Analyzing the Network of Traumas

in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*

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ABSTRACT: Since classic Caruthian trauma theory cannot account for novels juxtaposing several historical traumas, this paper explores network theory as a new analytical approach to trauma narratives. A reading of Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* demonstrates how traumas become linked in a network and explores the effects of this trauma network on characters, readers, and main themes of the novel.

KEYWORDS: trauma novel; network theory; Cathy Caruth; links between traumas

Introduction

Studies on literary representations of trauma, individual or collective, have proliferated since the early 1990s. Especially Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and other Yale-based critics developed a theory of what Roger Luckhurst and Alan Gibbs call "cultural trauma" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 81; Gibbs 15) based on Caruth's definition of trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge ... and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time" ("Recapturing" 153).[1] This theory presupposes above all the incapability of the traumatized to understand the traumatic events and their feelings as well as to access memory of them willfully, from which the notion of the unrepresentability of traumatic experiences is deduced. Literature is considered the best medium to communicate trauma despite its unrepresentability, provided that it turns to new techniques of representation. This theoretical approach has since become the foundation of most studies of literary representations of trauma and can thus be considered the classic approach of literary trauma studies.

Nevertheless, since the turn of the century, this classic approach has become contested for the inaccuracy of Caruth's argumentation, her primary assumption that traumatic amnesia exists, the prescriptive use of her results by other scholars and the subsequent development of a "trauma genre" (Gibbs 2) perpetuating these results, as well as the Euro-/Western-

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1 I cannot go into the multitude of trauma concepts here. For an overview see, for example, Craps, Leys, or Luckhurst ("Traumaculture").

Centrism of the models. The most significant drawback of the classic approach, at least for this paper, constitutes its incapability to account for links between several collective historical traumas as they can be found in novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), or Bebe Moore Campbell's *What You Owe Me* (2001).[2] The events represented in these novels, such as the Holocaust, 9/11, and slavery, are 'traumas' because the victims are depicted as suffering from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such as nightmares, amnesia, hyper-vigilance, or emotional numbing, and because they are perceived and treated as such in the extraliterary as well as the fictional sphere by the communities involved, media, and government. Despite the undeniable differences between them, for example, with regard to the number of people concerned, the traumas dealt with in these novels can be argued to belong to a common category since, by referring to real historical events, they are all 'historical' traumas;[3] they are also all 'collective traumas' because they hit a high number of individuals simultaneously and affect collective identity.[4]

In this paper, I explore how such novels can productively be analyzed by turning to a theoretical approach so far neglected by trauma studies: network theory. Following a brief overview of the main assumptions of the classic analytical approach to trauma narratives and of criticism directed at it, I illustrate the application and the shortcomings of this methodology at the example of Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2010). After demonstrating why network theory lends itself to analyzing trauma narratives, this paper will conclude with an analysis of *Let the Great World Spin* combining trauma and

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2 In my view, these novels constitute a sub-genre of the trauma novel which has so far not been identified as such, even though more and more authors have included several collective traumas in the fictional realm of one novel since the attacks on the World Trade Center of September 11, 2001. As the resurgence of this kind of trauma novel in the U.S. is apparently coupled with the events of 9/11, it can be considered a reaction to the abuse of the attacks for rhetorics of exceptionalism and politics of warfare.

3 I thus follow LaCapra's use of "historical trauma" (67–82).

4 I could hence also use the term "cultural trauma" coined by Jeffrey C. Alexander who argues that "[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways." (1) I prefer "collective historical traumas," however, because the term distinguishes the novels from others dealing with individual traumas, such as rape, and because it emphasizes the fact that the traumas are not fictional.

network theory in order to reveal how traumas become linked in the novel and to offer some hypotheses on possible aims behind this linkage of collective historical traumas.

Classic Literary Trauma Studies

In the 1990s, Caruth's work paved the way for the development of an academic discourse which above all dealt with the analysis of literary representations of traumatic experiences and memories. Caruth's theory is based on a combination of Paul De Man's deconstructivist theory with psychological and neurobiological findings, especially by Sigmund Freud and Bessel van der Kolk, and includes analyses of trauma representations, such as Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and the film *Hiroshima mon amour*. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth developed three main characteristics of psychological trauma relevant for literary and cultural analysis: first, the incapability of trauma victims to comprehend the traumatic event while it takes place as well as to access memory of it willfully. Second, since the traumatic experience cannot be processed while it occurs and since traumatic memory is attributed a special status of inaccessibility, the traumatic experience cannot be represented. Third, despite this unrepresentability, to achieve a working through, the victim needs to express her experience, otherwise she will be haunted by her trauma, for example, in the form of nightmares. Due to their affinity to metaphorical representation, Caruth designates "psychoanalysis and literature as particularly privileged forms of writing that can attend to [the] perplexing paradoxes of trauma" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 5).[5] From these paradoxes a need for new techniques of representation is inferred, a claim that led to the postulation of a number of narrative techniques deemed suitable for representing the unrepresentable, such as repetitive and fragmented narratives and flashbacks, for example. The possibility that trauma narratives deal with more than one trauma does not play a role in Caruth's theorizing, or in that of her adherents.

