

“I Smell the Ellero River Already”: Trauma and Exile in Roberto G. Fernández’s *Holy Radishes!*

Hüseyin ALTINDIŞ¹

Abstract

Trauma studies aims to construct an intellectual and ethical response to human suffering and their cultural and artistic representations. Trauma studies have inspired an array of disciplinary and interdisciplinary criticism that offer paradigms for understanding human behavior and coping strategies. Drawing on postcolonial trauma theory, this essay analyzes how Roberto G. Fernández in his novel *Holy Radishes!*¹ complicates and challenges existing trauma paradigms suggesting that existing European psychoanalytic origins of the trauma theory are not adequate for depicting Cuban trauma experience. The text focuses on the specificity of trauma that constructs meaning through considering social, historical, and cultural contexts of traumatic experience. In other words, the paper aims to break with Eurocentrism by analyzing the text that bears witness to the suffering caused by exile. Thus the paper aims to discuss the usefulness of trauma theory for understanding colonial trauma caused by forced migration, exile, dispossession, diaspora, and political violence.

Keywords

trauma
eurocentrism
postcolonial Trauma
collective Trauma
temporality
liminality

About Article

Received: 02.12.2021

Accepted: 25.02.2022

Doi:
10.20304/humanitas.1031466

“I Smell the Ellero River Already”: Roberto G. Fernández’in *Holy Radishes!* Romanında Travma ve Sürgün

Öz

Travma çalışmaları insan acılarına ve bu acıların kültürel ve estetik ifade biçimlerine entelektüel ve etik bir tepki oluşturmayı amaçlamaktadır. Travma çalışmaları insan davranışını ve sorunlarla başa çıkma stratejilerini anlamaya yönelik paradigmlar sunan disiplinlerarası eleştiriye ilham olmuştur. Sömürge sonrası travma kuramından yola çıkarak, bu çalışma Roberto G. Fernández’in *Holy Radishes!* romanında var olan travma teorisine nasıl meydan okuduğunu ve Avrupa psiko-analitik merkezli travma teorisinin Küba travma tecrübesini aktarmada yetersiz olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Metin, travma tecrübesinin sosyal, tarihi ve kültürel bağlamlarını göz önünde bulundurarak anlam oluşturan travmanın özgüllüğüne odaklanmaktadır. Bir başka deyişle, makale sürgünün yol açtığı acılara tanıklık eden metni sömürge sonrası travma kuramı bağlamında inceleyerek Avrupa merkezli yaklaşımdan uzaklaşmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu sayede travma kuramının kolonyal travmayı anlamadaki etkinliğini zoraki göç, sürgün, diaspora ve politik şiddet bağlamında tartışmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler

travma
sömürüsonrası travma
kollektif travma
zamansallık
eşiklik

Makale Hakkında

Geliş Tarihi: 02.12.2021

Kabul Tarihi: 25.02.2022

Doi:
10.20304/humanitas.1031466

¹ Asst. Prof. Dr., Selcuk University, Faculty of Arts and Letters, English Language and Literature, Konya/Türkiye, haltindish@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-2318-3052

Introduction

Trauma studies, as a field of research, emerged in the 1990s aiming to construct an intellectual and ethical response to human suffering and their cultural and artistic representations. Social, emotional, and psychological trauma have inspired an array of disciplinary, interdisciplinary criticism and studies that offer paradigms for understanding human behavior and trauma coping mechanisms. Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman, among many, are the pioneers who have constructed literary analyses of human suffering by the convergence of deconstructive and psychoanalytic theories. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth "seeks to rethink the relation between memory and trauma and to construct models of historical temporality which depart from the strictly linear" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 6). Caruth pioneered a psychoanalytic poststructuralist approach and adopted Freud's concept of "belatedness" to focus on trauma's disruption of time or history. For Freud, trauma is a wound inflicted not on the body but the mind. Caruth's definition establishes claims about the repetitive and dissociative nature of trauma, which "returns to haunt the survivor" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4).

In her book *Worlds of Hurt*, Kali Tal states that "trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside the bounds of 'normal' human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded" (Tal, 1996, p. 21). For Tal, the purpose of literary trauma narratives is to "tell and retell the story of traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community." (Tal, 1996, p. 21). Although the primary purpose of the theory was to "provide the very link between cultures" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11), it fails cross-cultural engagement. In other words, it neglected or failed to recognize the trauma of non-Western and minority cultures. For that reason, critics such as Michael Rothberg, Alan Gibbs, Michelle Balaev, Stef Craps, Ruth Leys, and Ann Cvetkovich offered new models for understanding and interpreting trauma. Alan Gibbs highlights the Eurocentric trauma paradigm's limitations and argues that the dominant trauma paradigm does not adequately reflect or explain contemporary American contexts (Gibbs, 2015, p. 20).

