

Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State*: A Caribbean Rhizomatic Novel Reflecting the New Transmodern Paradigm

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Abstract: This article explores Haitian American writer Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State* (2014) as a novel that represents our intricate and rhizomatic transmodern era. In order to prove this contention, it focuses on the novel's amalgamation of different literary genres and modes from previous cultural paradigms—namely, the postmodern fairy-tale retelling and the social realist novel—with Euro-American as well as Haitian/Caribbean literary and sociocultural elements. The result of this *mélange* is a complex narrative of multiple interconnections that offers a nuanced portrait of new millennium Haitian diasporas and locals, and that most especially, recuperates subaltern Haitian voices so as to denounce the “untamed state” of the country. The article concludes by arguing that Gay's hybrid and relational text effaces an either/or episteme which, although considerably used in Western and postcolonial theories for a while, has now become obsolete and inoperative in such a globalised and entangled world.

Keywords: Transmodernity; Créolité; Haitian American literature; Caribbean hybridity; rhizome

[es] *An Untamed State* de Roxane Gay: una novela rizomática caribeña reflejo del nuevo paradigma transmoderno

Resumen. Este artículo explora la novela de la autora haitiano-americana Roxane Gay, *An Untamed State* (2014), como un texto que representa nuestra intrincada y rizomática era transmoderna. Para demostrarlo, se centra en cómo la novela entremezcla diferentes géneros y modos literarios de paradigmas culturales anteriores—concretamente la reescritura postmoderna de cuentos y la novela de realismo social—con elementos literarios y socioculturales Euro-Americanos y Haitianos/Caribeños. El resultado de esta mezcla es una compleja narrativa de múltiples interconexiones que ofrece un detallado retrato de la diáspora y lugareños de Haití en el nuevo milenio, y que sobre todo, recupera voces haitianas subalternas para denunciar el incontrolado estado del país. El artículo concluye argumentando que, con este texto híbrido y relacional, Gay elimina una episteme “de esto o aquello” que, aunque bastante utilizada durante un tiempo en teorías occidentales y postcoloniales, se ha vuelto obsoleta e inoperativa en un mundo tan globalizado y enmarañado.

Palabras clave: Transmodernidad; Criollización; literatura haitiano-americana; hibrididad caribeña; rizoma

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1. Introduction²

The numerous socio-political, economic, cultural and philosophical changes that have occurred from the late 1980s onwards have affected the present human condition to such an extent that Postmodernism seems to have come to an end (Van den Akker et al. 2017). In fact, in the last decades, a new emerging paradigm has been noted by different scholars around the world (Rodríguez Magda 2004, 2011; Dussel 2002; Moraru 2011; Ateljevic 2013; Van den Akker et al. 2017). Particularly, Spanish philosopher María Rodríguez Magda uses the term “Transmodernity” to define the new “globalised, rhizomatic, technological society” (2004: 3, my

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translation) which results from the dialectical synthesis and overcoming of Modernity and Postmodernity (33). Other thinkers regard the new paradigm as a change from a culture of egology and self-centredness to a culture of ecology and ethical interconnectedness (Moraru 2011) and, most particularly, as an opportunity to recuperate Third World (hi)stories through the dismantling of the centre/periphery binary promoted by Western Modernity and Postmodernity (Dussel 2002).

Although it is true that a homogenised definition for the new paradigm shift has not yet been provided, what is evident is that literary works are responding to the current cultural transformations. In her debut novel *An Untamed State* (2014), Haitian American writer Roxane Gay's particular treatment of hybridity and interrelatedness could be deemed as representative of the intricate transmodern times. In this narrative, Gay articulates through her female Haitian American protagonist a portrayal of the ambivalent relationship that the US-born children of many Haitian immigrant parents maintain with their progenitors' homeland. On the one hand, this character loves Haiti for it is a familial *locus* that brings memories of her childhood. But, on the other, she hates it because it is in part a "tropical apocalypse" (Munro 2015) of rampant sexual violence, poverty, crime alongside fratricidal (class and nationalist) conflicts in which both the Global North and Haiti's locals and diasporas are involved (Girard 2010). It is my contention that, through the complication of its protagonist's fluid diasporic identity—moulded by her transnational reality plus her conflicting relationship with the homeland—and through the recovery of Haitian subaltern voices disregarded by their own nation-state and the Western world alike, in line with the new cultural shift, Gay dismantles same/other and centre/periphery dichotomies rooted in the discourse of Western Modernity and postcolonial nationalism.

Precisely, the aim of this article is to demonstrate that, in order to efface those binarisms, Gay creates a hybrid novel of interconnections which combines and transcends literary genres and motifs coming from the Euro-American and Haitian tradition as well as aesthetic modes (postmodern retelling and social realism) from previous cultural paradigms. The result of this amalgamation, I will argue, is not a playful pastiche but rather, a complex relational narrative which reproduces the interconnected, rhizomatic and mixed nature of the Caribbean defended by Édouard Glissant (1989, 1997) and other critics of the *Créolité* movement emerged at the advent of the transmodern era, which so well evidences the current relational change in global culture theorised by Enrique Dussel (2002). Thus, in order to expand the scarce literary criticism on *An Untamed State* and to bring new insights to the current debates around the conceptualisation of contemporary fiction in the context of the new global paradigm shift, this article ultimately aims to prove that Gay's hybrid novel mirrors and reflects on the current intricate globalised world where the dichotomous either/or episteme seems to have become inoperative.