Caruth's theory, which "has received considerable approbation, not only from humanists in various fields but also from psychiatrists and physicians" as Ruth Leys (266) suggests and which was confirmed by the work of Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub, and

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5 Caruth develops this notion, for instance, in the first two chapters of *Unclaimed Experience.*

other Yale critics, became the standard approach for the analysis of literary representations of trauma. Today, it is still frequently applied, for example by Hamish Dalley, Anne Whitehead, Kristiaan Versluys, and by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega Jaén. These theories and studies form the classic trauma discourse in cultural and literary studies, also known as Caruthian approach or "cultural trauma theory" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 81; Gibbs 15).

Classic Narrative Devices of Trauma Fiction

Caruth and literary critics in her wake usually agree on a number of characteristics of trauma narratives, which, in their view, translate best the traumatic experience by meeting Caruth's call for experimental artistic forms (*Unclaimed* 5). These characteristics or narrative devices are fashioned around Caruth's claims and around symptoms of PTSD[6], the current medical diagnosis for traumatization, and include: First, a fragmented or dispersed narrative and shifts in narrating voice which supposedly transmit the confusing experience of trauma (Gibbs 27) and the process of working through by narrating and re-narrating the core traumatic experience (Whitehead 88). Second, the repetition of events, words, and phrases as well as flashbacks functions as textual mark of repetition compulsion and unexpected intrusion of the unprocessed traumatic experience. Special metaphors, such as 'ghost' or 'haunting,' are accepted narrative strategies to represent these phenomena (Whitehead 5–7). Third, a solely indirect or allegorical depiction of the traumatic event is deemed appropriate for the representation of the unrepresentable and unspeakable (Versluys 14; Ganteau and Onega Jaén 5). Fourth, another accepted way of attesting to the unrepresentability of trauma is not representing it at all and putting into evidence the absence of memory of the traumatic event by recurring to metaphors such as 'void' and 'hole' (Ganteau and Onega Jaén 10; Whitehead 9). Fifth, characters' frequent inability to speak and their recurrence to silence (aphasia) are seen as attesting to the limits of language and narrative in face of trauma (Versluys 89; Gibbs 150).

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6 For an extensive discussion of the development and symptoms of PTSD see, for example, Luckhurst (Trauma).

A Classic Literary Trauma Studies Approach to *Let the Great World Spin*

I agree with Luckhurst that the continuing significance of Caruth's theory shows in the high number of critiques which "[act] as a strange sort of monument to its importance" (*Trauma* 13).[7] Moreover, most analyses of representations of trauma, like those cited above, are still based on Caruth's theories, probably because, despite their shortcomings, they function well in revealing how a text is marked as trauma narrative. *Let the Great World Spin* also makes use of some techniques typical of trauma narratives.

The novel is mainly set in New York City in 1974, but also includes flashbacks to Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s as well as an epilogue set in 2006. Narrated from a plurality of points of view, which include six different first-person narrators, seven partly interwoven plotlines deal, for example, with everyday racism and criminality in New York, the struggle with religious faith and life plans, and finding a home. The collective historical traumas McCann's novel refers to include 9/11, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, slavery, the war in Afghanistan, and the 1974 IRA bombings in Dublin. All plotlines are linked by an unnamed artist's tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center on August 7, 1974, on the same date such an act was historically performed by French artist Philippe Petit. Two of the plotlines are especially relevant for this paper: one centers on the preparations for and the act of the tightrope walk. It is delivered to the reader from different perspectives: two third-person narrative chapters adopt the tightrope walker's perspective, the first chapter presents it from the perspective of the crowd watching, and two others present the accounts of two women watching as the performance takes place. Furthermore, several characters muse on the significance of the tightrope act. The second relevant plotline is about a group of five women who meet after answering a newspaper advertisement in which one of them looked for other mothers whose sons died in the Vietnam War. Their last meeting on the morning of the tightrope walk is depicted in the novel, first in third-person narrative with the host Claire as focalizer, then in first-person narrative from the point of view of Gloria, another member of the group.