Similarly, Michael Rothberg provides a crucial theoretical model for decolonizing trauma theory. He suggests rethinking trauma as "collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)" (Rothberg, 2008, p. 228). Last but not least, in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, Stef Craps suggests that the "trauma of non-Western or minority groups must also be acknowledged in their own terms" (Craps, 2013, p. 3), so that we can find connections between individuals and groups with different traumatic experiences. Reading postcolonial

trauma emphasizes more differentiated and more culturally and historically specific readings. Within this context, drawing on theories of exile and postcolonial trauma theory, this essay attempts to show how *Holy Radishes!* complicates and challenges existing trauma paradigms suggesting that Eurocentric psychoanalytic trauma theory is insufficient for depicting Cuban—social, political, and gendered—trauma experience. The text focuses on the idiosyncrasy of trauma that constructs meaning through a more significant consideration of traumatic experience's social, historical, and cultural contexts. In other words, the paper aims to break with Eurocentrism by analyzing the text that marks the suffering caused by exile. Thus the paper offers a postcolonial reading of trauma to understand migration, exile, dispossession, and political violence. The paper also addresses decolonizing trauma theory by offering a supplementary model of trauma narrative and ultimately aims to advance our understanding of pluralistic—feminist, postcolonial, and cultural—models of trauma theory and provides a sample reading as alternative trauma aesthetics to contribute to the decolonization of trauma studies.

The Cuban presence in the U.S. was reasonably distinct from that of other immigration populations. As Lisandro Pérez writes, this distinction was due to a "large proportion of middle-aged and elderly persons, female majority, low fertility, and relatively high socioeconomic status" (Pérez, 1986, p. 126). These people were the ones who were against the communist regime in Cuba and exiled to the USA. Roberto G. Fernández focuses on their struggles, survival, and adaptation to new cultures. Fernández portrays the life and traumatic memories of the exile and depicts Cuban–American survival strategies in his novels *Raining Backwards* (1988) and *Holy Radishes!* (1995). Born in Sagula la Grande in Cuba and exiled to Florida when he was eleven, Fernández depicts the life and struggles of Cuban Americans in Florida, and his narrative calls to the development of alternative discourses. *Holy Radishes!* is a witty and wise parable of exiled Cubans in Florida. The book portrays a microcosm of the exile community from Xawa (a fictional representation of Cuba) and their struggles in rural town Belle Glade, Florida. Through the text's structure and theme, Fernández moves beyond the Eurocentric trauma paradigm and conveys a fractured view of self, blown about by forces beyond one's control. Thus, the text contributes to Cuban American literature presenting a multicultural and diasporic interpretation of trauma theory while challenging deconstructive trauma theory models, which marginalized or ignored the Cuban exile's traumatic experiences. In this sense, it is crucial to relate trauma to exile, which presents a unique case.

Exile and Gendered Trauma

To understand the Cuban, social and gendered trauma presented in *Holy Radishes!*, we must carefully include exile, which becomes an inevitable factor contributing to trauma in the Cuban experience. As Fernández tells here, their stories are "about marginal, isolated individuals whose only power lies in their ability to bear witness" (Alvarez-Borland, 1998, p. 18). As Isabel Alvarez-Borland notes, "exile literature has always been intimately related to history because the banishment of the writer is usually caused by some historical event beyond his or her will" (Alvarez-Borland, 1998, p. 17). By saying this, I do not mean that exile is inevitably traumatizing, yet in the Cuban experience, violence and torture increased the impact of the exiled trauma. Another reason is that exile traumatized several generations collectively; for that reason, it is both an unclaimed and unclaimable experience. Spanish word *desterrado* (Alvarez-Borland, 1998, p. 18), which means literally to be unearthed, to have lost essential link between land and soul, conveys a much stronger meaning than exile. In her introduction to the edited volume of *Exile* (1998), Susan Rubin Suleiman classifies the definition of exile in both a narrow and broader sense. In a narrow sense, she writes, it is "a political banishment;" in a broader sense, it "designates every kind of estrangement or displacement, from physical and geographical to the spiritual." (Suleiman, 1998, p. 2). This specificity makes trauma culturally specific rather than event-based.

My reading of *Holy Radishes!* attempts to demonstrate that Fernández closely replicates the literary techniques associated with trauma and memory theories to depict the collective and spatial trauma, as Rothberg suggests. This model examines the specific social and historical context in which exile's trauma is propagated. His narrative brings trauma to light and empowers the protagonist, Nellie Pardo, which is crucial for her survival. To portray collective and spatial trauma, Fernández creates a narrative full of disruptive temporalities, fragmentation, repetition, dislocation, and dissociation—devices that, according to Gibbs, "become established methods of depicting trauma" (Gibbs, 2015, p. 47). The chronology in *Holy Radishes!* is structured according to Nellie's memories—associative memories of trauma that disassociate her from her temporal and liminal space—and shifts in narrative voice disrupt the narrative. The themes of trauma, exile, memory, and fantasy are among the primary narrative threads of *Holy Radishes!*, through which Fernández explores the consequences of exile and fantasy and how loss and exile may lead to trauma. In this sense, the text presents a trauma narrative unique to exile and offers paradigms for lived human experiences baffled by human behavior. Fernández obsessively returns "to the intonation of collective and social trauma and the material conditions

of labor (Altındaş, 2015, p. 31). In so doing, the text highlights Nellie's "struggles to maintain her humanity and resist forces of control and homogenization" (Vickory, 2015, p. xi).