2. Transmodernity and the relational rhizome in contemporary caribbean literature

Since 1989, María Rodríguez Magda has observed the rising of a new paradigm in the First World which originated around the fall of Berlin Wall and was confirmed after the 9/11 attacks (2011: 2-4). She calls this "global shift in consciousness, economics, politics, and human relations" (Ateljevic 2013: 215), "Transmodernity" because to her, the prefix "trans-" ultimately holds the defining characteristics of our contemporary society such as constant transformation, transmissibility of information in real time, transgenic experimentation, transculturalism as well as transnational occurrences and immigration (Rodríguez Magda 2011: 6). Likewise, this prefix makes clear Rodríguez Magda's contention that Transmodernity is not a rupture with preceding paradigms (Modernity and Postmodernity) but rather, a continuation and transcendence of their premises (2004: 8).

Croatian academic Irena Ateljevic concurs with Rodríguez Magda's idea that the current paradigm shift is based on the overcoming of both Modernity and Postmodernity while "drawing elements from each" (2013: 203), and to some extent so does Enrique Dussel. This Mexican philosopher and historian, whose theorisations about Transmodernity coincidentally ran parallel with Rodríguez Magda's own conceptualisation, believes that the mind-shift produced by globalisation in the last years opens up a "cultural horizon" beyond Modernity and Postmodernity (2002: 221). However, in contrast to Rodríguez Magda, Dussel regards the advent of the new paradigm in a non-Eurocentric light that boosts a necessary decolonial critical thinking. In his view, Transmodernity is a new and promising "multicultural, versatile, hybrid, postcolonial, tolerant and democratic" (236) project which strives for the resurfacing of those Third World or subaltern cultures "depreciated or unvalued" by the universalist pretensions of Western Modernity and Postmodernity (224). Accordingly, Dussel deems the transmodern project framed in our globalised world as a paradigm no longer grounded on the centre/peripheries binary promoted by Western discourses, which can recover disregarded living cultures through the establishing of horizontal relationships between the Global North and South (Martín Alcoff 2012: 63).

In the literary field, writers are responding to the challenges of the transmodern era by generating new forms sometimes difficult to categorise with a single label owing to their employment of "new stylistic, generic and/or modal forms" that result from the relational "accumulation and intermingling" of former cultural paradigms—Modernity and Postmodernity—with the current globalised, transnational and interconnected reality (Omega and

Ganteau 2020: 13). Hence, as Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau note, such a generic experimentation and hybridity, which, as will be proved in the subsequent section, is present in *An Untamed State*, provides a good illustration of the current “fluid, interconnected, unstable reality of selves and worlds” (15). In addition, in the particular case of contemporary hyphenated authors like Gay, Peter Boxall remarks how many of them are responding to the globalised times with stories that subsume “differing or contradictory cultural histories” (2013: 173) and promote the necessity of overcoming nations and nationalisms alongside “oppositions between fact and fiction, between genders [...] and races” (180). Interestingly enough, this apparent new direction in hyphenated literature noted by Boxall—which is very much aligned with Dussel’s decolonial understanding of the transmodern project—is particularly observable in the Caribbean fiction that followed the intellectual movement of *Créolité* emerged in the late twentieth century, just at the advent of Transmodernity. As I will argue, this is the case of *An Untamed State*.

The Créolité-thinking was inaugurated by Martinican thinker and writer Édouard Glissant and expanded by other scholars such as Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau as well as Raphael Confiant. Unlike the previous Négritude nationalist movement that defended Caribbean identity as merely derived from ancestral African origins, Créolité promotes a conceptualisation of Caribbeanness as an identity based on the New World alongside the hybridity and diasporic experience of the West Indian peoples. Although it may seem that the Caribbean archipelago is a discontinuous and chaotic conjunction of “unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools” and contrasting cultures, languages and power relations, this seemingly chaotic area is rather “an island bridge connecting, in ‘another way,’ North and South America” (Benítez-Rojo 1992: 2). In fact, as Glissant notes in his groundbreaking *Poetics of Relation*, the Caribbean “may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly” for it “has always been a place of encounter and connivance and, at the same time, a passageway toward the American continent” (1997: 33). Precisely, because what happened in the islands bathed by the Caribbean, “a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc” (33), was nothing but a phenomenon of creolisation or mixture, Glissant argues that this archipelago offers the best “natural illustration” of Relation possible (34).

Besides this image of openness to the sea and other lands, Glissant also finds a crucial archipelagic interconnection in the abyss of the boat and the depths of the Caribbean Sea faced by the African slaves that were brought to the New World. Borrowing Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s arboreal image of the rhizome, “an enmeshed root system, a network spreading [...] with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently” (Glissant 1997: 33), this critic regards the foundation of the West Indies interrelation in the submarine roots sprout from the Africans that drowned in those tropical waters. These roots, Glissant explains, are not fixed in one position but rather, float free “extending in all directions [...] through its network of branches” (1989: 67). In this sense, Caribbean peoples “are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship” (Glissant 1989: 67), of a “*limitless métissage*” (Glissant 1997: 34, original emphasis) that has always characterised the West Indies. In sum, whilst Négritude retained binary oppositions through the inversion of stereotypes applied to peoples of African descent, Glissant’s relational or rhizomatic tenets seek to completely destroy binaries by stressing the heterogeneity and plurality of the Caribbean islands. In this sense, the Creolist movement could be regarded as a particularised expression of the new relational shift in global thinking and culture applied to the Caribbean reality.

