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DECOLONIZING TRAUMA STUDIES: A RESPONSE

MICHAEL ROTHBERG

André Schwarz-Bart's slim novel *A Woman Named Solitude* (*La mulâtresse Solitude*, 1972) tells an epic tale of trans-Atlantic slavery with implications for contemporary trauma studies. Over the course of *Solitude*, the descendants of a pastoral African landscape depicted at the novel's opening become diasporic subjects in the Caribbean—still tilling the land but under significantly different conditions. Captured, deported, and raped during the Middle Passage, the novel's protagonist Bayangumay gives birth to a daughter, “la mulâtresse Solitude” (“the mulatto Solitude”), a legendary figure in Guadeloupe's history. Solitude is later executed for her role in a slave rebellion the day after giving birth to her own child, who is also destined to live as someone's property. In the novel's brief epilogue, the narrator breaks the historical frame of the text and imagines that a tourist will one day come to visit the plantation where Solitude and other rebels fought against their enslavement—a site that was dynamited in desperation by the rebellion's leader:

If the traveler insists, he will be permitted to visit the remains of the old Danglemont plantation. The guard will wave his hand, and as though by magic a tattered black field worker will appear. He will greet the lover of old stones with a vaguely incredulous look, and they will start off....[T]hey will stroll this way and that and ultimately come to a remnant of knee-high wall and a mound of earth intermingled with bone splinters.... Conscious of a faint taste of ashes, the visitor will take a few steps at random, tracing wider and wider circles around the site of the mansion. His foot will collide with one of the building stones, concealed by dead leaves, which were dispersed by the explosion and then over the years buried, dug up, covered over, and dug up again by the innocent hoes of the field workers. If he is in the mood to salute a memory, his imagination will people the environing space, and human figures will rise up around him, just as the phantoms that wander

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about the humiliated ruins of the Warsaw ghetto are said to rise up before the eyes of other travelers. (*A Woman* 149-50)

In these concluding sentences of the novel, Schwarz-Bart depicts a landscape of trauma replete with ruins, bone splinters, ashes, and phantoms.¹ He mobilizes various forms of anachronism and “anatopism” (spatial misplacement) in order to depict multiple traumatic legacies.² Like the novel’s opening paragraphs, this passage mingles the mythical and the mundane. But in the place of the opening’s invocation of the fairy-tale (“Once upon a time,” the novel begins [3]), more gothic, even traumatic, temporalities emerge in the epilogue. Like the fragments of bone, time is literally splintered. While the novel proper moves continuously from Africa to Guadeloupe and from the mid-eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, the epilogue jumps to the contemporary moment of the novel’s enunciation and to a hypothetical, layered European/Caribbean space. Both the presumably European traveler and the West Indian guide appear equally displaced spatially and temporally—the former because of his perplexing love of “old stones,” the latter because of his magical emergence and tattered appearance. As ruin, the site of the plantation is itself disjoined from the present, half-buried by nearly two centuries of “innocent” activities but still testifying to a violent past.

If, as many of the contributors to this important special issue of *Studies in the Novel* convincingly argue, turn-of-the-millennium trauma studies has remained stuck within Euro-American conceptual and historical frameworks, Schwarz-Bart’s work demonstrates another tendency: for sixty years (at least), certain writers and intellectuals have been seeking to articulate traumas within Europe with traumas in colonial and postcolonial space. In *A Woman Named Solitude*, Schwarz-Bart not only brings the memory of the Holocaust to bear on a “forgotten” piece of world history; he also ensures that a fragment of the Caribbean past unexpectedly recontextualizes the Nazi genocide.³ In placing black and Jewish histories side-by-side, Schwarz-Bart’s novel does not normalize the uniqueness of the Holocaust or of slavery; nor does it set those histories in competition with each other. Rather, such anachronistic and anatopic (dis)placements bring together the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism as singular yet relational histories in what I call *multidirectional memory*.⁴ Schwarz-Bart, who died on September 30, 2006, was a French Jew of Polish origin who lost his family in the Nazi genocide and who remains best known for his novel of Holocaust and Jewish history, *The Last of the Just* (*Le Dernier des Justes*, 1959). In the wake of the surprising success of that prize-winning first novel, Schwarz-Bart, in collaboration with his Guadeloupean wife Simone Schwarz-Bart, set out on an ambitious, multi-volume project to write a comparative fictional history of blacks and Jews in diaspora. Only sections of that project have ever been published, but the project remains enormously suggestive for rethinking trauma studies from a postcolonial perspective. Indeed, as the