On the one hand, *Holy Radishes!* is a parable of the Cuban immigrant community, while it is "foremost the story of Nellie Pardo, a dreamer who longs for the idyllic place called Mondovi and her truffle-loving pet pig Rigoletto" (Altındaş, 2015, p. 32). Nellie always dreams about and fixates on this Mondovi, which is a perfect Eden for her. This imaginary homeland, with the dialogic relationship with 'transcendental homelessness' (Lucaks, 1971, p. 41)² and her imaginary relationship to it compensates for loss and healing the wounds of dislocation. Nellie's traumatic experience is defined by personal peculiarities and social contingencies, such as culture, family ties, national myths, and the relationship to a place, specifically Mondovi. Nellie's obsession with Mondovi and her memories about the place "[have] social and political values, forms of language, and even ideologies that guide how the story of trauma is interpreted and expressed" (Balaev, 2012, p. xviii). In this sense, Nellie experiences two realities simultaneously. Her condition stimulates the desire to invoke a different reality, which can be called an exilic imagination.

The setting is Belle Glade in the Florida Everglades, where the former aristocrats of Xawa now live in exile, and most of the women toil at the local radish-processing house. Their stories are told at breakneck speed, zipping back and forth in time, through long-winded and unrealistic streaks of dialogue. At the whirling hub of these scattered tales is Nellie Pardo, who, as a child, was a spoiled child and spoke only to her pet pig, Rigoletto. Grown-up, she marries Nelson Guiristain, the unwilling heir of a business empire. When revolutionaries overthrow the Xawan government, Nelson escapes to the USA with several million dollars of his father's company in cash in a cardboard suitcase. When the military forces ask him to stop, he throws the suitcase and the money into the sea. The action is symbolic because Nelson aims to free himself from parental and historical pressure. His journey ends in Belle Glade, Florida, where he finds a job with his friend Bernabe's help. Later, he sends documents to get his wife Nellie and his children to Belle Glade, where they reunite.

² The temporal situation of the exile reveals "transcendental homelessness," to use Georg Lukacs's phrase, due to lack of recognition. In *The Theory of The Novel* (1971), George Lukacs coined the term to mean "the urge to be at home everywhere" (41). He labeled modern novels, especially those of German Romanticism, as the artistic expression of this philosophy of trying to make oneself feel welcomed in any place or situation. He further states that "the form of the novel is, like no other one, an expression of transcendental homelessness" (41), which is the condition of modern societies. Nellie Pardo, the exile protagonist in *Holy Radishes!*, longs for a spiritual and emotional home no longer available in a world without a deity. This state of homelessness is emphasized at the end of the novel when Nellie sets off on a journey with an unknown destination.

The exiled have various ways of surviving once they find themselves in Belle Glade. Nellie finds a job at a radish-packing house where many other elite women from Xawa work. At the workplace, they have to endure abuse and exploitation, which worsen their traumas. Nellie dreams of going back to her beloved Mondovi and reuniting with her pig and her father. Meanwhile, Nellie and Nelson's marriage splinters further as Nelson yearns only for his lost squirrel (a prostitute), and Nellie retreats into her fantasy world. In the end, Nellie and her redneck friend Mrs. Olsen embark on a ship leaving their families behind, aiming to return to Mondovi.

Through Nellie's experience, *Holy Radishes!* envisages a new orientation in trauma: the trauma of specific historical truthfulness of dislocation and dispossession in the form of confiscation, loss of land, and loss of beloved ones. This sort of presentation distinguishes Fernández's narrative from the deconstructive trauma approach and accentuates the need for minor cultural representation of trauma in literature. The experience "outside the bounds of normal" (Tal, 1996, p. 17) accentuates trauma's effect, and "dramatic tension becomes excruciating pain for Nellie because what Nellie experienced back in Xawa cannot be considered normal. Her father, Don Andrés, is imprisoned after his house and wealth are confiscated by the revolutionaries. Nellie breast-feeds her father in prison to save his life because he is not given any food by the revolutionaries as a punishment" aimed to result in his death (Altındaş, 2015, p. 35). Nellie remembers the traumatic moment as follows:

I guess I have to feed you.... Please don't open your eyes...but I don't want to be your mom. I want you to promise me you won't consider me your mom, which means you would become Maria-Chiara's brother, and Nelson would become your father and Mam would become my daughter in law....I can't do it. I'm too ashamed to do it (Fernández, 1995, p. 41).