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7 Pederson gives further examples of Caruth's work's ongoing influence (334).

Let the Great World Spin classifies as a trauma narrative in the sense of the Caruthian approach in various ways. Classic literary trauma studies' concepts like the metaphorical representation of traumatic events, the emphasis on their irrepresentability which is nonetheless linked to a need to talk about them, characters' feeling haunted, and the need to 'work through' become especially apparent in the performance of the tightrope artist and in the depiction of the grieving mothers.

Most studies of McCann's novel, for example those by Sheila Hones and John Cusatis, read the tightrope walk as a metaphorical representation of 9/11 and thus of the paradigmatic trauma in recent US history; a reading in line with the Caruthian notion that traumatic experiences can only be represented metaphorically. Since no less than nine of *Let the Great World Spin*'s thirteen chapters and eight of its twelve narrating voices refer to the performance of the tightrope walker, this metaphorical representation of 9/11 makes use of the different points of view and shifts in narrating voice stipulated by Caruth's approach to add ever new details to a dispersed story.

In a conventional textual mark of the inexpressibility of traumatic experience, characters are found struggling with language or searching for the right word. The crowd gathered at the foot of the World Trade Center, for instance, watches the tightrope performance, and thus by extension the attacks of 9/11, in "awful" "silence" (McCann 3). This traditional approach to representing trauma is also evident in the way the mothers, whose sons died in the Vietnam War, are depicted. They are repeatedly faced with a lack of adequate words to articulate their feelings, as when Gloria, for example, cannot find the right words to express the traumatic loss reflected on Claire's face: "I don't know the words for how she looked at me—there are few words—it was welling up, . . . a lifting up on the surface from the water, it was the sort of thing that could not be told" (McCann 298). Gloria even recurs to almost stereotypical psychological terminology when describing the difficulties the group, which after all functions as a kind of talking therapy, experience in their attempts to speak of the traumatic loss: "Funny how it was, everyone perched in their own little world with the deep need to talk, each person with their own tale, beginning in some strange middle point, then trying so hard to tell it all, to have it all make sense, logical and final" (McCann 293). In this text passage, the characters feel the need to talk but cannot achieve the coherent narrative

deemed necessary to overcome the traumatic loss. The following thoughts by Claire support this reading: "You let it be, it returns. . . . You let it be, it drags you to the ground. You let it be, it crawls up your walls" (McCann 81). Claire not only questions the possibility of suppressing traumatic memory but she also refers to trauma's capacity, suggested by Caruth, to haunt its victims if not worked through properly.

Critiques of the Classic Approach

For the last fifteen years, Caruth's theory as well as studies following her assumptions have been severely criticized by scholars such as Leys, Luckhurst, Gibbs, and Joshua Pederson.[8] Leys' criticism of Caruth's theory is especially severe. Expressing her general "impatience with the sloppiness of her [Caruth's] theoretical arguments" (305) and the arbitrariness of the close readings, Leys criticizes among other aspects Caruth's idea that the victims of trauma are haunted by "a literal, nonsymbolic, and nonrepresentational *memory* of the traumatic event" (272) which intrudes into their lives in the form of nightmares. According to Leys, Caruth deduces this theory of the haunting "unclaimed experience" (Caruth, *Unclaimed*) from Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) which in Ley's view does not stand up to scrutiny because, in contrast to the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, in which past events are "determined as traumatic by a retroactive conferral of meaning" (271), Caruth's "model of trauma as defined by latency is much closer to the model of an infectious disease, in which an 'incubation period' or period of delay intervenes between the initial infection and the subsequent appearance of the symptoms" (Leys 271). In his article "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory" (2014), Pederson, like also Gibbs (12), questions Caruth's concept of literality and traumatic amnesia, that is the incapability of the traumatized subject to recall the traumatic event. Pederson rests his critique upon Richard McNally's 2003 study *Remembering Trauma,* which revealed mistakes in the neurological and psychological studies by van der Kolk on which Caruth relied. Gibbs, in a similar vein, deplores the fact that the false assumptions underlying Caruth's theory have led to the dispersion of "a variety of literary narrative strategies that are understood to formally represent the [symptoms]" (17) of trauma, that is symptoms which may not even exist. Consequently, Gibbs' main concern with regard to classic literary trauma studies is the

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8 For further critiques of Caruth see, for example, Craps, and Kansteiner.

emergence of a "trauma genre," "a self-reinforcing circuit of fictional and non-fictional prose narratives" (2) based on the basically unreliable findings of Caruth and her followers.