brief passage considered here already suggests, *A Woman Named Solitude* condenses many of the issues at stake in “Postcolonial Trauma Novels”: it probes the articulation of race and space; the uncanny historicity of colonial (and other forms of) violence; the intergenerational transmission of trauma; and the problem of unequal recognition of disparate traumatic histories.

The essays collected in this issue of *Studies in the Novel* take several important steps forward in a project I would call “decolonizing trauma studies.” In surveying a wide world of trauma literature, they contribute to the creation of an alternative canon of trauma novels that should have significant pedagogical implications—within postcolonial studies, certainly, but also more generally within an English studies curriculum that remains, at least in my experience, too wedded to a relatively narrow range of Anglo-American works. In providing nuanced readings of those texts, the essays also make a strong case for the importance of literature and literary studies as modes of understanding and responding to political violence—a topic all too relevant in a world of ongoing genocide and neo-imperial war. The necessity of recognizing this contribution to an understanding of our blighted world should not be underestimated in a neoliberal age that produces chronic crisis for the humanities. Finally, and perhaps most centrally, the contributors provide a challenge to dominant modes of theorizing. In particular, all of the essays here make a convincing case for the need to supplement the event-based model of trauma that has become dominant over the past fifteen years with a model that can account for ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well. The implications of this latter, collectively-articulated argument are far-reaching; while the contributors’ critical focus stays appropriately on trauma studies, especially in its psychoanalytic mode, their insight that theory needs to globalize itself more thoroughly and responsibly holds true for many prevailing theoretical tendencies.

The essays in this issue accomplish much necessary and overdue work, then. Editors Stef Craps and Gert Buelens are to be saluted for gathering them together since the impact of collective work far exceeds that of multiple singular interventions. Yet the work of this volume necessarily responds to contradictory demands: on the one hand, to force trauma studies to fulfill its aspirations for cross-cultural understanding; on the other hand, to question whether trauma provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world. These are both legitimate and essential projects that are worth pursuing, but they cut in different ways and produce inevitable tensions in the volume’s interventions. As we proceed in the project of rethinking trauma studies, we need to be careful about repeating the dead ends of earlier debates and reproducing the terms and frameworks that we set out to disable. In the following remarks, I engage with the essays collected here from a perspective of critical solidarity; that is, I seek to advance the project of decolonizing and globalizing trauma studies by offering what I hope will be productive comments on issues of epistemology, ethics, and politics.

It is, I think, unarguably true, as Craps and Buelens assert in their useful introduction—and as many others confirm in their contributions—that trauma studies has tended to focus on European and US-American histories and that, within that focus, the Nazi genocide of European Jews has had a predominant place. Such a narrow focus does indeed, as so many remark here, cast doubt on the possibility famously articulated by Cathy Caruth, that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (“Trauma” 11). But it remains significant how we talk about trauma studies’ limits and how we reconceive the link between cultures. In a formulation echoed by several other contributors, Craps and Buelens write that trauma studies thus far has been “almost exclusively concerned with traumatic experiences of *white Westerners*” (2, my emphasis). If much work in trauma studies has focused on victims of the Holocaust, does it make sense to refer to them as “white Westerners”? What about those Irish victims of British imperialism and the Famine brilliantly explored in David Lloyd’s frequently cited essay “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?”? While Jews and the Irish have “become” white in many parts of the contemporary world, it does conceptual violence to describe the targets of Nazi genocide and British colonialism as “white Westerners” because the description projects contemporary notions of race backwards across time.