In addition to this unusual experience, sexual abuse and, ultimately rape add a gendered perspective to the trauma and enforce the traumatic experience. In *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*, Maria Christina García notes, "Castro encouraged the departure of those who opposed his government" (García, 1997, p. 16). When they wanted to get an exit permit, female exiles were often exposed to sexual harassment by the police, and some of whom were raped; this exit process itself "was a form of harassment" (García, 1997, p. 17). In *Holy Radishes!*, Nellie's harassment by the guard in prison during her visit to her father and later by the same guard in a police station epitomizes this factuality. Nellie encounters the prison guard, and he uses "Nellie's own hands [...] to help her start the process of disrobing" her silk taffeta gown that her mother bought from Belgium (Fernández, 1995, p.

35). The guard takes her taffeta and gives her jute sackcloth to wear, with which Nellie has to go back to her home after the visit, which is humiliating for her. The same guard, Rulfo, rapes her when she gets the passports to travel to the USA to reunite with her husband, Nelson. The narrative depicts the impact of trauma after the rape in the following manner:

Nellie's mind was ready to play back the Belvedere-Tower scene when she was slapped, and then the door closed behind the departing trespasser. Three passports landed on her bruised body as Nellie's lips finished reciting Sergio's last card to Don Andrés. Then she heard him say, 'You're gonna beg for my love one day!'

All was calm, all was still, and a fine mist seemed to be falling in the room. She lay silently in the quietness, staring into nothingness, her hands clenching the passports, her mind drifting on the air (Fernández, 1995, p. 286).

Nellie suffers from the traumatic experiences of exploitation and rape. These traumatic experiences and repeated abuse and losing her family, wealth, and status challenge conceptions of trauma as a single and sudden event and show that trauma is a structure in Xawan experience.

Nellie's case represents the commonality of trauma and implies that it is collective rather than individual. Through Nellie's story, *Holy Radishes!* explores the "overwhelming and traumatic effect of wider historical events upon the individual or family," as Gibbs remarks (Gibbs, 2015, p. 49). It also exemplifies how social systems and circumstances affect individuals. The intensity of emotions and trauma following the rape "impairs [Nellie's] emotional and cognitive functioning and [brings] lasting psychological disruption" (Vickroy, 2015, p. 6), which manifests itself later in the novel in the form of dissociation, rumination, and shutting down. Thus, the text depicts "post-traumatic reactions as a constant, insistent, and conscious presence" (Fernández, 1995, p. 6) in Nellie insistence on returning to Mondovi seems the only recuperative solution while at the same time her intention challenges Caruth's idea that there is no return. For that reason, her ambition to return to the idyllic representation of Xawa is not only a response to the overwhelming call of the past but also problematizing the Eurocentric definition and classification of trauma. Although Xawa reminds her of corruption and destruction of lives filled with the death of her beloved ones, returning and confronting the destructive aspect of exile and revolution alleviates the impact of trauma and acts as a healing process. Her eagerness to overcome the burden of the trauma displays itself in her behaviors and belongings: "Her traumatized, psychologically injured consciousness speaks through the action of leaving her bags packed. Besides, as the survivor of the violent revolution, Nellie bears witness in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts that remind her of the loss she experienced" (Altındış, 2015, p. 36).

The story opens with a third-person narrator describing Nellie doing her household chores and remembering her past through the physicality of her "evening gown, a royal-blue dress with brocades, pearls, and sequins" (Fernández, 1995, p. 7). These objects represent a sort of the exclusive, unforgettable core of her previous self. These objects also act like a meditative medium that links the body to the past. Nellie's household chores depict her spatial and temporal state; as she irons clothes, she remembers what Delfina, her father's servant, told her about doing chores at home. Opening the story through memory, *Holy Radishes!* reminds us that "memory's influence on consciousness, and the individual's concept of self before and after the event determine how much significance is ascribed to the narrative recall or abreaction of trauma in order to recover" (Balaev, 2012, p. 8). Through Nellie's memory, the narrative offers a powerful mode of access to the past of the characters. To remember the past, Nellie pulls the stack of photos from her luggage that she keeps under the bed. A recently taken photo reads: "To remember is to live again, but I feel like dying when I remember, Belle Glade, Florida, 1963 (Still in Exile)" (Fernández, 1995, p. 10). The impact of collective dislocation and exile that caused trauma is highlighted in this scene to remind the reader of a specific approach that would depict the culture and nation-specific trauma experiences.