Luckhurst also criticizes classic literary trauma studies for the tight aesthetic requirements it imposes on representations of trauma. Since the stipulated "aesthetic is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions" (Luckhurst, *Trauma* 81), a large part of trauma representations is excluded from recognition while at the same time narrative possibilities are curtailed.

In line with Luckhurst, a branch of criticism has become pronounced in recent years which draws attention to the consequences of classic literary trauma studies' uncritical use of Euro-/Western-Centric psychological trauma models and its call for avant-garde narrative techniques. According to Stef Craps, Claire Stocks, and Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, Caruthian theory excludes most postcolonial experiences of trauma by presupposing 'western' concepts of identity as well as an event-based model of trauma that does not account for insidious or structural traumas, like racism or colonialism. Significantly, in their discussion of the classic approach to trauma narratives, Craps, Gibbs, and Cheyette conclude that, besides not being able to account for non-western trauma narratives, it does not even necessarily offer adequate models to analyze US (or other 'western') trauma experiences and trauma narratives (Craps et al. 910–11).

Finally, the Caruthian model cannot account for the juxtaposed representation of several traumas and the links between them. While this is my main point of criticism, Craps is the only critic who touches upon this problem, even if not regarding links between 'western' traumas, when he states that "they [the founding texts of the field (including Caruth's own work)] generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas" (2). One could argue that this shortfall derives from the close affinity between the Caruthian discourse, which insists on the unrepresentability of trauma and especially the Holocaust (Leys 268), and the discourse of uniqueness, supported by Elie Wiesel, Steven T. Katz, and others, which ostracizes all attempts at comparing other collective historical traumas with the Holocaust since it considers the Holocaust "the watershed event of the modern age because, uniquely terrible and unspeakable, it radically

exceeds our capacity to grasp and understand it" (Leys 267–68)[9]. As a result, and in line with a general trend to set 9/11 apart as a unique event, none of the readings of McCann's novel conducted by Hones, Anne Fogarty, and Regina Schober, or of McCann's work in general by Cusatis and Eóin Flannery, as well as none of the reviews by Tim Adams and Jonathan Mahler, deem the juxtaposed inclusion of other traumas next to 9/11 a topic of discussion.[10] Since the authors criticizing the classic approach do not offer coherent new models, neither with regard to the analysis of trauma narratives in general (Craps et al. 908) nor considering the links between traumas, this paper will discuss the benefits of applying network theory for these ends in the following.

Network Theory and Trauma

Theories of networks are manifold and as diverse as the disciplines from which they evolve.[11] Moreover, 'network' is at the same time object of and tool for the "study of complex, emergent, and self-organized systems" (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 6).[12] This paper relies on an understanding of networks as complex webs of connections and interactions between more than two elements in which the connections are as significant and as much carrier of agency as the elements they link. Important characteristics of networks include "decentralization, connectivity and relationality, flexibility, and non-linear shape" (Schober 392–3); their connections are marked by multidirectionality, changeability and fluidity. Of special interest are elements that are connected to a high number of others and thus function as hubs, knots, or nodes.

The concepts of trauma and network share a number of characteristics, which suggest that a combined application of the concepts can generate fruitful results: Trauma and networks are both non-linear and alter perceptions of time. In his often cited *Rise of the Network Society* (1996), Manuel Castells states that "linear, irreversible, measurable, predictable time is

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9 Rothberg, in *Multidirectional Memory*, and Huyssen, in *Present Pasts*, for example, criticize the discourse of uniqueness for its tendency to create competition between victims and suggest benefits of analyzing links between collective memories. However, they do not propose a coherent analytical approach.

10 This comes even more as a surprise since McCann's follow-up novel *TransAtlantic* (2013) similarly interweaves the historical traumas of slavery, Irish famine and the conflict in Northern Ireland.

11 For an overview of different types of networks see, for example, Galloway.

12 This aspect is discussed at length by Latour (131).

being shattered in the network society" (463) due to the phenomenon of "timeless time" which "*occurs when the characteristics of a given context, namely, the informational paradigm and the network society, induce systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena performed in that context*" (494, italics in original). In a society ruled by networks, the traditional sequence of time may thus appear altered in different ways, for example as reversed, simultaneous or unreliable. Similarly, in trauma, "distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now" (LaCapra 46) due to the unexpected and unforeseeable intrusion of the traumatic past into the present, by way of nightmares and flashbacks, for example, as well as certain symptoms, such as repetition compulsion or the experience of time as frozen.

