

Reviews

Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 184 pp.

Stef Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* attempts to adapt the rather recent advances of trauma theory to postcolonial theory and despite its flaws, it is one of the more important texts on trauma theory in recent time. In the book Craps claims to address what he sees as major flaws in traumatic theory. He wants to attend to the marginalization of non-Western as well as minority traumas, shift focus away from what he claims is a Western-centric theory that gets overlaid onto other cultures, expand the overly rigid normativity of trauma aesthetics, and correct the lack of attention to the relationship between the developed and underdeveloped nations. It is a rather tall order and some of the issues are treated more sagaciously than others, but overall it is a very strong look at trauma studies.

The major flaws in the text, then, are twofold. The first is the approach to the research that came before. Craps locates the emergence of trauma theory in the 1990s, and with Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra primarily. While one can see this moment as a significant shift in and or coalescence of the theory of trauma and its relationship to cultural products, it is important to place trauma theory in its larger historical perspective. What is more problematic, however, is his approach to the field. In his critique of some of the seminal works of trauma theory Craps takes a decidedly hostile approach to the research. This is not to say that all of his criticism is deniable, but the text attempts to enter the field via sledgehammer in the introduction only to build on said theories in a much more cogent way later.

An example of the first issue comes by way of the second flaw in the text. One of Craps's problems with the field is its heavy concentration on Europe and the Holocaust and his tone is openly hostile toward those precursors. He writes of "trauma theory's general blindness to or lack of interest in, the traumas visited upon members of non-Western cultures" (11–12). While I often agree with his assessment, I understand that the theory started in a particular place at a particular time. There is a historical convergence of literary technique, the two world wars, and the Holocaust, as well as a number of other conflagrations that involve the West, where at the

time most literary theory was produced. In other words, trauma theory had to start somewhere. What is important and perhaps underrated by Craps is that that many other critics have taken those original theories and have moved well beyond that Eurocentric thought and the Holocaust. That said, even as *Postcolonial Witnessing* attempts to decenter both traumatic theory and the traumatic texts that are studied, it has a hard time letting go of the Eurocentrism. In fact, Europe or the Holocaust is mentioned, by way of negative example or comparison, in all but two of the eight chapters. Furthermore, although it is true that the primary focus of much previous research was the war in the European theatre and the Holocaust, and I agree that there is no need to compare every other traumatic event to that era and that we should instead examine events on their own terms, Craps ignores much of the work that has been going on in the Global South for years, including work by Idelber Atilar, Diana Taylor, and even some of Caruth's more recent work on the return to democracy in Chile. That said, *Postcolonial Witnessing* is building on and adjusting foundational trauma theories in important ways and looks to South Africa, Guyana, Saint Kitts, and India for examples.

Once Craps moves to the analysis of the primary texts, *Postcolonial Witnessing* shines. Chapter four examines the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*. He argues that the event, a fictionalized account of the 1993 murder of Amy Biehl can be used as an entrée into the traumas of apartheid as well as a response to the TRC. Craps argues that "while *Mother to Mother* calls for skepticism towards grandiose proclamations of healing and reconciliation, it does so not in a spirit of fatalism or despair, but in the stubborn belief that there is some hope in crossing boundaries to witness the pain of others" (58). Craps, in this chapter, also strives toward a more inclusive way of examining trauma. Though *Mother to Mother* still includes a connection to the West, neither it nor Craps privileges that position.

In Chapter five, Craps examines David Dabydeen's poem "Turner" and Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghost*. The works by these two British Caribbean writers focus on the Middle Passage and the racial violence that continues to haunt today. Leaning heavily on Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, Craps focuses on the spectral in "Turner" and *Feeding the Ghost*: "At the Heart of D'Aguiar's testimonial enterprise, then—and this is also true, it seems to me, for Dabydeen—there is a concern with justice not only for the dead, but also for the living and the as yet unborn" (71). The idea that the past continues to haunt the present in terms of trauma is far from new, but the combination of trauma with this particular postcolonial witnessing gives critics yet another tool with which to examine a number of texts.

Chapter seven returns to the Caribbean to analyze the connections of racist and anti-Semitic violence that Caryl Phillips explores in his work, arguing that, "having no access to any representations of slavery, colonialism, or their legacies, Phillips

tried to make sense of his experience and history through the prism of Jewish suffering” (90). This level of cross-cultural traumatic identification is an important avenue of research as often it is the traumas of others that inspire people to examine their own lives. Craps’s claim that the work of Phillips moves “beyond the isolation imposed by trauma by letting multiple histories of suffering address one another without collapsing one into the other,” is also a noteworthy point to make and ought to inspire a boom in cross-cultural trauma studies (101).

The final work studied in *Postcolonial Witnessing* is Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay*. Again, Craps studies a text that traces a cultural trauma back to Europe. One of the more interesting points made by Craps as he examines this text is the traumatic disconnect. Although there is suffering that the Jewish Baumgartner had to endure, his neighbors in his adopted city of Bombay did not seem to know what had happened to the Jewish population and could not understand what he and his family had gone through, let alone empathize with his situation. On the other hand, Baumgartner knew nothing of the struggles between the Muslims and the Hindus; to him they were all simply Indian. Craps could spend more time discussing these connections or disconnections through the lens of empathy or lack thereof to fully round out these last two chapters as Phillips finds his way through empathy and Desai seems to demonstrate the dangers of a lack of empathy.

In the end, Craps claims that he is trying to point out the current limitations in trauma theory, and, in fact, he does make a number of significant points in this regard. Furthermore, he states his belief that “rethinking trauma studies from a post-colonial perspective and providing nuanced readings of a wide variety of narratives of trauma and witnessing from around the world can help us understand that shared precariousness” (127). I could not agree more.

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Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?*

A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex

New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 246 pp.

In *Are the Lips a Grave* Lynne Huffer brings together her work in feminist and queer theory to continue the project that she began in her previous book, *Mad for Foucault*—the rethinking of the foundations of queer, and now feminist, theory in order to develop a relational ethics, which she sums up as “an erotic, desubjectivating practice of freedom in relation to others” (106). For Huffer this work requires bridging the gap that has emerged between feminism and queer theory over the nature of the subject, ethics and sociality, and the functions of narrative and per-