Jeffrey C. Alexander defines collective trauma as "the result of a sociocultural narrative act of constructing traumatic experience" (Alexander, 2004, p. 10). The narrative of *Holy Radishes!* interprets "harmful and overwhelming phenomena which are believed to have deeply harmed collective identity" (Alexander, 2004, p. 10). Although *Holy Radishes!* provides a picture of the individual, Nellie, yet it depicts it in a way that suggests that "this protagonist is an 'every person' figure" (Balaev, 2012, p. 17). The collectivity of the trauma is exemplified through the inclusion of the stories of some other female characters. This commonality annuls Caruth's theory that trauma is event-based and individual. Nellie works for a radish-packing plant along with many upper-class exile women. Ten upper-class Xawan women work in the radish-packing plant. Dina, for example, "was a university professor of anatomy" back in her country; Loly Espino, ex-wife of Senator Zubizaretta; Victoria Rey, wife of the poet laureate Lisander Pons; Pituca Josende, wife of Chief Justice Josende; and Aida Lopez, the leading national contralto (Fernández, 1995, p. 99). The traumatic experience is overwhelming for these upper-class female workers because the loss of social status makes the trauma of exile more difficult to tolerate.

Maria Root, a psychologist and clinical practitioner, writes, "factors such as isolation, blame, *loss of social status*, and effect on the ability to take care of one's self and /or family

add to the trauma of the original event" (Root, 1997, p. 237). From this perspective, Nellie's trauma embodies the commonality of her experience. These characters are, as Whitehead would say, "traumatized individuals and they are subject to the contingencies of exile and displacement." (Whitehead, 2004, p. 19). The personal experiences of the exiled characters and their perception of time differ from person to person. These experiences are "insidious," and their trauma is called "insidious trauma," as Laura Brown conceptualizes it (Brown, 1995, p. 107) "because they are endemic to particular class situations that are repeated in ways that maintain hierarchies of dominance" (Vickroy, 2014, p. 132). This brings us a significant area of debate whether trauma is an event or structure. Another contribution of this paper to trauma studies is that the paper proposes that trauma is a structure that affects individuals differently.

Holy Radishes! brings the structurality of trauma to the personal and visible level and shows that Nellie's trauma is connected to more prominent social factors and ideologies. The female characters, along with Nellie, also embody the class and gendered perspective of trauma. Focusing on the experiences and sufferings of female characters, *Holy Radishes!* complicates the monolithic approach to trauma and shows that even within the same community, individuals may be affected differently due to the structure of the trauma rather than the event itself. While Nellie and the other female characters suffer emotionally and economically due to the exile, male characters, Nelson, Bernabe, and others, seem to focus more on their pleasures and jobs rather than remembering the past. This is presented through Nelson's obsessive search for the squirrel (the prostitute) and letting Nellie go to an unknown future with the money he saved.

The terror of the trauma and the past haunt these female characters in the present, which is depicted through the actions of Loly, one of the Xawan female workers in the packing plant, who has a near mental breakdown and hallucination in the following exchange:

They are coming to get us! They want my pearls!

Who's trying tuhgit who? asked a haggard Naomi

They." Loly pointed to the radishes.

Girl, yuh crazy. Yuh afraid of dem radishes? yuh crazy!

They are coming. They are coming to take me to Montana!" she said, running towards the next station, looking for a place to hide (Fernández, 1995, p. 98).

Loly takes the radishes on the conveyor belt like the soldiers back in Xawa who confiscated and looted the aristocrats' mansions, raped women, and killed or exiled those against the revolution. When Loly cries out: "They are coming to get us! They want my pearls!" she cries out the need for a unique approach to understanding her and thus Xawan women's trauma

within the context of trauma. In addition, Loly's physical description, "[her] face was red, and drops of perspiration stood out on it like the morning dew," (Fernández, 1995, p. 98) manifests the impact of trauma and, as Balaev succinctly writes, "[magnifies] a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence" (Balaev, 2012, p. 17). Through these examples *Holy Radishes!* delineates that the similarity of the trauma exiled Xawan female characters experienced shows its collectivity and is the uniqueness that advances our understanding of their pain.

There are different paradigms and elements that we need to consider to explain the role and effect of trauma in different cultures and genders. The passage above also highlights the impact of dislocation and relocation as a significant device of trauma fiction. The dislocation involves political oppression and power. In *Holy Radishes!*, the oppression and fear of relocation remind the female workers of their past unspeakable moments. The Xawan workers in the packing house act as a "supporting beam in [their] household," and therefore, they "have to endure all sorts of rubbish" (Fernández, 1995, p. 93). They know that if they lose their job, "the government comes and relocates [them] to Montana" (Fernández, 1995, p. 93) which is considered as a form of punishment, another exile, in a cold place in the middle of nowhere. Throughout its narrative, *Holy Radishes!* emphasizes that traumatic events are structural, and they permeate our everyday lives and consciousness.