Moreover, both concepts assume that their objects are not fixed but in constant change since they are shaped by ephemeral connections and multidirectional relations. With regard to the links forming networks, Schober states that "these connections are not stable but dynamic. In a fluctuating manner, they emerge and disappear again" (395-6). Typical network connections, and consequently the networks built from them, are thus also not fixed but "highly dynamic" (Castells). With regard to memories of traumatic events, Michael Rothberg has shown in his theory of multidirectional memory that collective memories are created through links between the memories of different groups, i.e. memories, and thus representations of historical events, are the result of constant transhistorical and transcultural processes of negotiation, referencing and borrowing, which always run in several directions between at least two bodies of memories (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 3–7). According to Rothberg, the multidirectional connections between collective historical traumas, such as slavery and the Holocaust, become apparent, for example, when one traumatic historical event triggers suppressed memories of other collective historical traumas, as was the case in France when reports of torture in the Algerian War sparked public debates on France's role in the Holocaust (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 3).[13] The connections also emerge in fictional and scholarly texts which refuse notions of incomparability or uniqueness by associating at least two collective historical traumas, such as André Schwarz-Bart's novels juxtaposing slavery and the persecution of Jews or Aimé

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13 Even if Rothberg's study for the most part does not explicitly deal with trauma, his main examples, memories of the Holocaust and slavery/colonization, are of collective historical traumas.

Césaire's treatises on colonialism and the Holocaust. Links produced by trauma and/or traumatic memory are thus not fixed but fluid, they appear and disappear, and can change over time. [14]

Network and Trauma Narratives

The similarities named above become even more apparent if one takes into consideration contemporary narratological theories. David Bordwell outlines in his groundbreaking study *Poetics of Cinema* (2008) the concept of network narration or network narrative, in which "[t]he network … refers to the plot structure, to the ways in which different plot lines and characters' fates are placed in parallel or in juxtaposition. These narratives do not tell a single story moving straight ahead, but rather cut back and forth between simultaneous plots" (Reichardt 29).[15]

If one compares the main characteristics of network narratives explored by Bordwell with characteristics typically attributed to trauma narratives, several overlaps emerge: First, according to classic literary trauma theory, trauma narratives not only deal with the trauma of their protagonists on the story-level, but use techniques which "[mimic] its forms and symptoms" (Whitehead 3). Since in texts "[n]etworking can be a topic or a mode of organization and composition" (Reichardt, Schäfer, and Schober 12), both trauma and network narratives not only use their subjects metaphorically but also try to reproduce their structure. For example, in trauma narratives repetitions at the level of language, imagery or plot typically function as textual traces of the repetition compulsion or the repetitive intrusion of memories attributed to trauma. According to Gibbs, "[t]raumatic memories are . . . typically built around what Genette terms repeating narrative, where a single last episode is narrated . . . numerous times." (54) Network narratives also often circle around the repeated descriptions of one event, typically a car accident, from the point of view of different protagonists (Bordwell 204). Consequently, one can argue that both trauma and network narratives repeat the event which lies at the heart of the narrative. Second, while

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14 There are more commonalities, which are not relevant for the following analysis, like the way in which trauma and networks are linked to globalization.

15 There are different definitions of the term 'network narrative'. In David Ciccoricco's understanding, for example, "[n]etwork fiction makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives." (4) In the following, I use the term in Bordwell's sense.

setting different plotlines in parallel or juxtaposition is an accepted technique of network narratives, the same phenomenon has not found its way into the list of characteristics of trauma narratives. However, novels that deal with several historical traumas all make use of this literary device which, as Bordwell puts it concerning network narratives, entices the reader/viewer to notice similarities and differences between characters and events (211). Third, in both types of narrative a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice and alternating points of view are related to the movement between plotlines. Bordwell states that the "technique of crosscutting among strangers . . . can make their eventual encounters seem less coincidental" (207), thereby evoking the underlying network. With regard to trauma fiction, Whitehead analyzes similar techniques as follows: "The narrative voice is dispersed or fragmented so that each of the protagonists takes up the story, adding to it his or her individual perspective" (88).[16]

Trauma and Network in *Let the Great World Spin*

Even though several scholars refer to network theory in their studies of McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin*, none of them considers the significance of networks in the novel regarding the traumas dealt with by its characters. Hones, for example, uses McCann's novel as case study for exploring space in contemporary fiction by means of literary geography and brings up network theory solely because, in her view, conventional two-dimensional literary maps cannot do justice to the way in which "collisions, connections, separations, and networks function structurally in the novel" (Hones 86). Closest to considering network *and* trauma comes Schober, who in her article focuses on McCann's use of networks for "offering an alternative conception of experiencing and dealing with contemporary reality after the events of 9/11" (392). This alternative conception is, according to Schober, based on a positive experience of being part of a network, of being connected to others, which offers stability and security (397).

