

Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds

Stef Craps

170 pages, 2013, \$80.00 USD (hardcover)

New York, Palgrave Macmillan

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Stef Craps' *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* is a timely and much needed corrective to the polarized debate—particularly in postcolonial studies—around the uses and abuses of trauma theory. Indeed, in this book Craps, the Director of the Centre for Literature and Trauma at Ghent University, the 2008 guest editor of a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* on “Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” and author of *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation* (2005), manages to reconcile trauma theory with postcolonial studies while delivering a pointed and thorough critique of the “hegemonic trauma discourse” (28) evident in the writings of established trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra and practiced by psychotherapists worldwide.

Craps' introduction and first chapter are invaluable as a survey and critique of the now numerous theoretical studies of trauma within a field that has grown rapidly in a relatively brief time period since the 1990s. But it is Craps' ability to clearly and succinctly critique early formulations of a western fixated model of trauma theory that propels this book forward. As Craps writes, “the founding texts of the field . . . largely fail to live up to this promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. They fail on at least four counts: they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas” (2). Despite this seemingly damning criticism of such “founding texts of the field,” Craps revises and injects new life into trauma theory by showing how it can be adapted to the postcolonial experience in psychotherapeutic, historical, and literary arenas. This is accomplished by way of a fair assessment of some of the most important works on trauma theory. This expansive, although relatively brief analysis (the primary text is 127 pages long) enables Craps to develop a consistently cogent and revealing theory of his own which effectively re-situates trauma theory in a postcolonial context.

Craps is open about his debt to authors such as Maria Root, Ethan Waters, and Laura Brown and builds upon the work of others to expose the inherent flaws in, for example, the different incarnations of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and its

universalizing conception of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Nonetheless, this study of trauma theory and postcolonial witnessing is primarily concerned with the implications of such theory for postcolonial literature. As Craps states at the end of chapter three, “trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate” (43).

In chapters four through eight, Craps’ reading of Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother*, David Dabydeen’s “Turner,” Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*, and novels by Caryl Phillips shows exactly how subtle and “insidious” and real trauma can be within a postcolonial context (26). Moreover, Craps’ discussion of “Derrida’s reflections on spectrality and mourning” leads to fascinating readings of “Turner” and *Feeding the Ghosts* which set the stage for the book’s reappraisal of Phillips’ more controversial and cross-cultural novels, *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* (60). This reappraisal of Phillips’ novels builds upon the work of Michael Rothberg (particularly his concept of “multidirectional memory”) in all kinds of revealing ways. Indeed, in his defense of Phillips’ ventures into the juxtaposition of “black and Jewish suffering” (89), Craps draws together various threads of his discussion, stating: “The indirections of Phillips’ approach to both Jewish and black history can be connected to the traumatic nature of the diasporic condition shared by the two groups. As Rothberg points out, ‘at the limit, diaspora frustrates all forms of metaphoric identification because it is rooted in, or—better—uprooted by traumatic history’” (100). At the close of chapter seven, which deals with Phillips’ work, Craps revitalizes Caruthian trauma theory in postcolonial terms: Phillips’ “work seeks to move beyond the isolation imposed by trauma by letting multiple histories of suffering address one another without collapsing one into the other. Bearing out Caruth’s claim that ‘trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures’ . . . , it offers a compelling reflection on how such mnemonic connections are to be made for visions of cross-cultural solidarity and justice rather than discord and violence to arise from them” (101).

Essentially, in this book Craps argues that trauma theory—if sensitized to the “insidious” or ongoing nature of trauma in the postcolonial context—is a means to justice (26). Indeed, after addressing a common misreading of Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* as a novel endorsing “orientalist stereotypes,” Craps claims that this novel “suggests the need for a productive and dynamic cross-culturalism which could help break what it portrays as a global cycle of violence” (123). At the outset of *Postcolonial Witnessing’s* concluding chapter, the author spells out the book’s overall intent: “I have tried to expose the limitations and blind spots that I think trauma theory will need to confront if it is to deliver on its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement” (124). Craps succeeds in this attempt. And in this sense, his book is a much needed corrective to an often polarized debate around the significance and relevance of trauma theory to postcolonial studies. I strongly recommend *Postcolonial*

Witnessing to anyone interested in future applications of trauma theory in various fields of study, especially postcolonial literature.