

Editorial

## “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism”—Introduction

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This Special Issue aims to explore the complex and contested relationship between trauma studies and postcolonial criticism, focusing on the ongoing project to create a decolonized trauma theory that attends to and accounts for the suffering of minority groups and non-Western cultures, broadly defined as cultures beyond Western Europe and North America. The issue builds on the insights of, *inter alia*, Stef Craps’s book, *Postcolonial Witnessing* [1], and responds to his challenge to interrogate and move beyond a Eurocentric trauma paradigm. Authors were invited to submit papers on the theorization and representation of any aspect of postcolonial, non-Western and/or minority cultural trauma with a focus predominately, but not exclusively, on literature.

The field of trauma studies emerged in the early 1990s as an attempt to construct an ethical response to forms of human suffering and their cultural and artistic representation. Born out of the confluence between deconstructive and psychoanalytic criticism and the study of Holocaust literature, from its outset trauma theory’s mission was to bear witness to traumatic histories in such a way as to attend to the suffering of the other. Indeed, in a famous formulation, Caruth went so far as to suggest that ‘trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures’ ([2], p. 11). Yet, while trauma theory has undoubtedly yielded numerous insights into the relationship between psychic suffering and cultural representation, postcolonial critics have been arguing for some time that trauma theory has not fulfilled its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. Rather than forging relationships of empathy and solidarity with non-Western others, a narrowly Western canon of trauma literature has in effect emerged, one which privileges the suffering of white Europeans, and neglects the specificity of non-Western and minority cultural traumas. In 2003, for example, Jill Bennett and Roseanne Kennedy called for a transformation of trauma studies from a Eurocentric discipline to one capable of engaging with ‘the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture’ ([3], p. 5), and in 2008 a number of influential critiques by Gert Beulens and Stef Craps [4], Michael Rothberg [5], and Roger Luckhurst [6] added to the voices calling for a radical re-routing of the field.

A decade on from Bennett and Kennedy's path-breaking work, Stef Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing* sums up the postcolonial case against trauma theory. The book mounts a summative critique of the Eurocentric bias of trauma theory and sets out the challenges to be met in constructing a thoroughly decolonized trauma studies. Craps argues forcibly that despite its laudable ethical origins, which sought to foster cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory has largely failed to recognise the sufferings of non-Western others. For him the founding texts of trauma theory fail on at least four counts:

they marginalise 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. ([1], p. 2).

One of the major stumbling blocks to a truly globalized discipline, according to Craps, is the fact that trauma theory "continues to adhere to the traditional event-based model of trauma, according to which trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" ([1], p. 31). In numerous accounts, trauma is defined as "a frightening event outside of ordinary experience" ([7], p. 172) but, as Craps argues, this paradigmatic model of trauma does not necessarily work for non-Western and/or minority group trauma (nor even for groups and individuals within Western societies). In particular, the experience of racism does not fit either of the "classical" forms of trauma: "Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present" ([1], p. 32). Therefore, racially based forms of trauma historically rooted in the global systems of slavery and colonialism pose a significant challenge to the Eurocentric model of trauma as a single overwhelming event.

Drawing on the pioneering work of Frantz Fanon, and more recent theories of "insidious trauma" [8] and "postcolonial syndrome" [9] among others, Craps develops a supplementary model of trauma, which addresses the normative, quotidian, and persistent nature of racialized trauma. If the ethical aspirations of the field are to be realized, he concludes, there is an urgent need to decolonize trauma studies by recognizing the globalized contexts of traumatic events, the specific forms traumatic suffering takes, and the myriad ways in which it is represented in literary works. Eschewing neither psychoanalysis nor deconstruction, this model seeks to "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 that these contexts invite or necessitate" ([1], p. 5). Such a decolonized trauma theory would, firstly, redress the marginalization of non-Western and minority traumas; secondly, it would challenge the supposed universal validity of Western definitions of trauma; thirdly, provide alternatives to dominant trauma aesthetics; and lastly, address the underexplored relationship between so-called First and Third World traumas.

Work in comparative literature and memory studies has contributed significantly to the process of decolonizing trauma theory, particularly in this last respect. For example, the work of Michael Rothberg on 'multidirectional memory' provides an indispensable conceptual model for this kind of

cross-cultural analysis. In his essay, “From Gaza to Warsaw”, Rothberg asks the salient question: ‘What happens when different histories of extreme violence confront each other in the public sphere?’ ([10], p. 523). His work is concerned with challenging the hierarchical and/or exclusivist approach to chronicling collective traumas—“either mine or yours”—and he is at pains to point out how, “Collective memories of seemingly distinct histories—such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism—are not so easily separable.” ([10], p. 524). In his earlier book, *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg developed the concept at length:

Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private. [...] This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory ([11], p. 3).

In particular, he suggests the usefulness of the term for thinking about how minority subjects in the present come to terms with and think about their and our collective histories. In recent years, moreover, there have been a number of publications such as *The Future of Trauma Theory* [12] and *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* [13] which seek to move beyond the dominant Eurocentric model of trauma theory, to explore the underexplored link between trauma and postcolonialism, and to suggest new avenues of research.