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16 Given these commonalities, the question arises as to why the two concepts have never been combined consistently in scientific research. There exist, however, some approaches which draw from both theories to explain other or related phenomena, like Luckhurst's attempts to grasp the many facets of the concept of trauma in the term "trauma knot" ("Trauma") or Rothberg's concept of "*noeuds de mémoire*" which assumes that "acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference" (Introduction 7).

Although *Let the Great World Spin* "no longer *performs* the rhizomatic complexity found in systems such as the internet, but rather comments on the idea of the network" (Schober 393; emphasis in original), network structures play a role on the levels of content and plot. To name just a relevant few, characters are connected across the US and even to Vietnam by the only just emerging ARPANET (the predecessor of the Internet), telephone lines and by the web of electricity. Characters living in New York are connected by the city's network structures, such as the subway system, or simply because they live in the same neighborhood.[17] Moreover, some plotlines converge in the prototypical network narrative event, a car accident, which connects the fates of several characters, some of which are not even involved in the accident. These webs of connections presented in McCann's novel are not fixed, but rather emerge and disappear, like, for example, the tightrope that connects the two towers of the World Trade Center only for some hours. Consequently, the process of establishing links should be considered at least as important as the links themselves.

The central incident in which trauma and network are interwoven in *Let the Great World Spin* is the act of the tightrope walk. Rendered from a number of different points of views and appearing in all plotlines as characters watch it, hear accounts of it, or look at a photograph of it, the tightrope performance is the main narrative knot in the web of storylines in Bordwell's sense (204-207)[18] while simultaneously being a metaphor for the traumatic events of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, the tightrope walk, and thus 9/11, functions not only as a knot in the storylines but also as a hub in a web of traumas. In line with Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memories, the connections are invisible until the tightrope performance provokes the resurgence of its audience's experiences and memories of collective historical traumas. For the anonymous crowd watching, the performance brings to mind the Vietnam War as well as other traumatic events: There are speculations on the background of the artist—is he a protestor against Nixon and the Vietnam War (McCann 6)?—and also "whispers that there had been a botched robbery, . . . that he'd taken hostages, he was an Arab, a Jew, a Cypriot, an IRA man" (5). Whereas for the novel's readers

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17 Hones proposes that the New York City of McCann's novel is "a city of layers and links, connections and interactions" (59). Schober also considers the New York of the novel a decentralized network (398).
18 The tightrope performance forms part of several networks. Schober provides, for instance, an analysis of how the tightrope walk is embedded in a network of gazes (395).

"Arabs" probably links the tightrope walk back to the attackers of September 11, this passage refers to at least three other traumatic incidents which could have been present in the mind of the New Yorker audience in 1974: "hostages," "Arabs," and "Jews" might refer to the Munich massacre of 1972, in which Palestinians took members of the Jewish Olympic team hostage and killed them; "Arabs" and "Jews" were also on Americans' minds for waging the Yom Kippur War the previous year; and "Jews" can also be read as a trace of the resurgence of Holocaust discourse at that time, an interpretation supported by Claire's later contemplation of the term 'Holocaust', a "[t]errible word" which she "[n]ever heard … as a child" (McCann 80).[19] The list continues with Cyprus, which was at the focus of international attention because of the escalation of the Cyprus dispute due to a military coup organized by Greek Cypriots and the subsequent occupation of the northern part of the island by Turkey in July 1974. 1974 being one of the bloodiest years of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the "IRA man" brings up the extensive bomb attacks of that year instigated by the warring factions, which hit, for instance, the Houses of Parliament in London as well as Dublin's city center where also one of the novel's characters is slightly injured (McCann 22). The link to the Vietnam War is one of the more outstanding in the novel, as exemplified by Marcia and Claire, for example, two members of the group of grieving mothers, who feel touched, bewildered, and even outraged by the walker's performance. Marcia states that she was reminded of her dead son when she witnessed the performance: "And all I could think of, was, Maybe that's my boy and he's come to say hello" (McCann 96). In Marcia's act of watching, the tightrope walk becomes a stand-in for her son's death in a helicopter crash in Vietnam, not only because the funambulist is monitored by a helicopter (McCann 93–96), which is one of the iconic images linked to the Vietnam War in US public memory, but also because he is a "[v]ery brave . . . m]an in the air" (McCann 97), just like her son used to be. For Claire, too, the tightrope performance conjures up memories of her son, not because of the courage of the funambulist but because of the thoughtless way in which he risks his life. She imagines a long list of ways of dying before concluding,

But death by tightrope?