Owing to the intermixed identity of the Caribbean peoples, it is not coincidental that the literature produced by West Indian writers, especially diasporic ones, is what Benítez-Rojo calls “mestizo text[s]” (1992: 27) where the Caribbean coexists with other cultures such as the Anglo-American and French ones in a polyphonic and polyrhythmic manner. This relational view of Caribbean literature in line with the aforementioned Creolist tenets that so clearly differ from the previous nationalist Négritude-thinking and dismantle the notion of peripheries and centre, is especially observable in the Caribbean writings produced at the beginning of Transmodernity, the 1990s. Interestingly enough, as Carine M. Mardorossian notes, the works of some contemporary Caribbean female authors like Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe/US), Julia Alvarez (Dominican Republic/US) and Edwidge Danticat (Haiti/US) particularly demonstrate the rising of a new literary paradigm that differs from earlier anti-colonial nationalist novels and later narratives of difference (2005: 2-3). As she puts it, these writers create fictional worlds where identities are not fixed but rather become rhizomatic, relational and dependent on the “new global interrelationships that are increasingly defining the world in multilayered ways” (3-4). Hence, because through their transnational, transcultural and translinguistic protagonists these contemporary Caribbean diasporic writers dismantle the same/other binary on which Western and postcolonial nationalism thinking is based, it could be argued that the new paradigm in Caribbean literature noted by Mardorossian seems to respond to the creolised understanding of the Caribbean culture and, by extension, to the new transmodern shift in global culture which encompasses these relational tenets.

As the following section will explore, although Gay is, unlike the aforementioned authors, a second-generation immigrant born in the US, due to her similar breaking of binarisms rooted in the discourses of Western Modernity and *Négritude* nationalism, she could also be regarded as yet another example of the new paradigm in Caribbean women’s writing in line with the *Créolité* movement which so well evidences the new relational cultural shift theorised by Dussel.

3. *An Untamed State* as a caribbean hybrid fiction of interconnected genres

In *An Untamed State*, Gay dismantles the traditional binary dynamics about Haiti extended by Western and postcolonial nationalist discourses by complicating her protagonist's diasporic, fluid and syncretic identity moulded by her Caribbean and transnational reality as well as her conflicting relationship with the homeland where the Haitian poor masses and women ignored by their own country and the Western world strive to survive (Girard 2010: 132-134; Duramy 2014: 33-35). In what follows, I will prove that, in order to do so, Gay creates a hybrid and relational novel which, in tune with the transmodern and Creolist turn in hyphenated Caribbean fiction, combines and transcends literary genres and modes from previous cultural paradigms (postmodern retelling and social realism) as well as socio-cultural elements from the Euro-American and Haitian traditions.

3.1. A postmodern feminist fairy tale of haitian princesses, zombis and maroons

An Untamed State is a fairy tale which revolves around Mireille Duval, an upper-middle class Haitian American young woman—the black princess of this tale—who, after being kidnapped and raped by a gang in Port-au-Prince, suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following her liberation. Nonetheless, unlike in traditional tales, Mireille is not protected by her wealthy and powerful father unwilling to pay the million-dollar ransom or saved by her white American Prince Charming (her husband). Instead, she wakes from her emotional numbness by herself and with a little help from other women, especially her peculiar fairy godmother.

In her celebrated work *From Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner maintains that “the happy endings of fairy tales are only the beginning of the larger story” (1995: xxv), and this is precisely what happens in *An Untamed State*. As its author explains, in this narrative the main story works as a sequel that develops from the happy ending onwards: “The story follows a woman who was living a fairy tale and then she is kidnapped and her fairy tale ends. [...] I thought it would be interesting to start with the happy ending and see how that might unravel” (Gay 2014a: 121). In fact, the story starts with the traditional formula, “Once upon a time, in a far off-land” (2014b: 3), and is divided into two halves entitled “Happily Ever After” and “Once Upon a Time.” On the one hand, the first half contains Mireille's detailed description of her imprisonment, a harsh account whose linearity is interrupted through memories of her former happy life. On the other, the second half firstly depicts Mireille's experiences in the aftermath of her trauma and, secondly, how she progressively heals and tries to re-start her life. In this sense, it is evident that Gay's text is not a traditional fairy tale but rather, a revisionist one.

Another characteristic that makes this work a revisionist fairy tale is its purposeful reversal of most of the defining aspects of classic tales. For instance, just as the action of fairy-tale retellings usually takes place in a more concrete contemporary or historical setting and time than in traditional ones (Joosen 2011: 13), Gay's story is set both in Port-au-Prince and the United States in a period that goes from 2008 to 2013. Moreover, in this story, the fortified mansion wherein Mireille's parents live—or as Mireille calls it, the “Caribbean Camelot” (Gay 2014b: 90)—could stand for a modern version of the castle that appears in classic fairy tales. Similarly, the tower where the princess is traditionally kept in tales such as Charles Perrault's “The Sleeping Beauty of the Woods” is replaced by a more realistic location: a barred windowed room in a gloomy humble house located in the slums of Port-au-Prince (Gay 2014b: 13). This stylistic choice clearly taints the text with a gothic touch.

Likewise, Vanessa Joosen notes that, especially in novelised fairy-tale revisions, “realistic alternatives are given for the magical occurrences” from traditional tales (2011: 13). This also happens in Gay's novel wherein all magic is absent and even macabre but realistic details of Mireille's rape are given, as illustrated in the following passage:

I scratched and kicked and screamed and spit in his face [...]. He stripped me of my clothing [...] pulling me up by my hips, forcing my thighs apart with his, forcing himself inside me. [...] With his arm pressed against the back of my neck, forcing my face into the mattress, I tried to breathe, tried to free myself but there was nothing I could do. [...]. I looked down at my thighs and saw blood in the dim light. (Gay 2014b: 79-80)

Interestingly enough, even though the novel includes a mirror, this is not the magical object from the Brothers Grimm's “Little Snow White” which judges the queen and drives her to jealousy and madness. Instead, here the mirror has a more realist function for it only works as an instrument of self-reflection whereby Mireille can observe her battered face and body that so evidently distance her from “the fairest [woman] of them all”: “I stared at my reflection in the mirror. [...] My face was nearly unrecognizable, misshapen—two black eyes, contusions, bruising. [...] A constellation of small bruises lined my collarbones. There were darker bruises wreathing my neck, my shoulders, my thighs, my back, my stomach” (Gay 2014b: 230).

