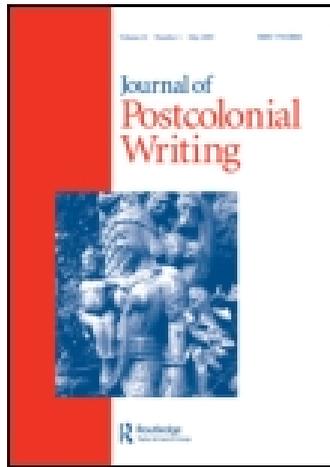


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Irene Visser ^a

^a University of Groningen , The Netherlands

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Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies

Irene Visser*

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

The plurality and growing number of responses to cultural trauma theory in postcolonial criticism demonstrate the ongoing appeal of trauma theory despite the fact that it is also increasingly critiqued as inadequate to the research agenda of postcolonial studies. In the dialogue between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies the central question remains whether trauma theory can be effectively “postcolonialized” in the sense of being usefully conjoined with postcolonial theory. This article presents a detailed account of the core concepts and tenets of cultural trauma theory in order to contribute to a clearer understanding of the issues currently at stake in this developing relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. It engages with fundamental issues, such as those deriving from trauma theory’s foundation in Freudian psychoanalysis; its Eurocentric orientation; its inherent contradictions, such as its deconstructionist aesthetics of aporia vs notions of therapeutic and recuperative narrativization; and its tendency to blur lines of distinction and to affirm stasis and melancholia as the empathic, responsible reception of trauma narratives. This article argues for a more precise, as well as more comprehensive, conceptualization of trauma and formulates possible directions in which to expand trauma’s conceptual framework, in order to respond more adequately to postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory and trauma.

Keywords: trauma; postcolonialism; memory; Eurocentrism; literary criticism

The past decades have seen the emergence of trauma studies as a rapidly expanding and extremely diversified field. Branching out from the early 1990s via psychology, cognitive science, law, and cultural and literary studies, it is now regarded as one of today’s signal cultural paradigms. Since the early 1990s, cultural and literary criticism has taken up the promise of new expository potential held out by trauma theorists, as for instance by Geoffrey Hartman, whose “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies” (1995) presented the new theory as offering “a change of perspective” not only at the level of theory but also “of exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning” (544). Since then, cultural trauma theory has been increasingly employed as a theoretical framework for literary practice.¹

While the theory has made its appearance in postcolonial literary criticism in the past decade, as yet its impact on postcolonial theory is a matter of debate. There is at present no consensus about the question whether trauma theory can be effectively “postcolonialized” in the sense of being usefully conjoined with or integrated into postcolonial literary studies. This was illustrated during a conference on trauma, memory, and narrative in the contemporary South African novel organized by the University of Vienna, Austria, in April 2010, when a number of distinguished postcolonial critics engaged with scholars who had published in the field of trauma.² This discussion foregrounded trauma theory’s complexity

*Email: i.visser@rug.nl

and controversies, and seriously debated its exegetical value for postcolonial literary studies. What the conference discussions demonstrated is that trauma theory's influence is indubitably an important and as yet unresolved issue in contemporary postcolonial criticism. My article takes up the questions raised during the conference and places them in the context of various theoretical as well as critical issues involved in the relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. The critical praxis deriving from this relationship was the central theme of the Spring/Summer 2008 special issue of the journal *Studies in the Novel*, devoted to a project to effectuate a "rapprochement" between trauma theory and postcolonial literary theory. The project's premise was that trauma theory has strengths that postcolonial literary studies can incorporate, as well as weaknesses that can be corrected or reconfigured. While the project's premise emphasized possibilities, its outcomes tended to emphasize the obstacles to this reconfiguration, opening up further pressing questions about the complex relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies, particularly in the field of non-western cultures.