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19 Rothe argues that the Holocaust became a public concern in the U.S. in the wake of the televising of the Eichmann trial in 1961; the term 'Holocaust', however, came to widespread prominence only in 1978 with the broadcasting of the TV series *Holocaust* (12).

> Death by performance?
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> That's what it amounted to. So flagrant with his body. . . . How dare he do that with
> his own body? Throwing his life in everyone's face? Making her own son's so cheap?
> (McCann 113)

In this text passage, Claire not only draws a parallel between the tightrope act and the death of her son in the Vietnam War but is outraged because by "[m]aking it cheap" the former changes the memory of the latter, debasing her son's (and her own) sacrifice and thus hinting at its futility.

The resurgence of traumatic memories is enabled by networks' and traumas' shared disposition to disturb conventional time sequences. In the last chapter of the novel, set in 2006, Jaslyn, who was still a baby on the day of the tightrope performance, looks at a picture of it, thinking: "A man high in the air while a plane disappears, it seems, into the edge of the building. One small scrap of history meeting a larger one. As if the walking man were somehow anticipating what would come later. The intrusion of time and history. The collision point of stories" (McCann 325). The text passage underlines the performance's status as a node in which different (hi)stories converge and—in typical trauma terminology—the intrusive power of this metaphor. McCann also suggests a collapse or conflation of time. While in this text passage the day of the walk in August 1974 is conflated with September 11, 2001, for another character, it conflates that day with her son's death in Vietnam. Confronted with Marcia's account of the performance, for Claire, the death of her son is suddenly "[s]o immediate. . . . it had always been distant, belonging to another day, the talk, the memory, the recall, the stories, a distant land, but this was now and real" (McCann 99). Hence, in a conflation of past and present typical of trauma and in a conflation of present and future made possible by network's timelessness, the performance of the funambulist becomes the "collision point" in which the traumas of 9/11 and the Vietnam War share a common temporal ground allowing for a joint and reciprocal interpretation of the two events although there is no "linear, or causal, relationship" (Schober 398) between them.

Also in the last chapter of the novel, the reader learns that Jaslyn carries the photograph of the tightrope walk with her wherever she travels. Through Jaslyn's travels in a network of

plane routes and streets, the tightrope performance becomes linked to even more collective historical traumas: to the devastations and deaths brought about by the hurricanes Rita and Katrina, since Jaslyn's job is to visit their victims to help them take care of insurance claims and tax issues (e.g. McCann 329, 332), and to the war in Afghanistan, in which Jaslyn's sister, whom she visits in Ireland where she is stationed (McCann 341), is involved in her capacity as a member of the military. Consequently, the tightrope walk is a hub which stands for 9/11 and is linked to the Vietnam War, the IRA bombings, the hurricanes Rita and Katrina, and the war in Afghanistan, for instance.

Despite the tightrope walk's function as a hub, the web-like structure McCann evokes is decentralized since the collective historical traumas are not only linked to 9/11 but are also interconnected. To give just two examples: the victims of the hurricanes experience similar difficulties of dealing with the death of relatives as Claire and Gloria and exhibit similar symptoms of PTSD, such as a feeling of complete desperation, which finds expression in apathy (McCann 90) or even the wish to be dead (McCann 338) as well as the "deep need just to talk" (McCann 337), the difficulties to find a listener and to put their pain into words (McCann 337-8). Besides this link established between the hurricanes and the Vietnam War, McCann draws a parallel between the wars in Vietnam and in Iraq by suggesting a similar rationale for war by the US-governments. One character in *Let the Great World Spin* states concerning the Vietnam War: "The repeated lies become history, but they don't necessarily become the truth" (McCann 129). This sentence aims at evoking in the reader the Bush administration's lies about Iraq's possessing weapons of mass destruction which was employed to justify warfare. Also the US-military interventions apparently yielded similar results in both cases with the US "[leaving] it all rubble and bloodsoak" (McCann 129).

McCann's weaving of a web linking different historical traumas produces several effects: As Bordwell has shown, the quality of network narratives to establish unforeseen links between characters and experiences brings to attention underlying similarities and differences. One can thus argue that in *Let the Great World Spin* this narrative device encourages the reader to consider similarities between the collective historical traumas and ways of dealing with them presented in the novel. The combined trauma and network approach can hence account for an effect Cusatis describes without offering a consistent explanation which

exceeds the mere diagnosis that McCann's novel is "founded on the idea of connectedness" (175): "McCann's novel hints at the tragic parallels between 1974 and the aftermath of 9/11—the Vietnam War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, diminished trust in Presidents Richard Nixon . . . and George W. Bush" (197).