Joosen also holds that, in adaptations of fairy tales to novels, the reader is given access to the inner lives of round and complex leading characters and more marginal ones like the king and the prince (2011: 15). In *An Untamed State*, whilst the story is narrated and focalised by the protagonist years after her difficult experience, other narratological techniques like an omniscient extradiegetic narrator, free-indirect speech and dialogues in several chapters give readers access to the consciousness of different characters. For instance, these narrative

strategies enable readers to learn about the reasons behind Mireille's father's refusal to pay the ransom demanded by the kidnapers as a condition to liberate her: "As always, he would do what was necessary to protect his family [...]. "This is the right choice," he said softly. He wasn't going to lose everything he had worked for to thieving losers, only to be left with nothing of a life again" (Gay 2014b: 48). As can be ganged from these thoughts, Mireille's father (Sebastien), a former poor Haitian immigrant who fulfilled the American Dream in the States and went back as a rich man to his motherland after decades of hard work, is fearful of losing the money that keeps the Duvals safe because paying once implies that "soon they'll (the kidnapers) be coming for [his] entire family" (22).

In addition, Joosen observes that postmodern retellings "frequently make use of a complex chronological and narratological organisation of plot elements" (2011: 16). This is the reason why stories reconstructed in flashbacks or a story that works as a frame tale in which other stories are inserted are a typical trait of revisionist fairy tales. Together with the continuous interruption of chronological events by Mireille's traumatic flashbacks and memories of her past life, in *An Untamed State* linearity is also broken through several summarised classic fairy tales, folk stories and myths embedded within the main plot that provide reflective commentaries about Mireille's captivity experience, her trauma and her family's reactions. These minor embedded stories function as what Mieke Bal calls *mise en abyme éclatée*, for, on the one hand, they repeat part of the larger story and, on the other, they reflect it as a whole when put together (1977: 107). For example, in chapter forty-one, Mireille embeds in her main story a brief summary of the first half of the Brothers Grimm's "Rumpelstiltskin," a tale which revolves around a poor miller who puts his daughter's life in danger when he "trades her for the favour of a king" (Gay 2014b: 353). Interestingly, this *mise en abyme éclatée* not only repeats part of Mireille's story—her captivity for monetary reasons—but also works as a critique against her father for having traded her life with her kidnapers, as the conclusive sentences demonstrate: "No one ever says what happened to the father [...]. I know what happened to the girl. I know" (353). In this sense, *An Untamed State* demonstrates its self-awareness as a metafictional text while deconstructing the conceptual and generic features of the classic fairy tale with the aim of creating an intricate story reflecting the complex reality wherein its Haitian characters are framed.

Nonetheless, this is a novel written by a Haitian American author, and in it, she combines her Euro-American and Caribbean cultures. Together with the references to European tales, Mireille includes in her narration a Haitian folk-tale, "The Magic Orange Tree," a story about the harsh reality of hunger and survival in Haiti which also functions as a *mise-en-abyme-éclatée*. The tale revolves around a little starving girl whose mean and cruel stepmother is killed by a magic orange tree that starts growing at the grave of the girl's mother thanks to her weeping and singing. At the end of this typically oral *conte*, the wicked stepmother is gone and the child keeps the delicious oranges that she later sells for a living because the tree "was that little girl's mother and a mother will do anything to protect and provide for her child" (Gay 2014b: 175). As Diane Wolkstein explains, this story is based on Haiti's country-side custom of planting the newborn's umbilical cord so that a tree can grow and become a food or economic source for the infant (1997: 14). Because of this tradition, trees are regarded as protectors or guardian angels of children (14). Then, it is not farfetched to suggest that, through this traditional tale which Mireille relates to the moment when the Commander threatens her with the kidnapping of her son if Sebastien does not pay the ransom, she is equating herself with the protective mother-tree that saves the little Haitian girl of the embedded story. Firstly, because she menaces to kill the Commander "if [he] touch[es] [her] child" (Gay 2014b: 175); and secondly, because her subsequent promise to "pull together what money [she] can" if "[her] father doesn't pay" (175) suggests a will to live or survive just for her beloved baby.

Such a reaction demonstrates that Mireille is a brave woman. However, despite her courage, she ends up turning into a peculiar Sleeping Beauty à la Haitian, i.e. a *zombi*, a figure which becomes yet another token of the interconnection of Euro-American and Haitian elements in the novel. The Haitian *zombi* has its origins in *vodou* and has often been employed as an image for the country's long history of colonisation. As different critics suggest, this figure can be defined as an undead body or spirit subdued to the command of a sorcerer, the *bokor*. This peculiar enchanter who steals the soul of the individual, thereby leaving him or her without will, consciousness and personality, becomes a merciless master exploiting the depersonalised and submissive person as if he or she were an enslaved labourer (Glover 2005: 107-108; Lauro 2015: 50). Then, the subject affected by the *bokor's* spell turns into a "being without essence," a "non-person that has lost not only its humanity, but that has accepted, without protest, the status of victim" (Glover 2005: 108-109). Because the connotations of confinement, dehumanisation and exploitation behind the Haitian *zombi* are similar to those behind the plantation slave's degradation and alienation into a state of "social death" (Patterson 1982: 38), it is not strange that zombification is usually related with the Haitian experience of slavery.