As discussed above, trauma is a structure rather than an event. This structurality is given through experiences and the structure of the narrative. In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead explains that "there are a number of key stylistic features which tend to recur" in postmodern forms of trauma narratives, including "intertextuality, repetition and dispersed or fragmented narrative voice" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 84). Nellie embodies temporality—a characteristic of trauma fiction—when she believes that she is not here forever and will go back to her dream country, Mondovi, empowers her to overcome hardships, exploitation and otherization. Exiled people deny a sense of home and identity in the new land through disruption of identity, property, and status. The liminality that exiled experiences causes deterioration and paralysis, which may position the exiles to reterritorialize themselves. As García writes, the exiles who traveled to the USA expected a temporary stay and thought they would return to their homeland (García, 1997, p. 14). Nellie's keeping her suitcase packed for two years displays her temporality and her hope to return.

For Martin Munro, "the condition of being in exile unavoidably disrupts or even destroys habit and routine, and their inherent qualities of temporal and spatial continuity"

(Munro, 2007, p. 72). This temporality excruciates the trauma's pain as Nellie's obsession with the past dissociates her from the present life. Her obsession can be explained as a challenge to the idea that "because exile [...] is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being, Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (Said, 2000, p. 140). Her final journey to Mondovi (which is a question as we do not know what becomes of her at the end) can be read as a physical and literal challenge to this idea. Trauma profoundly alters the structure of temporality; therefore, Nellie, along with the other Xawan female workers, "literally lives another kind of reality, an experiential world incommensurable with those of others" (Stolorow, 2011, p. 20). Although humans have the ability to survive and adapt to challenging conditions, this incommensurability contributes to Nellie's dissociation and multiplicity. It alters her psychological, social, and biological equilibrium to a level that she becomes obsessed with the past, which destroys her temporal and spatial continuity.

Another key literary strategy in trauma fiction is repetition and in *Holy Radishes!* it acts in the levels of language, imagery, or plot. The repetitions help to explain Nellie's irrational behaviors. As a form of the binding, repetition "allows the reader to connect one textual moment to another in terms of similarities or substitutions and make sense of the narrative" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 125). The memory of the place and the past is insistently present in Nellie's consciousness and the narrative structure fulfills this function of binding. Specific themes that are persistently invoked in *Holy Radishes!* include Mondovi, Rigoletto, the Ladies' Tennis Club, and the soot covering everything. Also, photographs establish the element of repetition to maintain the connection with the past and space. When Nellie meets her neighbor Mrs. James B. Olsen, she introduces herself by saying, "I am from Xawa, but I was meant to be born in Mondovi." (Fernández, 1995, p. 17). The structures of repetition underline how Nellie is mired in a trauma, which is continuously recirculated. The attachment to the place is repetitively elaborated throughout the rest of the novel as Nellie repeats almost the same sentence several times: "Practically, yes. I was destined to be born in Mondovi;" (Fernández, 1995, p. 100); "I will be back where I was meant to be born;" (Fernández, 1995, p. 227); "I should have been born in Mondovi." (Fernández, 1995, p. 22). In addition to the place, her memories about Rigoletto and truffles serve the same function. These repetitions reinforce the sense that Nellie is haunted by traumatic memories, which eventually leads to dissociation.

In their article "Relationship between Trauma and Dissociation: A Historical Analysis," Martin J. Dorahy and Onno van der Hart state that the concept of dissociation is used in modern times to "denote alterations in conscious experience, a breakdown in integrated information

processing and psychological functioning, the operation of multiple independent streams of consciousness, a dissociatively divided personality structure" (Dorahy & van de Hart, 2007, p. 5). In *Holy Radishes!* Nellie's traumatic stress, sexual harassment, recurring sexual abuse, being exiled, losing her family (most notably her pet Rigoletto), and losing her social status leads to the division or dissociation of consciousness, which is depicted throughout the narrative structure. As the narrative voice describes, "Her dreams of a graceful life in Mondovi had become an obsession." (Fernández, 1995, p. 135). She screams for Rigoletto in her dreams. Although the nightmares diminish after six months, she "remain[s] laconic and taciturn," (Fernandez, 1995, p. 135) which describes Nellie's act of disunion with the present and her rumination and social, situational, and emotional withdrawal. The act of dissociation is illustrated in the following manner when the Xawan female workers appreciate one of the poems of Lisander Pons's, Xawa's poet Laurette, recited by his wife Vicky:

'That is really beautiful,' said Aida, the contralto, who was eavesdropping. 'He should set it to music, and I'd love to sing it.' The rest of the station five nodded in approval, except for Naomi and Mrs. James B., who didn't understand what was going on, and Nellie, whose mind had flown to Mondovi (Fernández, 1995, p. 94).