The problem Craps and Buelens are seeking to address, I would propose, lies elsewhere—in the contemporary misrecognition of the victims of trauma. Their formulation substitutes the presumed status of the victims of historical trauma for the rather different question of trauma studies’ contemporary address. Here, they touch on an extremely important issue concerning reception, “listening,” and empathy taken up effectively by Victoria Burrows, Robert Eaglestone, Ana Miller, Laura Murphy, Amy Novak, and Stef Craps himself, among others. Agreeing with Craps and Buelens, as well as the other scholars, that empathy and recognition are unevenly apportioned in contemporary discourses on trauma, I would put the problem like this: instead of focusing criticism on the supposed “whiteness” of trauma studies’ subjects, we might want to say that as long as trauma studies foregoes comparative study and remains tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses (such as the Holocaust) and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories. Well aware of these risks, Eaglestone begins, in his essay, to develop a literary-critical framework for such a comparative project.

The question of whiteness leads to a second, equally important point. In addition to imposing an anachronistic racial categorization, the attribution “white Westerners” also risks reproducing a notion of a homogenous “West” that stays within the terms of the dominant framework.⁵ What is the “West” and why would we want to evoke this highly ideological and Eurocentric concept? I mean this question quite seriously. Not only is the referent of the “West” highly elusive, but use of the concept ends up confirming the racialized framework it seeks to mark and displace. As Naoki Sakai puts it, “the West is

[n]either a geographic territory with an affiliated population, [n]or a unified cultural and social formation. It remains always a putative unity; its unity is preordained regardless of its inherent fragmentation and dispersal. It is in fact a mythic unity” (180). My argument here is not with all generalizations (as I will demonstrate shortly) but with the usefulness of this particular one. While “the West” may seem to serve as practical shorthand for unequal power relations, we should resist using it and seek other terms, for, as Sakai continues, “the West-and-the-Rest distinction can never be free of the aura of racism” (191). In seeking to avoid that aura, a decolonized trauma studies should attempt to demonstrate the internal heterogeneity of Europe, North America, and Australia at the same time that it draws attention to the frequent non-fit between the categories of colonizing nations and those of the societies they have colonized. Attention to hybridity and heterogeneity need not distract from hierarchies of power—as, arguably, it tends to do in some postcolonial work inspired by Homi Bhabha. Rather, it can serve as part of a more thoroughgoing indictment of imperial politics and legacies that draws attention to the parallels as well as differences between forms of violence inside and outside the metropole. In any case, most—if not all—of the sites and figures explored in this special issue are heterogeneous and hybrid, albeit in different ways. The West/non-West binary cannot explain the situation in South Africa, which figures so crucially in several essays here. Nor can it provide an adequate framework for understanding the frequently cited work of Frantz Fanon, the theorist of colonial trauma who drew on phenomenology, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, among other sources.⁶ The ongoing violence and colonization suffered by indigenous peoples within the “West”—explored here, for instance, in Nancy Van Styvendale’s fine essay on Jeannette Armstrong and Sherman Alexie—also suggest why a West/non-West binary, however detached from actual geography, does not ultimately serve the interests of postcolonial critique. Rather, a new comparative project beyond “the West-and-the-Rest” awaits a reconfigured, postcolonial trauma studies. Such a project is foreshadowed by Schwarz-Bart as well as Caryl Phillips and Wole Soyinka, whose work is subtly interrogated here by Craps and Anne Whitehead in their respective essays.

If the risk of homogenizing geo-cultural regions accompanies this issue on “Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” a related, but inverse risk looms just as large: the tendency toward hyper-particularism. Together with the accusations about the “Western” bias of trauma studies come assertions that the category of trauma, as it has been developed by Caruth, Felman, Laub, and others, cannot illuminate “non-Western” trauma because it remains locked in a one-dimensional “event theory” of trauma—what Van Styvendale usefully calls the “accident model” (207). The fundamental point here is a good one; and, for instance, Van Styvendale’s own notion of “trans/historicity” and Shane Graham’s rethinking of trauma as collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic) contribute to breaking the hold of a singular model. Relatedly,

