses to her granddaughter as she expresses her regret concerning a ‘land that no longer knows how to love its children’ stressing, however, that this does not constitute an excuse to abandon it. Mbambè praises her granddaughter’s efforts to be reunited with her own mother in spite of considerable hardships; ‘…you are looking for your mother despite everything. It is better to take care of the sick and poor mother who no longer recognises you than to grovel at the feet of a stepmother with only hate and contempt’. Furthermore, Miano has spoken publicly of the symbolism behind the three generations of African women portrayed in Contours. Placing Mbambè in relation to political and historical contexts, the author stated in a 2006 interview that this character embodies the generation that, though having lived through the colonial era, critically possessed the tools, certain core values, and more crucially, a sufficiently resistant sense of self-esteem, to surmount the trauma of colonisation. This resistance is confirmed in the tale Mbambè recites to

61 Ibid., p. 236.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 135.; LaCapra, p. 41.
65 Craps and Buelens, p. 3.
67 Miano, Contours, p. 255.
68 Ibid.
Musango near the end of the novel in which she summarises the colonial enterprise in Sub-Saharan African stressing that it was, at least in regard to her generation, ultimately unsuccessful as the African soul remained intact:

"Others came,... If they dug roads long ago, it was to get access to every millimetre of land where there was something to extract. If they relieved our pain, it was because we had to be strong to work. If they built schools, it was to teach us to no longer love ourselves, to forget the name of our ancestors. They were not just after our land and our sweat. They needed our soul...[but] this soul did not die."70

Postcolonial trauma scholars have identified indigenous literary practices as methods permitting 'a deliberate eschewal of the Western discourse of unspeakability'.71 It is indeed through her recourse to African oral literature that Mbambè through her endorsement of the role of griot—the 'custodian of history and memory for traditional African societies'—breaks with canonical models of trauma by articulating that which has remained silenced up until this point in narration.72 If Mbambè's generation managed to resist the trauma of European imperialism in Africa, the same cannot be said for that of her daughter. Miano has stated that Ewenji represents the generation that did not live through colonisation yet came to be just after, that which 'had to assume independence without the required tools'.73 Ewenji and her 'lost' postcolonial generation, compromised by both a lack of resources and, more tellingly, by a systemic lack of confidence in themselves, recall the founding of the new African nation states and the transition from colonial to postcolonial oppression.74 Through Ewenji, this 'suffering' mother who 'cannot love what she engendered as she has no love for herself', Miano subverts the much exalted symbol of the devoted, caring Mother Africa to emphasis the long-term effects of (post)colonial trauma somewhat overlooked in pre-independence, utopian Négritude discourse.75

Miano’s inscription of (post)colonial trauma in Contours breaks with canonical event-based models as trauma cannot always be attributed to a single, extraordinary past event. The trauma engendered by postcolonial regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa and manifest in Ewenji’s character can be described as insidious in regard to Brown’s theory concerning traumas that are not ‘necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being’ but nonetheless do ‘violence to the soul and spirit’.76 In the text, insidious trauma exists alongside historically specific trauma relating to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The result is a novel built upon layers of trauma that constantly interact and feed into each other to underscore the extent to which trauma in general has marked and continues to mar the African continent. The question that remains to

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70 Miano, Contours, p. 260.
71 Craps and Buelens, p. 5.
72 Whitehead, p. 28.
73 Miano, ‘Léonora Miano: ‘Pour créer une nouvelle Afrique, il nous faut accepter notre passé’.
74 Ibid.
76 Brown, p. 107.
be answered then is how Miano proposes that Sub-Saharan societies deal with (post)colonial trauma? This brief discussion will conclude our study of *Contours*.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra makes a distinction between two different yet interconnected ways of responding to trauma that the theorist borrows from Freudian psychoanalysis; ‘working through’ and ‘acting out’. The process of working through is restorative entailing a therapeutic coming to terms with trauma which enables one to break the cycle of retraumatisation. It requires that an individual or a community recognise that a traumatic event belongs to the past and that, though it may have implications in the present, it is not identical with the ‘here and now with openings to the future’.77 Conversely, acting out is based on the incapacity to distinguish between past and present which results in trauma being ‘performatively regenerated or relived as if it was fully present rather than represented in memory’.78 In acting out, the victim of trauma is possessed by the past and unable to move beyond it.

At the novel’s conclusion, it is Musango who epitomises the more desirable process of working through. She is aided in this task by Mbambè who encourages her to let go of the past and direct her gaze towards the future in order to ‘espouse the contours of the coming day’.79 This must be achieved by ‘remembering and celebrating who one is’ while recognising that this is not solely dependent on one’s past but equally so on what one will accomplish in the future.80 If Musango has begun the process of working through, the same cannot be said for Ewenji with whom the protagonist-narrator is finally reunited with at the novel’s end in the cemetery where her father is buried. Musango remarks with regret that her mother, whom she finds in a hysterical state calling upon her deceased partner to return from the dead and give her back ‘a life’, remains ‘walking backwards’ where there is ‘nothing but an impasse and deafening silence’, incapable of shifting her gaze from a painful past that continues to haunt her present.81 Still addressing her mother, metaphor of a traumatised postcolonial Africa, Musango reiterates Mbambè’s guidance in the hope that Ewenji will one day desist in acting out the past; ‘[w]e must not cry nor tirelessly whimper losing sight in the end of the cause of our grief. We must remember, and then we must walk forward’.82 Musango’s recognition of the importance of remembrance is reflected in her decision to reinstate in continental memory the victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the ‘disappeared without a sepulchre’, in whose honour she decides to erect a series of figurines along the river bank.83

Our reading of *Contours* has demonstrated that, although Miano draws extensively on canonical trauma theory in this novel, her literary depiction of Sub-Saharan societies heavily marked by colonial trauma requires an engagement with postcolonial perspectives. This approach alone can account for the complicated and interacting expressions of trauma in non-Western contexts. Ultimately, the novel confirms that literature offers what LaCapra calls an ‘expansive space’, a ‘relatively safe

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77 LaCapra, p. 22.
78 Ibid., p. 70.
80 Ibid., p. 260-61.
81 Ibid., p. 267.
82 Ibid., p. 274-75.
83 Ibid., p. 274.
haven’, for examining the inscription of trauma.\textsuperscript{84} Our analysis thereby supports the claim made by Craps and Buelens that there is much to gain from ‘postcolonizing’ trauma studies.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{84} LaCapra, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{85} Craps and Buelens, p. 3.