The dissociative effect of trauma displays itself as daydreams, alterations in perception, and breakdowns in terms of keeping a consistent conversation or relation with others around. Similarly, in another scene, Nellie shuts herself and disrupts the integrated functioning when her coworkers ask her if she is going to Pituca's house for a canasta party. "Vicky knew there wasn't going to be a party, but she asked Nellie to bring her into the conversation," (Fernández, 1995, p. 60) yet, as a result of dissociation, Nellie does not respond to the question as she is lost in memories of the past. The others are aware of her situation and Mrs. Olsen responds to Vicky: "She won't answer you. She ain't *here*. She's *someplace else*." (Fernández, 1995, p. 171).

An essential part of the novel's engagement with the perspectives of trauma narrative and ontological confusion is introduced through its mixture of fiction and non-fiction. The purpose of this fragmented narrative is to mimic the collectivity and impact of trauma. The plethora of narrative voices in *Holy Radishes!*, in this sense, provide individual perspectives to collective and structural trauma and supply enough material to explore the impact of the past, exile, and trauma. The multiplicity of narrators and narrative forms results from the complexity of the stories the characters want to tell as each of them focuses on different aspects of the same story, which highlights the idea that trauma is a collective structure. Each of these narratives

concerns the life of the exile "whose story either mediates that of the central figure or is mediated by it" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 124). It also emphasizes the difficulty of pinning down any memory-based story. The story begins in the present with a third-person narrator and goes back and forth in time between the present and the past. Then the narrative voice and narrative forms shift in voice and genre, which bind the overall structure of the narrative together and "suggest correspondences between the lives of the protagonists" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 123). Fragmented structure introduces a book review of "*Viaggio All'Amore*, by Marco Francesco Pietralunga Riccardi (Pietrarca). Saluzzo, Italia: The University of Saluzzo Press, 1939, (\$50)" (Fernández, 1995, p. 65). The intertextual link "constitutes a significant connection between the postmodernist form" and concerns of the novel "and its preoccupation with the trauma of ontological crisis" (Gibbs, 2015, p. 111). Thus, the text displays discursive complexity and multiplicity of narrative voices to emphasize the traumatic past unique to the minor culture and prescribes a way to read this trauma from different perspectives that cannot be granted by Caruth's model.

Fragmented narrative voices reflect the sense of dislocation and constitute a critical textual strategy that is centrally linked to the impact of trauma and exile. The text introduces various genres and oral narrative techniques, blending voices through shifting narrative voice and episodic framework to stimulate the participatory dynamics of imaginative power and multiplicity of trauma. These structural maneuvers emphasize the need for minority cultures and experiences, such as exile, to learn about minor cultures and the impact of trauma on the community. This type of reading contributes to the emerging critical and theoretical scholarship of trauma. For example, we notice that the chapters "Tulips," "Many Tulips Later," and "The Apocrypha" are letters from Delfina. In the chapters "Soul Train," "Gelati" and "I Saw Her Again Last Night" the first-person narrator, Nelson, tells the story of his escape from Xawa, as well as the past from his perspective so that the reader can fill the gaps in the overall story. The dispersion of the narrative voice and styles depict their struggle as "a dual struggle for connectedness—with a past and with a present." (Vásquez, 1991, p. 80). Through its critical characteristics, *Holy Radishes!* as a trauma narrative, emphasizes that "the effort to retain a vinculum with a cultural context now carried only within was made more complex by the traumatic nature of the separation from the island and by the chosen conception of its temporality" (Vásquez, 1991, p. 80). In this fragmented structure and psychology, the text emphasizes that Nellie, or any traumatized individual, is unable to disconnect herself from the

deteriorating effect of the traumatic event and becomes obsessed with the past, which hinders cognitive functioning and epistemic and ontological existence in the present and future.

Conclusion

Through depicting Nellie's traumatic story, *Holy Radishes!* displays the relationship between social forces and the role of individuality in trauma and presents trauma as an indicator of social and political injustice or oppression. By highlighting social, political, and cultural dimensions of trauma, the text problematizes the conventional recovery ending and leaves the reader with a question about exile's return. The end of the novel problematizes the notion that exile is involuntary and that the return is almost impossible. The title of this article, "I smell the Ellero river already," implies that return, which does not have to be physical, is achieved in a psychological mood. At the emotional and psychological level, the character would reach a level that would allow him or her to face the structure that creates and maintains the trauma. As mentioned earlier, despite her unknown destination, Nellie, with her friend Mrs. Olsen, achieves some healing by leaving the house and embarking on a ship, yet it is not wholeness, and it is not clear where she is heading. Liberating the bonds that constrict their national and cultural identity, Nellie and Mrs. Olsen, by starting this journey, aim to abolish national culture and identity in order to experience authentic cultural freedom. In so doing, Nellie, along with Mrs. Olsen, dismantle repressive connections between the self and the state; she remaps her geographical and cultural identity, which becomes transnational and free of any national boundaries. As this paper argues, this freedom implies the freedom from any dominant trauma or literary theory that aims to read the roles and moods of individuals in any circumstances within a particular structural form.