Rosanne Kennedy's productive engagement with Dominick LaCapra suggests some important modifications to his useful correlated distinctions between absence and loss and structural and historical trauma. Historical trauma and loss, Kennedy suggests, mean something different depending on whether one seeks them out in epochal events or the repeated degradations of a racist colonial regime. I would go even further; it seems to me that the "extended" model of trauma and the rethinking of historical trauma are as relevant to a "Western" trauma such as the Holocaust (hardly a singular event) as they are to colonial and racial traumas. This move beyond event theory represents an important extension of trauma studies, albeit one anticipated, as many essays demonstrate, by Laura Brown's feminist critique of the accident model and her use of the notion of "insidious trauma" as an alternative—a critique, we should recall, that was included in Caruth's original, field-defining collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

However, a tendency to slide toward nominalism threatens the epistemological and political advances of this expansion of our understanding of trauma. In several of the essays, it becomes unclear whether *any* notion of trauma can sustain the relentless particularizing of a certain version of postcolonial analysis. Perhaps the most extreme version comes at the end of Ana Miller's illuminating reading of Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*. Dangor's novel, writes Miller,

problematizes the ability of homogenizing accounts of trauma to account for the specificity and heterogeneity of experiences of, and responses to, trauma. It suggests the need to contextualize trauma, to examine each experience as it is embedded in a particular historical, geographic, social, cultural, and personal history. In doing this, it suggests the limits of theoretical models in describing and explaining trauma: individual experiences will never quite fit attempts to place them within a model, particularly when the model is restricted. (159)

The investment in the individual and particular is simultaneously irrefutable—of course all traumas and individual experiences are particular—and ultimately disabling. By the end of Miller's passage, it becomes impossible to imagine any model or theory of trauma that would meet the requirements of absolute contextualization. I focus on this passage because it captures something essential about our scholarly moment and its turn toward an extreme historicism. Miller is not alone in her approach, nor is the approach limited to literary criticism. In a critical account of contemporary anthropology, Matti Bunzl has diagnosed such hyper-particularism or hyper-localism as a tendency to create "Borgesian maps"—maps of the social that are so detailed and particularizing that they forfeit all potential to orient investigation. Theory demands a certain level of generalization and a certain level of homogeneity. Since, as I have noted, an inverse tendency toward over-homogenization also

afflicts contemporary approaches when they treat the dominant “West,” the difficult part becomes knowing when and how to draw the line. In negotiating these difficult traps, postcolonial trauma studies (as well as other tendencies in cultural studies) can seek to pursue an approach between homogenizing universalism and nominalist particularism. My own approach focuses on the multidirectionality of collective memory, but other theorists of comparison use “incommensurability” or “translation” to describe such an in-between space (see Melas; Apter). Eaglestone’s anatomy of shared formal and generic features in post-Holocaust and postcolonial literature, included in this volume, provides a further promising methodology.

One striking fact about this collection of essays is how frequently its criticism of trauma theory echoes self-criticism that has taken place within a developing postcolonial studies. Thus, the homogenization of trauma for which many indict Caruth and her associates sounds strikingly like the homogenization of “the postcolonial condition” that later scholars have found in earlier postcolonial theoretical models. Much recent postcolonial work has been intensely invested in local conditions and in demonstrating the diverse forms that colonialism took and the diverse impacts that those colonialisms have had on already pluralized societies and regions. Similarly, the complaint that canonical trauma theory tends to locate the trauma in the completed past of a singular event—while colonial and postcolonial traumas persist into the present—sounds similar to the arguments of the 1990s about the very term “postcolonial,” which, as Ella Shohat, Anne McClintock, and others famously asserted, may tend to relegate colonialism to the past and thus block recognition of the neo-colonial present. Finally, the turn from psychic reality to economic and political materialities proposed by many contributors follows accusations that Bhabha-style postcolonial theory, indebted as it is to Lacan, Derrida, and other poststructuralist thinkers, distracts from power differentials in capitalist and imperial domination (see many of the essays in Loomba et al.).

