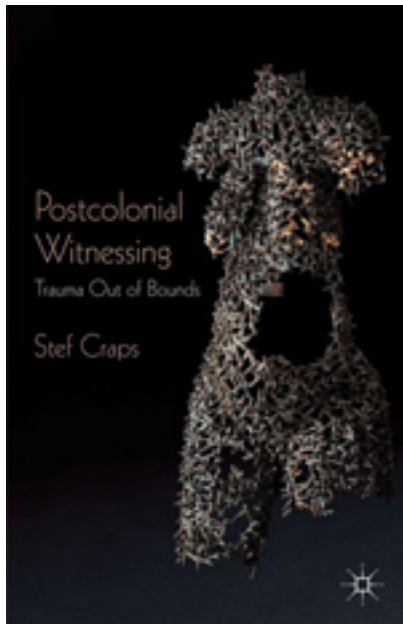


## Trauma on its own terms

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Stef Craps. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. 2013. Palgrave Macmillan. 184 pages, Hardcover.



*Postcolonial Witnessing* represents a major contribution to the field of trauma studies in that it calls for a conversation between the historically discrete, if not self-isolating, fields of trauma theory and postcolonial studies. As Craps informs us, those involved in the initial formation and subsequent institutionalization of trauma studies within the North American and Western European academy in the 1990s (Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub and Dominick LaCapra, amongst others) generally looked to the history of the Jewish Holocaust as *the* fundamental source site for theorizing trauma. Because of this, both intentionally and unintentionally, the field of trauma studies quickly came to resemble a Eurocentric account of trauma. This meant, in short, that other historical moments and forms of trauma—such as individual and collective trauma resulting from the history of European colonization the world over—were either not sufficiently theorized or altogether absent. As such, Craps’s text represents a call to action against this lacuna. At the core of *Postcolonial Witnessing* is the awareness that, “breaking with Eurocentrism requires a commitment not only to broadening the usual focus of trauma theory but also to acknowledge the traumas of non-Western or minority populations for their own sake” (19).

There is a serious need to interrogate the blind spots of trauma studies as a field in that, “Trauma theory’s failure to give the sufferings of those belonging to non-Western or minority groups due recognition sits uneasily with the field’s ethical aspirations” (3). Like most

branches of literary and cultural studies in the 1990s, trauma studies were indexed by the larger ethical turn in the humanities at the time. Yet the broad aspirations of trauma studies to consider the universal structure and effects of trauma compared to the actual scope of the analysis and work produced by its key practitioners have not necessarily lined up; in truth the analytical span of trauma theory has been rather narrow, gravely limiting itself to a modern European (as well as a North American) context. It is for this reason that Craps argues that, “the traumas of non-Western or minority groups must be acknowledged, moreover, on their own terms” (19).

Craps’ book is divided into eight chapters that are prefaced by an introduction and culminate in the conclusion. In Chapter 1, “The Trauma of Empire,” Craps provides us with an extensive review of the literature, history, and theories of trauma studies, underscoring the large extent to which the field as a whole has overlooked the question of the trauma of “non-Western cultural traditions” (3). Anyone wanting a concise yet comprehensive summary of the major debates within trauma studies up through the contemporary moment would do well to review this chapter in particular.

In Chapter 2, Craps unpacks what he means when he repeatedly suggests that the trauma of the world’s non-Western subjects must to be considered *on its own terms*. We are reminded that, as a formal category of human experience trauma, “is actually a Western artifact, ‘invented’ in the late nineteenth century” (20). As such, we must pause to recognize trauma not as universal experience, but rather, as a historically and regionally specific conception. Craps is thus right to stress that any attempt to impose Eurocentric understandings or models of trauma onto the social experience of non-Western subjects is in its own way an egregious form of cultural imperialism. In most need of criticism, then, is the Freudian, event-based model of trauma that has dominated the field.