My discussion of the complexities of this relationship starts from an exploration of the theory's main concepts, tenets and conundrums, drawing on a range of recent publications in both fields, with special reference to Roger Luckhurst's lucid overview of trauma theory in *The Trauma Question* (2008), and the project of the special issue of *Studies in the Novel* (abbreviated below as *StiN* project). This article will, I hope, contribute to a clearer delineation of the issues currently at stake in the developing relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. Of these, three stand out as particularly relevant: the definitions of trauma that are at the heart of the theory; the closely related yet intrinsically oppositional streams of thought in cultural trauma theory; and its Eurocentric orientation. In interrogating these three main aspects, my intention is to highlight the areas where further conceptualization is needed for a "postcolonized" trauma theory to aid the debate about the possibilities as well as the impossibilities in the trajectory to such a reconfiguration.

* * *

An overview of trauma theory, as Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* overwhelmingly demonstrates, must not hope to aspire to full comprehensiveness. As an area of theory and research, trauma involves knowledge not only of present-day (post-)Freudian psychoanalysis but also of its first formulations in 19th-century Britain and France.³ To fully understand trauma, Luckhurst claims, we would need to acquire knowledge of historical, legal and scientific specifics related to military psychiatry, pension agencies, neuroscience and so on; in short, "given the specialization and the sheer volume of discipline-specific scholarship, it is a severe stretch to acquire this range of expertise, with almost inevitable lapses of knowledge and understanding" (4). Practically unknowable and unteachable, then, trauma has nevertheless become a dominant paradigm in cultural studies. Today's culture is "saturated with trauma", Luckhurst argues: politically, it involves government inquiries, medical task forces and grassroots pressure groups; it has invaded today's bestseller lists, academic monographs as well as celebrity media (2). It is hardly surprising, then, that trauma theory has increasingly impacted on literary studies, and that a new literary genre, the trauma novel, has been construed, with the "postcolonial trauma novel" following in its wake.

To understand trauma theory, we need to ask what exactly is understood by trauma. Ruth Leys cites the official definition of trauma as given in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed. DSM-III, 1980) as an event that involves a "recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone", noting,

however, that the definition and its criteria have various ambiguities and that what constitutes “a recognizable stressor” remains subject to debate (*Guilt* 94). As the subject of study in trauma theory, then, “trauma” refers not so much to the traumatic event as to the traumatic aftermath, the post-traumatic stage. Trauma thus denotes the recurrence or repetition of the stressor event through memory, dreams, narrative and/or various symptoms known under the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD provides the basic framework for understanding the symptoms of trauma. Trauma theory of the early 1990s took as its starting point the 1980 formulation of PTSD by the American Psychiatric Association, which initially defined only those suffering from symptoms *directly* related to their experience of the traumatic event. Since then, the definition has been expanded in each new edition of the Association’s *Diagnostic Manual* to include secondary victims, witnesses and bystanders at the event, but also relatives, therapists and friends of victims. Symptoms of this vicarious traumatization are the same as those of primary PTSD: nightmares, flashbacks, depression, but also an increased sensitivity to cynicism, depersonalization, and distinct changes in spirituality or worldview (Kaplan 40). What is clear is that these officially recognized symptoms are extremely diversified and include apparently quite opposite patterns of behaviour and memory, from emotional numbness to extreme alertness or even explosive excitability. The traumatic event may intrude repetitively on everyday activities and sleep, but there may also be a total absence of recall. Symptoms may appear chronically or intermittently; immediately or many years after the event.

It is important to acknowledge that the official formulation and its acceptance of PTSD was a victory for the political struggle of activists on behalf of Vietnam War veterans, and that there is no doubt whatsoever about the reality of trauma symptoms as expressing psychic disorder. However, for the critical praxis of literary studies, PTSD is a problematic concept. In its present definition, and due to its multidisciplinary history of origin, it is characterized by a lack of coherence and specificity. As anthropologist Allan Young states in his study of the history of PTSD, “this disorder is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these effects and resources” (5). In her overview of key publications in the field, Leys concludes that “the very terms in which PTSD is described tend to produce controversy” (*Trauma* 6). For literary-theoretical purposes, then, PTSD offers a potentially controversial, divergent spectrum of symptoms, together constituting an array of characteristics that would appear to be too diversified for a consistent understanding and interpretation of trauma in literature.