As this last matter of the overvaluing of psychic reality suggests, many of the complaints registered against trauma studies also parallel more general questions about the applicability of psychoanalytic categories to societies far from the purview of Freud’s initial formulations. One of the important criticisms that contributors here share is that psychoanalytic approaches to trauma tend to import individualizing and psychologizing models onto the terrain of collective violence. Hence, it comes as a surprise that many of the otherwise fine-grained textual readings in “Postcolonial Trauma Novels” are character-based. That is, while drawing our attention to issues of collective trauma and the material conditions of global modernity, the alternative methodology developed here too often remains resolutely individualist. This residual investment in character and individual psychology may represent the revenge of Tancred and Clorinda. Many contributors follow Ruth Leys in her withering critique of Caruth’s reading in *Unclaimed Experience* of Freud’s

reading of Tasso; meanwhile, Amy Novak adds a fascinating twist in exploring the colonial roots of this scene, and Mairi Emma Neeves includes a compelling South African translation of the paradigm. But rather than displacing the individualist framework that lies behind this famous example—Freud’s reading of literary characters as if they were “real” analysands on his couch—most contributors follow it. Here I would propose that if postcolonial literary studies wants to engage trauma studies, it should incorporate a Lacanian turn that, with its emphasis on the disruption of the Symbolic in the “missed encounter” with the Real, tends to emphasize social structure to a greater degree than Freudian models (see, for example, Žižek). Of course, the Lacanian model is no panacea and has its own “homogenizing” pitfalls, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere (*Traumatic Realism*, esp. 137-38).

Despite its obvious faults, however, the provocation of Caruth’s Tancred and Clorinda model of trauma is not without its productivity. Indeed, Caruth’s odd attribution of trauma to the “double murderer” Tancred, and not to his victim Clorinda, bears an important lesson. There is a natural tendency to conflate the terms “victim” and “traumatized person,” but this represents a conceptual error. On the one hand, we can conceive of a victim who has not been traumatized—either because the victimization did not produce the kind of disruption that trauma ought to signify in order to have conceptual purchase or because the victim has been murdered. The dead are not traumatized, they are dead; trauma implies some “other” mode of living on (cf. Lloyd 219-20; Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 138). In Laura Murphy’s eloquent phrase, trauma involves “the suffering of survival” (55). Hence, when Neeves writes of “the unnamed [dead] child as the primary victim of trauma” in Lisa Fugard’s novel *Skinner’s Drift*, I believe she is slipping between categories. On the other hand, not all traumatized subjects are victims, and the fact of being traumatized does not necessarily imply the kind of moral capital that sometimes accrues to it. As Dominick LaCapra has frequently and convincingly asserted, perpetrators can also be traumatized by their participation in extreme violence (41); this is also the implication of the frequent focus on American Vietnam veterans and of Fanon’s anecdote in *The Wretched of the Earth* (cited by Kennedy, 91) of the Algerian independence fighter traumatized after planting a bomb in a café (cf. Fanon 253). Critics invested in revitalizing both trauma studies and postcolonial studies can contribute to such revitalization by developing differentiated maps of subject position and experience that neither eliminate distinctions nor seek to multiply particularities until all possibility of generalization disappears.

Attentiveness to complicity marks one promising path for such a differentiated approach. Murphy opens her essay with a similar insight: in her powerful and disturbing epigraph from Ken Saro-Wiwa, the late Nigerian writer and activist links neo-colonial relations in Africa to “the early days,” when “our forebears sold their kinsmen into slavery for minor items such as beads, mirrors, alcohol, and tobacco” (52). Although Murphy does not quite

say so, her choice of epigraph suggests that the underlying trauma in the novel she discusses, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*, may be not only the memory of slavery but the memory of complicity on the part of its victims. Such an insight would be close to that found in many of the novels of Caryl Phillips, including *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood*, discussed by Craps. To recognize complicity is not to blame the victims or relativize responsibility. As Mark Sanders's work on intellectuals and apartheid demonstrates, a thinking of complicity can—and perhaps must—be part of a thinking of responsibility. Without recognition of what Sanders calls “a complicity in human-being as such” (8), it is difficult to avoid the “narrow sense” of “acting-in-complicity” (12). Besides serving as a prompt to ethical and political action, such a recognition of generalized complicity can lead to a more supple understanding of the implications of racial and colonial forms of violence, which frequently if not inevitably attack subjects on the ethical and moral levels as well as the physical and psychological.