Precisely in *An Untamed State*, like Haitian slaves in the past, Mireille is kidnapped, confined and physically as well as sexually abused by the gang and especially by the (Master and) Commander of these men for economic purposes. As a consequence of the destruction of her agency through physical tortures and the usurpation of her body by means of continuous sexual abuses, Mireille "feels nothing" because she is "no one" (Gay 2014b: 176). Deprived of her own will and body, Mireille falls into a *zombi*-state which leads her to stop fighting and submit to the Commander: "I undressed the Commander the way a woman who could want a

man like him might. I began to forget everything I had ever known and anyone I had ever loved. I became no one” (139). Moreover, once liberated and reunited with her family, Mireille’s psychological numbing resulting from a clear PTSD will continue back in the States, so the second part of Gay’s tale will deal with Mireille’s process of psychological awakening from her *zombified*-traumatised state. However, it is important to bear in mind that the *zombi*’s subjugation, although profound, “is not necessarily definitive” for this living dead “is a creature within whom coexist an utter powerlessness and an enduring potential for rebirth (Glover 2005: 108). For this reason, in a similar vein to the *maroons* or fugitive slaves who preceded the Haitian Revolution that carried with it the end of slavery in the country and the constitution of the first Black Republic in 1804, Mireille attempts to escape from the gang’s domination by running away to the streets. Even though she is found and taken back to her gloomy chamber, this flight evidences how the revolutionary and fighting spirit of her Haitian ancestors runs through her veins. Similarly, when, following Mireille’s liberation and return to the States, her husband tries to confine her at home so that she can heal from her psychological condition, Mireille revolts and escapes to the countryside so as to flee yet another enclosed world.

Regardless of her zombification, it could be argued that Mireille’s courageous *marronage* denotes that she is a strong woman like her rebellious forefathers and mothers rather than a damsel in distress to be rescued and, therefore, that Gay’s story is a feminist fairy-tale retelling. In fact, because the novel chooses not to present any male rescuer as neither Mireille’s husband nor her father risk their lives or fortune to rescue her,³ this tale seems to follow a trend within contemporary feminist fairy-tale revisions including an inadequate male-rescuer “who is replaced by an assertive self-liberated heroine and/or by her sidekicks, i.e. female-bonding (Fernández-Rodríguez 2002: 69, 57). Interestingly, these two alternative endings are related to the most outstanding values of contemporary feminism, namely self-love, sorority and individual empowerment, values that Gay includes in *An Untamed State*. The first value of contemporary feminism that the novel includes—self love—can be identified in the protagonist’s re-appropriation of her own body some time after her liberation when she refuses to have sex with her insistent and unsympathetic husband, who criticises her for being “completely unreachable” (Gay 2014b: 299) and, as a broken magic mirror, continuously reminds her how “terrible” and “skinny” she looks (160). Likewise, the confinement that Michael imposes on Mireille so as “to keep [her] safe” until she heals (262), instead of helping the protagonist, makes her feel “trapped in [her] own house” (261). This leads her to flee and abandon her husband, an index of self-love that could be understood as Mireille’s attempt to re-appropriate her own body and life.

Besides self-love, sorority plays a key role in this feminist tale too. After leaving the marital home and driving for miles, Mireille takes refuge in the farm owned by her parents-in-law in Nebraska. At first, through the memories of her pre-captivity life, readers learn that Michael’s parents and especially his mother, Lorraine, did not accept Mireille because of her origins. Nevertheless, the relationship between both women changes when, some years before the kidnapping, Lorraine suffers from cancer and Mireille moves to the farm so as “to take care of [her]” (121). For this reason, when Mireille arrives, contrary to her (absent) mother, who wishes to put “this incident [the kidnapping] behind” (241), Lorraine turns into a fairy godmother that accommodates and takes care of her daughter-in-law. Moreover, Lorraine encourages Mireille to carry out different tasks such as helping her with cooking activities so she can “make [herself] useful” (280) and get distracted. By so doing she triggers Mireille’s healing process for she makes her depressive and traumatic state progressively disappear, as evinced by Mireille’s new willingness to reconstruct her marriage. Significantly, alongside Lorraine, other women like Mireille’s sister and two female doctors help her to progressively wake up from her zombification or psychological/emotional numbness.

Lastly, the third value of contemporary feminist ethics—individual empowerment—can be found both in Mireille’s attempt to flee from marital confinement and in the final episode where, some years later, she has a face-to-face encounter in Miami with the villain of the story, the Commander, at the restaurant where the latter works. There, full of rage, Mireille chases and confronts him physically: “I was crazy. I was all the crazy held in my bones for five years. I pounded his chest with my fists and he didn’t resist. He didn’t try to defend himself. He stood still [...]. He let me bruise his body and break the blood beneath his skin” (358). Thus, it is my contention that because Mireille is able to confront the Commander and make him run away forever (360), this attack can be regarded as the final step in Mireille’s healing and self-empowerment process which allows her to become the actual heroine in this tale.

3.2. A social realist narrative about Haiti’s “painful truths”

For a long time, postcolonial writers and scholars have associated Realism, the literary mode especially deployed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-American literature that attempted to provide a faithful representation of reality and everyday activities and life, with the colonial project behind Imperialism. For this

³ In chapter thirty-nine readers learn through the omniscient narrator and Michael’s focalisation that he actually does search Mireille for one day with the help of her Haitian cousin Victor. However, when they finally find one of the villains guarding the chamber where Mireille is locked, Michael is unable to shoot him or make him confess by using Victor’s gun, thereby proving himself the wrong rescuer in this story.

