

*Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*

By Stef Craps

Basingstoke (UK), and New York (USA): Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 170. UK£50 Hardcover.

Despite the seriousness of the topic, the clarity and flow of Craps's writing makes *Postcolonial Witnessing* a joy. Craps enters the debate about the future of trauma studies not simply by offering a critique of its failures or even by discussing a way forward, but by opening up the field through the thoughtful analysis of a number of postcolonial literary texts. While clearly outlining what he sees as the failures of trauma theory, in particular its inability to break free of the Eurocentric origins of its founding texts, Craps's project is ultimately optimistic about its ability to broaden its vision and embrace a postcolonial future.

*Postcolonial Witnessing* begins with a reminder that trauma studies came out of the 'ethical turn' of the 1990s. Craps's overall aim is to chart a course by which the ethical promise of trauma studies is capable of being recuperated, but he starts by outlining ways the field has fail to live up to its ethical promise: through its Eurocentric bias and in particular a narrow and culturally specific definition of trauma; through an obsession with modernist aesthetics and rejection of narrative; and by a lack of consideration of the ways traumas suffered by different minority or oppressed groups connect with each other.

Having listed these deficiencies, Craps systematically considers each issue in turn. The first two chapters, "The Trauma of Empire" and "The Empire of Trauma", offer an excellent review of both the theoretical and psychological literature in which traditional trauma theory (if there is such a thing in a 20-year old field) is grounded. As might be expected, particular attention is paid to the work of Cathy Caruth, and Craps offers counter-readings of a number of texts where Caruth considers non-European characters. For example, Caruth's reading of the story of Tancred and Clorinda, Craps suggests, is an example of the way the experience of the non-Western other can be appropriated by trauma theorists who are insufficiently aware of their own cultural bias. This pattern of considering the literature, offering critique and then using a textual analysis to give examples is followed throughout the book, adding to the text's accessibility. Even chapter two, which deals with the fairly technical historical context of the definition of trauma and critiques the way trauma theorists have tended to rely on outdated psychological models, is brought to life by Craps's use of tangible examples. For example, he recounts Frantz Fanon's description of a racist interaction with a small child to illustrate the "insidious trauma" (29) of everyday oppression. In doing so he also draws Fanon into an expanded canon of trauma literature.

Despite Craps's strong critique of the event-based model used by traditional trauma theorists, the second half of the book focusses on three historical moments he argues are important to the development of a postcolonial trauma theory: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); the slave trade's Middle Passage; and the Holocaust. However, these moments are given attention in order to explore the broader flows of power and structural inequality which gave rise to them. Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) serves as a jumping off point for a critique of the TRC as well as for a consideration of how postcolonial writers address postcolonial trauma. As Craps demonstrates, for oppressed peoples there is no 'normal' point of origin—no prior untraumatized existence that could be returned to if the pain was 'worked through' in the right way. Similarly, although David Dabydeen's "Turner" (1995) and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) both address a particular historical moment of the slave trade, Craps considers them through the prism of Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*

(1994), a text he sees as foundational to trauma theory. Playing on the haunting imagery of the literary texts and Derrida's similar focus on ghostly imagery, Craps suggests that by showing the past as continued in the present, these postcolonial trauma texts offer the reader "an opportunity to learn to live with ghosts" (71).

Perhaps the most contentious area for a postcolonial trauma theory is the way the Holocaust is considered in relation to other traumas, and Craps dedicates three chapters to exploring this issue. He does this by first retracing the emergence of the field of memory studies, and its recent shift in focus from national to transnational memory. As in other parts of the book, Craps uses this historical and theoretical context to draw out the complex issues which he sees as keeping the fields of Holocaust and postcolonial studies apart. While sympathetic to the historical context that has led to claims that the Holocaust is a 'unique' event, Craps is critical of such claims, arguing that, "Insisting on the distinctiveness and difference of one's own history can indicate a kind of blindness, a refusal to recognise the larger historical processes of which that history is a part" (84). The two writers whose work Craps considers in this section of the book—Caryl Phillips and Anita Desai—both explore links between the Holocaust and the suffering of other oppressed or minority peoples. They resist the impulse to claim equivalence between traumas, while at the same time ask the reader to consider the interrelationships between different types of violence and oppression.

The focus of the book is on trauma, and Craps does not really address one of the other key terms in the book's title—the concept of witnessing. However, like all of the chapter headings, the choice of the book's title is significant, playing on reference to Felman and Daub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature* (1992). Craps considers previous critiques of this text and the way traditional psychoanalytic approaches set up a power dynamic between the writer/speaker and the reader/analyst that replicate that of patient and psychoanalyst. Craps wants to restore to the witness of trauma a sense of political agency. He also plays with this word to create a sense of shared responsibility—the witness is sometimes the survivor of trauma and sometimes the one who empathises and who crosses boundaries "to witness the pain of others" (58).

This is a book that engages with current debates in a lively and interesting way and is sure to be of interest to scholars of trauma, postcolonialism, cultural memory studies and related fields. Its clear structure and thorough consideration of foundational and recent literature, including an excellent index and bibliography, will also make it a useful text to those who are new to the topic. In fact, the book's strong argument, clear structure and engaging prose make *Postcolonial Witnessing* an example of what an academic text should be.

ALISON ATKINSON-PHILLIPS  
University of Technology Sydney