This insight about complicity also lies behind Primo Levi's famous notion of the “grey zone” in *The Drowned and the Saved*. While I hesitate to generalize Levi's model of the grey zone as a way of talking about trauma in postcolonial contexts, his approach to the world of the Nazi camps nevertheless bears important implications for the project announced in this volume. Without in any way blurring the question of responsibility for constructing the camps, Levi demonstrates how “an infernal order such as National Socialism...degrades its victims and makes them similar to itself, because it needs both great and small complicities” (68). He concludes that “Europeans of today...are all mirrored in [complicit figures such as the Lodz ghetto elder] Rumkowski, his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids molded from clay and spirit” (68-69). Unsurprisingly, some critics find this moment in Levi too universalizing. But I would argue that the “grey” insights of Levi's great last book can serve to inspire further theorizing about the differentiated—neither entirely homogenous, nor entirely particularistic—landscapes of violence that a globalized trauma studies seeks to theorize, work through, and ultimately transform.

The essays in “Postcolonial Trauma Novels” offer many of the tools we will need in the simultaneously intellectual, ethical, and political task of standing against ongoing forms of racial and colonial violence. Such a task involves both a finely honed sense of critique and an ability to engage in self-reflexive scrutiny. As we confront trauma studies with necessary, conflicting demands—that it be more true to itself, that it modify its basic tenets—we may also need to pursue apparently conflicting goals. In the interest of decolonizing trauma studies, we may want to maintain a grasp of ambiguity, hybridity, and complicity while simultaneously daring to generalize and build theoretical models. As both trauma studies and postcolonial studies find themselves confronted with an ever-more globally connected world, such a two-pronged approach can add to the ethical and political force of our work. Like Schwarz-

Bart at the end of *A Woman Named Solitude*, we may want to break out of the isolation imposed by physical, psychic, and epistemological violence. We may need to wander amidst multiple ruins and practice an archeology of the comparative imagination.

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NOTES

¹ Although today the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto have been almost entirely paved over, leaving only the monument to the Ghetto uprising, the description of visiting the plantation could easily describe a contemporary visit to one of the sites of the Nazi extermination camps, where often ashes and bone splinters do persist.

² On anachronism and anapopsism, see Vico (333), and Aravamudan (331).

³ Brodzki notes that the site of the slave revolt had not been commemorated at the time Schwarz-Bart wrote his novel. However, in the decades since the publication of Schwarz-Bart's novel, the memorialization of slavery in general and of the revolt described in *A Woman Named Solitude* in particular has become more prominent in the Caribbean. For a consideration of this process, with a focus on Guadeloupe and Martinique, see Reinhardt, especially the discussion of Solitude and the erection of a statue in her honor in 1999 (149-53). For a longer discussion of the way Schwarz-Bart's work brings together the Holocaust and colonialism, see Rothberg, "Writing Ruins."

⁴ On multidirectional memory, see Rothberg, "Work of Testimony" and "Between Auschwitz and Algeria."

⁵ Many of the essays follow Craps and Buelens in framing their analyses in terms of the West/non-West binary. One provocative exception is Petar Ramadanovic's essay, which seeks to subsume postcolonial novels within overarching and paradigmatic "narratives of Western modernity" (179), particularly the Oedipal narrative. While most contributors oppose a homogenizing West to a particularized non-West, Ramadanovic's approach implies a single hyper-homogenized narrative underwritten by the presumed universality of a Freudian model, even as he suggests that changes within the model are possible.

⁶ For a rigorous unpacking of Fanon's model of trauma and its relation to Freud's version, see Cheah. Cheah's ultimate point, however, is that even Fanon's colonial-based model proves insufficient in a postcolonial world of globalized finance capital.

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