Leaving her family and husband behind, Nellie attempts to destroy the pre-established control on her fragmented identity to overcome the burden of trauma and oppression and dismantles pre-established theories that deny minor cultures and structures outside of the circle that is authoritative about trauma. By setting a journey to an unknown destination among the crew whose language neither Nellie nor Mrs. Olsen knows, the text assigns her a transnational identity, liberating her because it is unrestricted and unconnected to anything that would remind her of the past. This journey also creates cross-cultural understanding, which Caruth's model fails to achieve. It also implies that we do not need to know the sufferer's language to understand or feel the pain she or he experiences. This restrictiveness again brings us to the argument that this paper proposes that the reading of *Holy Radishes!* as a trauma narrative enriches new approaches to reading trauma in different literary works and cultures. *Holy*

Radishes! does not lead to any satisfactory resolution; therefore, it is an unfinished narrative that offers the reader another perspective to consider a traumatic past; as Vickroy states, "the nature of these narratives encourage readers to become more aware, to adopt a new consciousness of history, even if it is one that is fragmented, ambivalent, and at times inconclusive." (Vickroy, 2002, p. 33). As a metaphor, the ship connects the exile to the universe as an "umbilical stairway," to use Amy Kaminsky's term (Kaminsky, 1999, p. 6). This requires reading trauma from different perspectives taking minor cultures and marginal groups into consideration to understand lived experiences better. Through this metaphor and unknowability of the truth of the traumatized past and suspended ending, *Holy Radishes!* maps new places and experiences that would offer new ideas and interpretations, which would help the reader better understand the pain the sufferer experienced. For that reason, Nellie's action suggests that "exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (Said, 2000, p. 185). This unique quality of exile requires reading trauma and exile together as exile's experience disrupts linear development, confuses spatio-temporal relationships, and splinters lives into unforeseen directions and unknowable (Munro, 2007, p. 246). This unknowability, which can be explained through emerging approaches in trauma studies, such as feminist, postcolonial, cultural trauma theories, opens new ways to read trauma narratives from different cultures and civilizations. Bringing the specific condition of exile and presenting a gendered perspective to exile and trauma, *Holy Radishes!* invites readers to recognize characters' pain and use this recognition as the basis for a cross-cultural, transnational, or global understanding of diverse trauma aesthetics.

References

- Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In J. J. Alexander et al. (Eds), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 196-265). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Altundiş, H. (2015). *Immigrant labor in contemporary southern literature, 1980-2010* (Published doctoral thesis). University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.
- Alvarez-Borland, I. (1998). *Cuban American literature of exile: From person to persona*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Balaev, M. (2012). *The Nature of trauma in American novels*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Brown, L. (1995). Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic trauma. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 100-112). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Craps, S. (2013). *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. New York: Palgrave.
- Dorahy M. J. and Onno van der Hart. (2007). Relationship between trauma and dissociation: A historical analysis. In Eric Vermetten et al. (Eds.), *Traumatic Dissociation: Neurobiology and Treatment* (pp. 3-31). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Fernandez, R. G. (1995). *Holy Radishes!* Houston: Arte Publico Press.
- García, M. C. (1997). *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibbs, A. (2015). *Contemporary American trauma narratives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kaminsky, A. (1999). *After Exile: Writing the Latin American diaspora*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lukacs, G. (1971). *The theory of the novel*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Munro, M. (2007). *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian literature: Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier, Laferrière, Dandicat*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Pérez, L. (1986). Cubans in the United States. *ANNALS, AAPSS*, 487.

- Root, M. (1992). Reconstructing the impact of trauma on personality. In L. S. Brown & Ballou M. (Eds.), *Personality and psychopathology: Feminist reappraisals* (pp. 229-266). New York: Guilford Press.
- Rothberg, M. (2008). Decolonizing trauma studies: A response. *Studies in the Novel*, 40, 224-234.
- Said, E. (2000). *Reflections on exile and other essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stolorow, R. D. (2011). *Trauma and human existence: Autobiographical, psychoanalytic and philosophical reflections*. New York: The Atlantic Press.
- Suleiman, S. R. (1998). *Exile and creativity: Signposts, travelers, outsiders, backward glances*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tal, K. (1996). *Worlds of hurt: Reading the literatures of trauma*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vásquez, M. S. (1991). Gender in exile: Mothers and daughters in Roberto G. Fernández's *Raining Backwards*. In J. Whitlark & Aycock, W. M. (Eds.), *The literature of emigration and exile* (pp. 79-86). Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press.
- Vickroy, L. (2002). *Trauma and survival in contemporary fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Vickroy, L. (2014). Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction. In M. Balaev (Ed.), *A Contemporary approach in literary trauma theory* (pp. 130-151). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Vickroy, L. (2015). *Reading trauma narratives: The contemporary novel and the psychology of oppression*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Whitehead, A. (2004). *Trauma fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.