reason, they have avoided its use by employing a more experimental or autochthonous/folkloric alternative (e.g. Magical Realism) to represent their realities while “writing back” the Empire. Nevertheless, regardless of the colonial connotations behind classic Realism, some recent postcolonial writers have turned to this traditionally Western literary mode owing to their interest in depicting the “actual” unfair conditions and experiences of their communities that so urgently need to be solved without offering Western readers the possibility of an exotic escapism from their own privileged reality (Benito et al. 2009: 119). Gay is a good example of this change since, despite *An Untamed State*’s partly postmodern style, she also follows the tradition of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Social Realism’s portrayal of class, economic, gender, race and geographical conflicts with a twofold objective: to depict the ambiguous relationship that some second-generation Haitian immigrants keep with the homeland and especially to denounce Haiti’s current socio-economic and gender problems neglected by the First World and the privileged Haitian elite.⁴

In order to give the most credible sense of this country’s “reality” not only does Gay discard magical or supernatural elements of tales and Caribbean Magical Realism, locate the action in actual geographical settings (e.g. Port-au-Prince and some of its neighbourhoods such as the lavish suburban Pétionville and Bel Air slum) and make reference to existing personages, institutions and events like the Fanmi Lavalas party (2014b: 13) and the 2010 earthquake (344). Also, she includes believable characters like Mireille—a second-generation Haitian immigrant attorney married to a white American man—or the kidnapers who so faithfully represent the gangs of Port-au-Prince. Furthermore, readers have access to Mireille’s point of view as well as to the perspective of other characters including some of the gang members thanks to an intermittent third-person omniscient narrator, free-indirect discourse and direct speech dialogues that make this polyphonic tale all the more believable and formally realist (Barrish 2011: 50-54). Through all these techniques plus the use of extremely vivid descriptions, Gay makes use of a quite classic Euro-American social realist style through which she brings to the fore three realities of the Haitian context: the nuances of the Haitian diaspora, Haiti’s rampant poverty and social-class conflict as well as the scourge of sexual violence in this country.

In relation to the first theme, the Haitian diaspora, the text mirrors and even seems to celebrate the upward social movement from rag to riches that many Haitian diasporic families like the Duvals undergo after their migration or exile to the States. Mireille’s account enables readers to learn that her father, Sebastien, who “grew up in a shack with a dirt floor” (Gay 2014b: 191), decided to migrate to the US at a young age in order to escape poverty and, decades later, after earning a degree in civil engineering and working for others, he retired and returned to Haiti with the purpose of running a construction company. His savings, pension and this new job make Sebastien a rich and powerful man in his homeland and firmly locate the Duval family among the Haitian elite. Notably, Mireille’s account of her father’s social change from a former discriminated immigrant forced to work “seventy hours a week” to “the triumphant son, returned” (36), portrays the benefits of transnational mobility in our days for those Caribbean immigrants who fulfil the American Dream. However, as Mireille admits in her retrospective and reflective narration, due to her father’s wealth, “it was easy for [him] to overlook the country’s painful truths,” that is, Haiti’s huge social and economic problems affecting the poor majority, because “they did not apply to him, to us” (36-37) as members of the Haitian privileged social class.

Moreover, through Mireille’s memories about her life in Miami and Haiti before her kidnapping, Gay characterises her protagonist as a twenty-first century cosmopolitan and creolised second-generation immigrant. Regardless of her complete assimilation into the US, Mireille, who travels to the motherland every year, has a clear cultural *métissage* which retains her Haitian origins. This connection with her roots can be noted in her hybrid and multilingual condition as a woman who speaks English, French as well as Haitian *Kreyòl* and who is influenced by the North American, French and Caribbean cultures. It is precisely this transcultural hybridity that allows her to disseminate her main story with minor tales from the aforementioned traditions as demonstrated in the previous sub-section. Nonetheless, *An Untamed State* also reflects the identity conflict suffered by many contemporary Caribbean immigrants and their offspring. Although since a young age Mireille maintains her bonds with her family in Haiti thanks to her annual summer holiday trips to the island, as an adult she recognises her dislike for those temporary returns to her parents’ country:

Every summer, my parents took us to [...] the motherland, what my siblings and I called Haiti, always with a smirk. [...] At the airport, we would stand in line with all the other *dyaspora*⁵ and their unfathomably large suitcases. I found the whole affair mortifying and tried to stand as far away from my parents and their embarrassing luggage as possible (Gay 2014b: 50, original emphasis).

⁴ Additionally, the realist tone is enhanced through extreme and faithful detail of Mireille’s rape and her acute PTSD symptoms following her ordeal which gives readers a glimpse of what rape trauma syndrome truly is.

⁵ In the Haitian context, this *Kreyòl* word is used to identify the numerous Haitian immigrants living abroad (Danticat 2011: 49). However, most often this term implies otherness and exclusion of those who left as well as their offspring and provokes in this group a collective feeling of shame and guilt at having fled the country (50). In fact, in Gay’s novel, when the captors kidnap Mireille, they call her “*dyaspora* with the resentment those Haitians who cannot leave hold for those of us who can” (2014b: 6, original emphasis).

Interestingly, not only does the above passage reveal young Mireille's and her parents' different degree of attachment to Haiti, but it also brings to the fore Mireille's feelings of embarrassment towards the country and her diasporic identity.

With the passing of time, this continuous physical connection to the motherland makes young Mireille feel in the middle of two countries, that is, in that in-between position or "Third Space" (Bhabha 1994: 36) typically inhabited by diasporic subjects, that makes her uncomfortable: "[W]henever we [Mireille and her siblings] were done with our homework, we would jump on our bikes and head to a place where we weren't Haitians in America and Americans in Haiti" (Gay 2014b: 35). This distressing double-consciousness as a Haitian American girl can also be noted in another episode related to Mireille's school days. As readers learn through Mireille's memories, when she proudly carries to school a straw *sombrero* bought in Haiti during a summer holiday, she is teased by her American classmates who had already made fun of her and her "wild hair" (155) on previous occasions. After such an embarrassing experience, when at home, Mireille puts her hat in the back of her closet "crushed by sneakers, a black sock, a softball helmet" (52). Thus, because the Haitian straw hat metaphorically symbolises Mireille's Caribbean cultural heritage, its hiding could be read as an attempt to cover-up her Haitianess so as to avoid rejection and be accepted by the US society.

