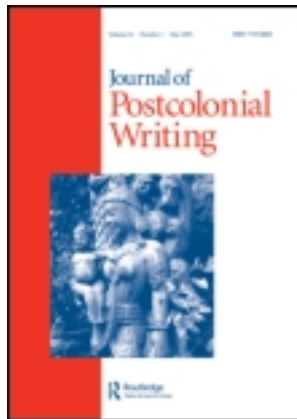


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### Postcolonial witnessing: trauma out of bounds

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Darwin's approach is to examine this spread of empire by way of a range of themes, each of which is treated in a different chapter. So we have sections on contact, possession, rebellion, resistance, culture and collapse. In the chapter on conquest we learn about the significance of technology to British success, the role of the empire's navy, the impact of military discipline, and the part that indigenous contingents played in the British success story. It is no surprise to see why India played such a significant role in the story of empire and how, once it became independent, the rest of the empire quickly came unstuck. Each of Darwin's chapters is supported by half a dozen or so case studies. The text is augmented by a number of clear and useful maps.

In the course of this epic narrative it is perhaps not surprising that no singular rationale or theory can explain precisely how and why the British were successful. Darwin argues instead that the empire was "improvised", "unstable", "higgledy-piggledy", "a ragbag" and "a work in progress". A number of intriguing themes thus emerge, in particular the centrality of luck. It seems that the British Empire arose just at the right time, when Ottoman, Mughal and Chinese power were on the wane (a theme addressed in Darwin's earlier work *After Tamerlane*), when major reserves of gold and coal could be exploited and when no European power, post-Napoleon, was really in a position to jeopardize British ascendancy. *Unfinished Empire* is thus also peppered with expressions such as: "fortuitous", "unique", "lucky", "fortunate" and "against the odds". Even during the Falklands crisis, when Britain's imperial luck had begun to run out, these British possessions just happened to be on the edge of Argentinian air-power. Indeed, if Australia is the "lucky country", after reading *Unfinished Empire* it appears that its British imperial counterpart is "the lucky empire".

Two other important themes emerge from the pages of Darwin's story. The first is the significance of 1815 as a turning point in the development of British power and history. The other, which in the last few years has become more and more conspicuous, is the role that private initiative played in the construction of empire. Indeed, Darwin argues that the British Empire was "largely a private enterprise", albeit one aided and abetted by the state. Witness the power and influence of the ubiquitous East India Company, as well as smaller and earlier schemes, ranging from Roanoke to the Royal African Company. I have only one minor criticism of the book, namely that, apart from the white settlement colonies of Australia and New Zealand, the South Pacific does not get much mention.

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**Postcolonial witnessing: trauma out of bounds**, by Stef Craps, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 184 pp., £50.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 2302 3007 1

Trauma theory has come in for substantial criticism in the last few years, for its ostensibly narrowly formalist aesthetics, its overdependence on current publishing trends, and its Eurocentrism. Stef Craps's excellent study calls for the decolonizing of trauma theory and begins from the premise that its founding texts have failed to live up

to the promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. In a carefully argued thesis, he accuses trauma theory of Eurocentric bias in four crucial ways: marginalizing the traumas of non-western subjects and minority cultures; assuming the universal validity of western models of trauma; privileging a narrow modernist trauma aesthetics; and overlooking the relationship between western and non-western forms of traumatic experience. Given the ethical claims made by trauma theorists, the failure to attend to the sufferings of non-western Others is highly problematic.

Chapter 1 surveys the founding texts of trauma theory, acknowledging that while it developed out of the study of the Holocaust in relation to literature and history, there is a need to move beyond a limited western frame for trauma. Craps cites Dominick LaCapra's admission that the overemphasis on the Holocaust in the United States may be implicated in its denial of slavery and highlights Judith Butler's argument that only some people's lives are represented as "grievable". Craps also draws attention to the problems of appropriation and instrumentalization of non-western traumas, which, chapter 2 argues, need to be acknowledged and examined on their own terms. In particular, Craps examines the critique of "psychiatric universalism" in which western understandings of trauma are projected onto non-western subjects in highly problematic ways. Feminist trauma theorists are also held to account. What, then, does a decolonized, globally aware trauma theory look like? In reply, Craps returns to Frantz Fanon's compelling account of colonialism as a wounding of the body and mind. He also draws on the work of mental health researchers to examine alternative concepts of trauma attuned to a postcolonial context.