For postcolonial studies, moreover, the centrality of PTSD in western trauma models is particularly problematic. Since the 1990s, aid workers and trauma therapists working in non-western contexts have expressed their concern about the ethnocentrism of imposing the western trauma model based on DSM in conflict and war zones across the world.⁴ In view of these findings it may be argued that a postcolonial trauma theory should not uncritically adopt the western trauma model in which PTSD is a central template, but should seek to employ a model of trauma incorporating non-western templates for understanding psychic disorders related to trauma. Such a re-routing is in line with other contemporary demands for a diversification of postcolonial modes of address, such as Leela Gandhi’s call, in *Postcolonial Theory*, for an engagement with non-western (African, Indian, Korean, Chinese) self-sufficient knowledge systems in order to “learn to speak more adequately to the world which it speaks for” and to “facilitate a democratic colloquium between the antagonistic inheritors of the colonial aftermath” (x).

A fuller understanding of the concept of trauma in cultural trauma theory entails a delimitation of its origin in Freudian psychoanalysis. While the 1980 third edition of the DSM discarded Freudian psychoanalysis as a classificatory template in favour of a model that considers psychic disorders on the model of neuro-biological, organic illnesses, and while, as Luckhurst demonstrates in detail, Freud's marginalization has been an ongoing process since the 1980s, genealogists of trauma theory agree that Freudian psychoanalysis remains the theory's explicit and inevitable foundation.⁵ For the dialogue between trauma theory and postcolonial studies, this poses several challenges that need to be negotiated, and which involve core concepts such as belatedness, transmissibility, collective traumatization, and melancholia.

In his early work on hysteria (*Studies on Hysteria*, 1895) Freud engaged with the effects of trauma as painful experiences that have not been fully integrated into the personality but have been repressed, remaining in the unconscious to resurface in the form of disturbing symptoms. Psychoanalysis started as a treatment aimed at facilitating patients to understand, verbally express ("abreact") and integrate these traumatic experiences. While Freud's early theory posited that the condition was caused by repressed memories of actual traumatic experiences of a sexual nature (e.g. assault), he reformulated it in the later 1890s to posit instead the centrality of the repression of infantile sexual erotic experiences or fantasies. These only retrospectively become traumatic, namely when the child (in puberty) can reconstitute and "understand" the erotic experience, which then becomes traumatic for the first time. Trauma is thus defined as the painful *remembering* of an experience which in itself need not be painful. In fact neither the first nor the later experience need be intrinsically traumatic, but it is the act of remembering as deferred action that constitutes trauma. The temporal aspect is crucial, therefore, and indeed Freud's term *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) or retrodetermination has become a central concept in trauma theory. Freud subsequently expanded his theory to include the hypothesis of the transgenerational transmission of traumatic primal scenes witnessed by early human beings and absorbed into the human psyche since the mythic dawn of history. This phylogenetic theory of trauma remained part of Freud's later thinking on trauma. Whereas the early theory saw trauma as infantile sexual repression that finds belated and "displaced" expression in later life, after 1920 Freud revised his notion of retrodetermination to focus instead on the phenomenon of compulsive repetition caused by the sudden violent intrusion of overwhelming stimuli (as in war neurosis). However, in assimilating the mechanism of compulsive reprisal in his concept of trauma as a psychosexual disorder, Freud also maintained his notion of a universal, primal, and hence structural (ineradicable) human traumatization.

For the present discussion it is important to note that Freud's theorization of trauma, here summarized in greatly simplified form, centrally poses the internal, abstract and "unsayable" causation of trauma rather than a historically concrete, knowable, external causation.⁶ This lack of historical particularity sits uneasily with postcolonialism's eponymous focus on historical, political and socio-economic factors in processes of colonization and decolonization. Moreover, while temporality and history are central theoretical concerns in cultural trauma theory, it is important to understand the differences in their representation in parallel, yet oppositional currents of thought.