However, Mireille's rejection of her roots does not last forever. As she grows, she ends up enjoying her connection with the island since, as she explains, there, she can relax spending "afternoons at the beach, swimming in the warm and salty blue of the ocean" (51). She even celebrates her engagement party in her parents' luxurious beach house in the touristic port-town city of Jacmel where a multicultural menu comprised of "Haitian delicacies," "someone's interpretation of American food" and lots of champagne is offered (110). The decision to hold such a special celebration in Haiti symbolises adult Mireille's deeper attachment to her second home. Significantly enough, the engagement *soirée* and her subsequent wedding in Miami point to a merging of Mireille's Haitian and American selves, a unification which will become even clearer with the accomplishment of her interracial marriage and the birth of her mulatto baby named after the key leader of the Haitian Revolution, Henri Christophe. It is my contention then, that with this episode around Mireille's hybridity not only does the novel foreground the complexity, heterogeneity and polysemy of the Caribbean defended by Creolist critics at the dawn of the transmodern era, but it also displays in a very realistic manner, how borders and identities are constantly negotiated and crossed in our globalised times (Rumford 2006: 163).

But when analysing Mireille's ambivalent relationship with Haiti, it is fundamental to bear in mind that, in her adulthood, her pride for her own Haitianess is based on her one-sided conception of the country. For this reason, when her white acquaintances from the US speak ill of Haiti—reproducing the stereotypical image of island outside the country—she gets angry for she feels they are just offering "their own desperate piece of information about my country, my people, about the violence and the poverty and the hopelessness conjuring a place that does not exist anywhere but the American imagination" (Gay 2014b: 11). Of course, it is not that Mireille is completely unaware of Haiti as a country of "starting contrasts," with "so much beauty" and "so much brutality" (97) where a small elite concentrates all the riches whereas most Haitians live in extreme poverty and are ignored by the former social class (Munro 2015: 16; Duramy 2014: 70). What the novel seems to imply and even criticise is that Mireille has a distorted image of the country inasmuch as the Haiti she knows is the idyllic upper/middle-class area of Port-au-Prince and her "father's castle in the sky" (Gay 2014b: 225) where she always spends her holiday. Such a positive conception of her second home, as the following passage demonstrates, does obviously disappear with Mireille's kidnapping for she comes in contact with a dark side of the country with which she was not entirely acquainted: "There are three Haitis—the country Americans know and the country Haitians know and the country I thought I knew" (11).

This dark side unknown to her is nothing but the *bidonvilles* or shantytowns of the Haitian slums where her poorest compatriots live "desperate, angry, hungry, scratching" (97) under dramatic socio-economic circumstances, as is the case of the gang who kidnaps her.⁶ In fact, during Mireille's imprisonment, the Commander reproaches her—and by extension her upper-middle class family—with living a luxurious life in Haiti while ignoring the problems of the country: "[y]ou are complicit even if you do not actively contribute to the problem because you do nothing to solve it" (137). By portraying the huge gap between the Duvals' upper-middle class status and that of the gang living in the impoverished slum of Bel Air, Gay's novel clearly exposes the paradox of our current times wherein neoliberal global capitalism has not enabled an actual global economic growth, but rather, has favoured already privileged Western countries and Westernised elites in Third World nations (Kacowicz 2007: 572) like Haiti.

On another note, it is important to remark that, by providing details about the origins of some gangmen, Gay also highlights the negative consequences of the deterioration of living standards and the current scarcity of job opportunities in Haiti, which have led many citizens, especially unemployed youths, to see crime as their only way of survival and economic improvement (Duramy 2014: 33). In the novel, Mireille becomes aware of this issue when TiPierre, one of her kidnappers, tells her that, after being sold as a *restavek* or a child slave to a

⁶ Gay's extensive and precise description of Mireille's kidnapping provides a remarking insight to one of the most common criminal activities carried out by armed gangs in Port-au-Prince (Duramy 2014: 63).

wealthy family, he ran away to “the slums where he would be safe” and joined the Commander’s gang at the age of sixteen (Gay 2014b: 148-149). It is easy to notice that TiPierre’s testimony about this common modern-day slavery in Haiti (Girard 2010: 225) contrasts sharply with Mireille’s distorted image of the island as “a jewel in the middle of the ocean” (Gay 2014b: 90). Consequently, it could be argued that through TiPierre’s account of his traumatic life heavily conditioned by his poor origins, Mireille—and with her, Gay’s readers—are revealed how many Haitian penurious people have no options to survive in “this land of mad indifference” (36), except for crime and extortion. Although Mireille does not exonerate her victimisers—after all they are unmistakably the villains in her tale—as her narrative voice makes clear at the beginning of the story, she understands that due to their terrible context, they are “fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope beating inside their bodies” (3). Therefore, it is my contention that, in bringing to light how the Haitian elite like Mireille’s family neglect the Haitian population on the edge of survival, Gay offers both a social photograph of one of the endemic problems of Haiti and a social critique against those privileged returnees and locals living opulently and indifferently to the systemic poverty of the country.⁷

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the above paragraphs, Gay continuously rejects providing an essentialist discourse around the reality of Haiti and its population. For this reason, she also seems to criticise the contribution of part of the poor mass—the gangs—to the fall of Haiti. On the one hand, through Mireille’s narration, Gay exposes the futility of the gang’s nationalist discourse evinced when they call Mireille “American whore” (195) and “*dyaspora*” (6, original emphasis), through the portrayal of her captors’ consumption of US products like “Nike sneakers” (49) and sitcoms such as *Friends* (83) and even in the Commander’s later flight to Miami where he works “clearing tables” (356) in a restaurant. In addition, at the same time that the novel reveals the consequences of rampant poverty in Haiti explained above, it criticises the “easy” position adopted by some contemporary Haitian youngsters joining local gangs through characters like Sebastien, who refuses to pay “a lifetime’s fortune” to “men who had not worked an honest day in their lives” (145). This critique is reinforced by Mireille’s description of the “long but well manicured” fingernails of a gangman (40) and most especially, by her words when she accuses the Commander of being a “complicit” (137) in Haiti’s current decline.