Chapter 3 draws on Roger Luckhurst's work to challenge the axiomatic notion that traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, modernist textual strategies. Craps also cites the work of Rita Felski, whose challenge to feminist aesthetics has also informed my own work on women's middlebrow trauma fiction, and he commends Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy's critique of the academic tendency to construct a trauma canon for study based on how well texts exemplify theories rather than for their insight into a range of traumatic experiences and for their diverse modes of representation – which is something we would all do well to bear in mind when constructing our own modules on trauma narratives. Chapter 4 develops the idea of a decolonized trauma theory through the textual analysis of Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) as a negotiation of different conceptions of trauma. Similarly, chapter 5 analyses David Dabydeen's epic poem "Turner" (1995) and Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) as texts which challenge Eurocentric concepts of trauma, mourning and recovery.

Chapter 6 on cross-traumatic affiliation makes an important attempt to bridge the gap between what are usually seen as two separate disciplines – Holocaust studies and colonial studies – while chapter 7 examines the ways in which postcolonial literary texts may reflect and elicit a relational understanding of trauma and foreground the connected legacies of colonialism and the Holocaust. Craps argues convincingly that Caryl Phillips's work is attuned to multiple histories of suffering "by supplementing a metaphorical view of history, which, in its insistence on similarity, threatens to conflate distinct historical experiences, with a metonymical view, which places them alongside one another and thus preserves the distance between them" (89). In chapter 8, he analyses the resonances between the Holocaust, colonialism and the partition of India in Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*, calling it a study in "cross-cultural incomprehension" (115). Overall, this short book advances an eloquent plea to rethink trauma from a postcolonial perspective in order to listen to the suffering of Others beyond the western

purview and, thereby, in Craps's words, "remain faithful to the ethical foundation of the field" (127).

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**Voicetracks**, by Jan Kemp, Auckland and Kronberg im Taunus, Puriri Press, 2012, 71 pp., £15.00 (available at [tranzlit@iconz.co.nz](mailto:tranzlit@iconz.co.nz)), ISBN 978 0 9089 4338 8

*Voicetracks* expresses the cosmopolitan sensibility of Jan Kemp, an expatriate poet from New Zealand who was a member of the "Freed" poets in the late 1960s, a group that responded to developments in USA experimental verse of the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1970s she was one of the "Gang of Four" poets, before leaving New Zealand to live and work in Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, Germany and other places. Where Kemp's previous collection, *Dante's Heaven* (2006), represents the Florentine poet's imaginative and cosmological vision of the Antipodes through the cross-cultural realities of New Zealand's vernacular and aboriginal traditions, *Voicetracks* explores and extends a transnational modernist poetics characterized by various quests for greater freedom of expression through expatriate travel and flights from oppression. The cover photo to Kemp's collection – depicting shadowy figures at the top of a partly illuminated staircase – captures a view taken from Dani Karavan's "Passages", a memorial to Walter Benjamin, the Jewish German philosopher whose life ended in Portbou, Spain, before he could complete *Das Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades Project*. Karavan's work consists of three passages inspired by Benjamin's life, work and death: a tunnel with a flight of steps leading to a view of the sea and a whirlpool below, a path leading to an olive tree, and a passage leading to a platform of meditation, which offers a view of the horizon. Following in the footsteps of Benjamin and Karavan, Kemp uses chiaroscuro effects in her representations of the delights and terrors associated with imagined and actual passages through space and time.

*Voicetracks* consists of six main sections, beginning with "The Rowohl Suite", a series of largely conversational poems based on the poet's experiences as a writer in residence at Le Château de Lavigny, Switzerland. Here Kemp's verse takes the form of an exuberant romp through this multilingual region; she calls attention to the space of writing through the displacements of language, especially through code-switching and playful twists on the literal and metaphorical meanings of words and phrases. In the second and third sections, Kemp's engagement with locality gives way to a wider reflection on the being in the world and the role of spatial aesthetics, especially through her responses to the work of writers, notably Katherine Mansfield and Charles Causley, and painters, including Salvador Dalí and Cy Twombly. Terror, *eros* and death emerge as dominant concerns in sections four through six as Kemp considers the terrors of World War II and associated issues of global citizenship, the body/text/locality as a site of expressive pleasure and relations between the living and the dead as the basis for alternative imagined communities.

In *Voicetracks*, the darker poems offer especially evocative reflections on citizenship, (un)belonging and the cosmopolitan imaginary. Particularly striking are the poems