The approach of linking traumas in a network transcends the mere use of analogy to highlight commonalities between separate historic events, which usually provokes criticism based on the notion of the incomparability of traumatic experiences.[20] I would argue that the network structure, which links the collective historical traumas in *Let the Great World Spin*, functions in Rothberg's sense as highlighting similarities and mutual influences instead of succumbing to logics of hierarchization or competition between "different social groups' histories of victimization" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 2), or, as Claire puts it blatantly: "Death, the greatest democracy of them all. … Happens to us all. Rich and poor" (McCann 107).

The combination of trauma and network narrative is also reflected in one of the main themes of *Let the Great World Spin*, the need for imaginative acts of creation and, especially, imaginative acts of establishing connections.[21] Again, this theme is embodied by the tightrope act, for example, which connects the two towers of the World Trade Center in a huge imaginative effort, but it is also relevant for the establishment of links in the network of traumatic experiences. Schober suggests a positive connotation of the network concept in *Let the Great World Spin*:

> The individual act of creating a line is foregrounded, the process of connecting, rather than the feeling of being trapped inside a system. The network is no longer an uncontrollable force imposed on the individual, but one that is actively created by the individual, who, through his/her interconnectedness within the network, experiences a sense of security. (397)

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20 Nonetheless, McCann also uses analogy when Lara considers the Watergate scandal "[a]nother sort of Napalm descending at home" (McCann 131), or in the designation of the Bronx as "American Hanoi" (McCann 256), for instance.
21 This theme is traced by Cusatis, Schober, and Flannery, for instance.

The notion that creatively establishing links between unconnected people might have positive outcomes is reminiscent of one often postulated trajectory of trauma theory: "moving from pain to recognition to solidarity" (Dalley 373). In my reading, the ways in which characters are linked in McCann's novel by a 'trauma network' can also fulfill this aim and thus embraces the emotional need of many trauma victims to overcome their feeling of isolation. The funambulist's audience, for example, which link the performance to so many different (traumatic) historical events, on the next page realize that they have become a community whilst watching: "The watchers below pulled in their breath all at once. The air felt suddenly shared" (McCann 7). This process of establishing community takes also place when Claire and Gloria connect via the shared traumatic loss of their sons across racial[22] and social boundaries; a claim that is supported by Claire's thoughts: "Let me tell you, Gloria, the walls between us are quite thin. One cry and they all come tumbling down" (McCann 78). The "cry" as expression of bodily and psychic torment is here invested with the power to break down the wall separating Gloria, the poor black character from the Bronx, and Claire, the rich white character living on Park Avenue. Since Claire occupies the position of power in this relationship it might not be surprising that she deems a connection possible. However, Gloria's thoughts while holding hands with Claire suggest that she too believes that this bond will help the two women overcome their traumatic loss: "I reached across and held her hand. I had no fear now" (McCann 321). Claire and Gloria subsequently become lifelong close friends (McCann 330) and, being linked by trauma and friendship, they leave fear behind and achieve a feeling of security. The women's reaching out to each other evokes Schober's suggestion that "[i]f the individual cannot create meaning by purely 'existing,' the act of creating connections, of relating to others, becomes vital" (396), especially vital, one might add, at times of crisis caused by traumatic experiences.

Conclusions

As I have shown, also a novel dealing with several collective historical traumas can be analyzed using the classic approaches to trauma fiction with the result that a traumatization

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22 U.S.-race relations, slavery and discrimination are other important topics of the novel which cannot be discussed in detail here. In the chapters presented from their perspectives, Gloria and Claire are depicted as clearly conscious of their racial and social positions which culminate in Claire awkwardly offering Gloria to pay her for her company (McCann 299).

of the characters and an indirect representation of underlying traumas can be asserted, which then allows for a classification of the text as trauma narrative, or, in the case of *Let the Great World Spin* even more narrowly, as "9/11 novel." Nonetheless, neither classic literary trauma theory nor more recently proposed approaches can account for connections between different traumas and thus exclude a significant aspect from the analysis. By contrast, combining network and literary trauma theory in the study of a novel like *Let the Great World Spin* exposes ways in which traumas can be linked without recurring to explicit comparisons. Whereas McCann does not invent "[a] whole new language of trauma" (McCann 72), as one of his characters puts it in the face of the injuries caused by a car accident, he certainly offers a new perspective on collective historical traumas and the ways they can be narrativized conjointly in one novel.

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