Craps beautifully underscores the fact that not all forms of trauma are event-based or event-specific, and that therefore the field must be open to the consideration of alternative models when considering alternate experiences of trauma. After all, “The traumatic impact of racism and other forms of ongoing oppression cannot be adequately understood,” within the event-based model of trauma predominant in trauma theory today. This point, which forms the thesis of Craps’ book, proves to be *Postcolonial Witnessing’s* most thought provoking and generative argument. Towards the end of Chapter 2, Craps looks to the postcolonial writings of Franz Fanon in order to support his critique of the hegemony of event-based formulations of trauma, for the forms of colonial based racism that Fanon criticizes in his work are not the products of any specific event or incident of trauma, but rather symptomatic of a larger, decentralized system of traumatic oppression. *Postcolonial Witnessing* thus builds upon previous scholarship exposing the intersections of psychoanalysis, colonialism and empire, such works as Ranjana Khanna’s *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* and the more recently published anthology *Unconscious Dominions:*

*Psychoanalysis, Colonial Trauma, and Global Sovereignties*, edited by Warwick Anderson, Deborah Jenson and Richard C. Keller.

In Chapter 3, “Beyond Trauma Aesthetics,” Craps continues outlining his major concerns with regards to the articulation of a postcolonial trauma theory. Here the conversation turns to a critique of normative trauma aesthetics in which he addresses “the textual inscription of [traumatic] experiences,” and suggests that, “certain received ideas and assumptions about how literature bears witness to trauma may need to be revised” (38). Theorists of trauma studies have historically privileged the written word and literature as the ideal media for representing and attesting to trauma. In turn, the expectation that victims of trauma can coherently narrativize their experiences of violence or loss has become habitual within trauma theory. For this reason, Craps rightfully underscores that trauma theory ought to consider, “the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate” (43). To do otherwise is to reproduce a rather narrow understanding of trauma. It is important to note, however, that Craps does, “neither reject modernist modes of representation as inherently Eurocentric nor uphold any particular alternative as a postcolonial panacea,” only that he, “stress[es] the need to check the rush to dismiss whatever deviates from the prescribed aesthetic [of trauma] as regressive or irrelevant” (5). *Postcolonial Witnesses* does not propose a specific political trajectory or theoretical stance for the future of trauma studies; rather, it works to call for a new trauma theory, one such that proves to be as comprehensive and inclusive a system of analysis as possible.

All the same, while Craps makes a point to suggest that we look beyond the desire for coherent narratives of trauma, such as those represented within literature, his book does not pause to consider the need to move beyond the inherent limits of the literary. Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 8 of *Postcolonial Witnessing* engage in a set of alternative, postcolonial literary representations of trauma that challenge the contemporary, institutionalized, event-based and coherent-narrative-demanding elements of trauma theory. In doing so Craps fails to move beyond literature and literary aesthetics. While the book offers a minor treatment of oral testimony, there is no deep consideration of visual—as opposed to literary or oral—forms of communication as vehicles for documenting and bearing witness to trauma.

As such, a serious consideration of the benefits (as well as possible limitations) of turning to live performance, cinema and visual art in order to bear witness to trauma remains wanting in Craps’ call for a new, postcolonial trauma studies. For a visual analysis of postcolonial trauma, if only within the field of contemporary art by members of the Caribbean diaspora, one could easily consider the Caribbean Canadian visual artist Joscelyn Gardner’s 2012 exhibition “Bleeding and Breeding”, a display of lithographs and video installation attending to the

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physical and psychic trauma of Caribbean female slaves, or even Dr. Leo Balai's Leusden artistic exhibition at The National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam based on the abovementioned Surinamese Dutch historian's doctoral research on the lost history of the Leusden, a Dutch slave ship that sank in 1768, drowning close to 700 African slave.

In conclusion, Stef Craps' *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* is a text that has, without a doubt, pushed the field of trauma studies towards a more positive and critical direction of analysis and ethical engagement. Scholars of trauma and postcolonial theory alike have much to benefit from Craps' book. With that said, this text proves equally beneficial to many other fields of study, such as political science, international relations, human rights, history, anthropology and sociology, to name a few. Another strength of *Postcolonial Witnessing* is that it has the potential to influence spheres of policy and practice beyond the realm of the academy. For example, Western NGO's working to address the history of trauma and its subsequent legacies in sectors of the Global South have much to learn about the dangers of imposing Western conceptions of trauma onto the non-Western world and its communities. A fundamental leap in the right direction, *Postcolonial Witnessing* opens a path for new, more generative theorizations of trauma.

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