Last but not least, *An Untamed State* also tackles the issue of sexual violence and gang rape in Haiti so as to open the eyes of Western and non-Western readers to such an urgent problem in the country. History has demonstrated that the colonisation of the Caribbean islands went hand in hand with the conquest of the female body as a way to demonstrate and enforce the white colonialist rule. Nevertheless, in Haiti rape has survived as a weapon of terror by the various repressive nationalist regimes such as the Duvaliers’ dictatorship (1957-1986) and Raoul Cédras’s *de facto* military rule (1991-1994) (Suárez 2006: 64; Duramy 2014: 47-51), and as “a common practice conducted by criminal gangs aimed at controlling deprived communities” (Duramy 2014: 51). In fact, because in Haiti women are the keepers of family honour, as Duramy explains, they “become specific targets” for gangs who seek for the “destruction, submission and humiliation” of rival Haitian families and communities (55). Precisely, in *An Untamed State*, Gay displays Haiti’s internalisation of the historical use of female rape as a war tactic on the island by portraying firstly, how the Commander’s gang kidnaps and rapes Mireille to demonstrate their power and control of the city to her accommodated father; and secondly, how the latter tries to resist such a personal blow by refusing to play the game. Thus, it could be argued that by showing how Mireille’s body becomes the battleground where the Haitian long-lasting class conflict between the rich and the poor—respectively embodied by Sebastien and the Commander—is disputed, Gay does nothing but to denounce the ongoing use and abuse of women in Haiti.

Finally, it is worth noting that, throughout the novel, Gay underscores a manifest indifference in the Haitian society towards an endemic rape culture in the country (Suárez 2006: 63) grounded on the subsistence of a patriarchal cultural system which overlooks and does not prosecute a sort of violence historically used in Haiti as a weapon of war and oppression (Duramy 2014: 99-115). This disregard becomes evident in the words Gay puts in her protagonist’s mouth: “I wasn’t going to stay in Haiti one moment longer than I had to. There would be no evidence collected, no trial, no justice and without justice, there was no crime” (Gay 2014b: 234). Although it is important to bear in mind that Gay is not able to give a solution for such a chronic gender and social issue in Haiti, she exposes this important theme so as to inform the world about it. Needless to say, the patriarchal use and abuse of women does not only occur in Haiti. As Gay acknowledges by dedicating her novel “for women, the world over,” rape culture and sexism occur across the world. Hence, because *An Untamed State* appears to recognise the accountability of the Haitian poor and privileged society as well as of individuals educated in the First World like Sebastien and, why not, Mireille’s unsympathetic husband, it seems apt to claim that this novel demonstrates the globality of sexism as well as sexual abuse and, therefore, the futility of making distinctions between First World and Third World cultures in this respect.

⁷ Particularly interesting in this respect is Mireille’s reference to the Commander as “*chimère*” (84, original emphasis), the name used for the organised gangs made up of desperate Haitian peoples from the urban slums who, as a way of economic survival, became the make-shift militia of the leftist president of Haiti (Lavalas Party), Jean Bertrand Aristide, until his forced exile in 2004. Yet, even though Gay’s privileged protagonist uses this word as an insult, its meaning—‘ghost’—ironically points to the very source problem behind the gang’s criminal actions: the invisibility and marginality suffered by the Haitian poor peoples who are excluded by the First World and, most sadly, by their privileged compatriots like Mireille’s family.

3. Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, *An Untamed State* is a hybrid novel of interconnections which concomitantly juxtaposes genres and modes related to former cultural paradigms. More particularly, Gay combines in her amalgamated novel conventions of the postmodern and feminist fairy-tale revision as well as the social realist novel, with Euro-American and Haitian literary and sociocultural elements such as confined and abused princesses, *zombis*, *maroons*, transmigration, the American Dream as well as Haitian *chimères* and *restaveks*. However, in lieu of creating a playful pastiche, Gay transcends the aforementioned *mélange* by presenting a complex relational novel in line with the transmodern paradigm shift in global culture in general and the Caribbean Creolist-thinking in particular, which clearly eliminates centre vs. periphery and same vs. other discourses no longer operative in the current rhizomatic or interconnected world (Dussel 2002). She does so, firstly, by bringing to the fore the ambiguities and intricacies around the fluid identity of Caribbean diasporic subjects currently living in a world characterised by transmigration, transnationalism and transculturalism. And secondly and most especially, by exposing, through the recovery of subaltern Haitian voices, the responsibility of First World nations as well as Haitian locals and diasporas in the current “untamed state” of the former “Pearl of the Antilles.” In this sense, due to its integral and pluralistic blaming, *An Untamed State* can be read as a text that creates not a one-sided consciousness, but rather, a truly global one that clearly responds to Transmodernity’s opportunity to rethink each individual’s position in a global and changeable scenario which no longer can be elucidated by previous Grand Narratives based on an obsolete either/or episteme.

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