This Special Issue aims to contribute to such a reshaping of the field. Its authors responded to the challenge to rethink trauma studies from a postcolonial and globalized perspective with gusto and ambition. They represent an international field of scholars working on a wide range of writers and artists from numerous postcolonial contexts. Of particular note is Irene Visser’s essay “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospects and Prospects”, which develops her work on the ongoing dialogue between trauma theory and postcolonialism, and sets out what she sees as the achievements and continuing challenges of the decolonizing project. In her view, an interrogation of Western secular modes of thought and a greater openness towards non-Western belief systems and indigenous healing rituals is required if trauma theory is to achieve its goal of inclusiveness. Dolores Herrero, another critic who has advocated a more socially nuanced and culturally-specific approach to trauma, also contributes to this Special Issue in an essay exploring the trauma of the ‘Stolen Generations’ through its representation in Jim Loach’s film *Oranges and Sunshine* (2010).

In addition to the individual essays, this Special Issue includes the transcript of a round-table discussion that took place at the “Decolonizing Trauma Studies” Symposium held at the University of Northampton on 15 May 2015, which featured contributions from the Symposium’s three Keynote speakers: Professor Stef Craps from the University of Ghent, Professor Bryan Cheyette (University of Reading), and Dr Alan Gibbs (University College Cork) [14]. The speakers were asked to address five key questions facing contemporary trauma studies: (1) does trauma studies suffer from psychological universalism and what is the relationship between individual and collective traumas when we are discussing non-Western and minority cultural groups? (2) Are there signs that trauma studies is becoming less Eurocentric? (3) What are the implications and challenges of a decolonized trauma theory for our understanding of our own disciplines and their relations to others? (4) What are the

implications for pedagogy particularly thinking around the ethics of detachment and identification?  
(5) How do you see the field of trauma studies developing in the future?

In his contribution to the discussion, Alan Gibbs spoke engagingly about the increasingly compelling challenges, coming from a variety of voices, to the dominant model of trauma as it is encoded in the American Psychological Association's definition of PTSD [15]. Gibbs underlined the point that not only is this model problematic in a postcolonial context but that it frequently fails to account for the range of traumas experienced by Western subjects within Western societies themselves. As he argues in his book *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, the dominant trauma paradigm does not even adequately reflect or explain contemporary American contexts [16]. However, Gibbs is optimistic that the field of trauma studies is showing signs of moving in a new direction; in particular, he identifies a greater awareness of 'the variety of manifestations of trauma' and a greater "sensitivity to localized variations in causes and symptomatology and treatment and the representation of trauma" [17]. In addressing the issue of the relationship between so-called Western and non-Western cultural traumas, Bryan Cheyette challenges the long-standing binary opposition between "the West and Rest". He calls into question the oft-made assumption that the Holocaust is an exclusively European cultural trauma and argues, like Rothberg, for a more complex examination of the overlapping histories of anti-semitism and colonialism, including an exploration of the colonial precedents for the genocidal practices associated with the Holocaust. Cheyette also argued for the decolonization not just of trauma theory, but of all disciplinary subjects and all forms of cultural enquiry including postcolonial studies itself.

In answering the central question about future directions of field, Stef Craps made the point that while work to date has done much to challenge the "inappropriateness and the injustice of applying western frameworks to a colonial or postcolonial situation" [18], scholars have been less concerned with producing a concrete alternative. For him, more work needs to be done on the practical development of alternatives to the dominant trauma discourse. As he comments, this requires "specialized knowledge of other cultures and languages, of the different media and forms of expression they use, and of local beliefs about suffering and healing" [18]. His view is echoed by the editors of another recent study of postcolonial trauma fiction, who argue that theory needs to be enriched by a knowledge of social context, combining "the psychological and the cultural, in an interdisciplinary approach that draws on psychoanalysis, sociology, philosophy, and history in the study of the aesthetic representation of trauma" ([19], p. xiv). In other words, while trauma theory has undergone a transformation in the light of postcolonial critique, the challenge now is to apply these insights in our practice. This might in turn necessitate a shift in power from the (Western) metropolitan centers of academe to more localized sites of knowledge. The fact that this Special Issue includes contributors from non-Western locales is a sign that this work is at least underway. In his concluding remarks to the round-table discussion, Professor Craps refers to Michael Rothberg's acknowledgement, in the preface to *The Future of Trauma Theory*, that trauma is not always the only or best lens for exploring complex global problems, let alone solving them. Therefore, while we undoubtedly need to "pluralize" and reconceptualise trauma theory, we also have to "recognise the limits of its applicability" [20]. With that caveat in mind, I am hopeful that this Special Issue demonstrates that the theoretical tools developed by trauma studies are capable of expanding our knowledge and understanding

of the representation of individual and collective suffering of subjects experiencing heterogeneous kinds of trauma in a variety of post-colonial, non-Western and/or minority cultural contexts.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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