The dominant model in cultural trauma studies was first formulated by critics of the Yale School in the early 1990s, in particular in Cathy Caruth's relatively small but influential body of work. Caruth posits two inherent paradoxes of trauma, predicated on Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*: the unusual temporality by which "trauma is not experienced as it occurs, [but] is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" ("Introduction" 7); and the literal yet latent nature of the traumatic experience: "the most

direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (*Unclaimed Experience* 91–92). The notion of trauma as an experience which keeps returning literally yet remains inaccessible to conscious knowing was also presented as a necessary contradiction by Geoffrey Hartman in 1995, when he stated that the knowledge of trauma is “composed of two contradictory elements, [...] as close to nescience as to knowledge” (537).⁷

This tenet of the inaccessibility or “unspeakability” of trauma, now received wisdom in trauma studies, has an opposing yet equally influential counterpart in trauma theory, associated with the work of Judith Herman. In her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1994) Herman argues that narrative is a powerful and empowering therapeutic tool, enabling integration of the traumatic experience and aiding healing and recovery. This contrast – which Luckhurst terms the “flat contradiction” in trauma theory (82) – raises questions about the nature of trauma narrative: whether it is aporetic, leading to increased indeterminacy and impossibility, or whether it is therapeutic, enabling a “working through” and eventual resolution of trauma. The former, aporetic notion is grounded firmly in the deconstructive origin of cultural trauma theory which posits that trauma necessarily resists or defies narrative and exegesis, and it is still to be seen as a core concept in cultural and literary studies today; Toremans, for instance, calls it the “landmark and constant point of reference” (336).

This should not obscure the fact that Herman’s theory of narrative is also influential in trauma studies. It has found resonance in literary criticism that acknowledges the possibility of the recuperative and empowering qualities of narrative of traumatic events and memories. For instance, Smith and Watson, engaging with trauma theory and autobiography, state that autobiographical narrative as cultural testimony is “citing new, formerly unspeakable stories”, in which memory is agency, “in its power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning” (15). This contrasts with Caruth’s view that narrativization of traumatic memory is to be seen as a loss of incomprehensibility, and an “impossible saying” (“Introduction” 9). Directly opposed to this is Herman’s view that “the victim must be helped to speak the horrifying truth of her past – to speak of the unspeakable” (179). The aporetic current of trauma theory thus rejects its therapeutic current which poses that narrativization of trauma is necessary and possible, as an “organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content” (Herman 177).

While Caruth’s aporetic dictum is a core element in cultural trauma theory and, as such, often drawn on in literary studies on trauma, Herman’s notion of trauma may hold out a more sustainable perspective for a postcolonial trauma theory, not only because it entails an openness to the structuring of narrativization but also because it allows a historically and culturally specific approach to trauma narratives. Caruth’s model of trauma is characterized by homogenizing and dehistoricizing tendencies, which, as several contributors to the *StiN* project argue, are at variance with postcolonialist analyses of political and actual historical contexts. For literary critics wishing to incorporate trauma theory’s concepts in analyses of processes of literary production and reception, these tendencies may obstruct rather than aid culturally astute readings of trauma. Addressing this issue, Dominick LaCapra, a prominent theorist in trauma studies, has criticized trauma theory’s openness towards indiscriminate generalization when it misleadingly conflates historical specificity with its Freudian originary notion of trauma (*Writing History* xi–xiii). For a postcolonial reconfiguration of trauma theory, therefore, its thinking about history is a crucial aspect.

The impact of Caruth’s landmark study *Unclaimed Experience* was largely due to its emphasis on a renewed engagement with history, in order to “rethink the possibility of

history” (12). Here, Caruth states that in the encounter with trauma, history is reconfigured; it is no longer “straightforwardly referential”, that is, no longer based on “simple models of experience and reference” (11). Aligning herself with what she terms Freud’s “political and cultural disengagement”, Caruth poses the primacy of the indirect referentiality of history, which she predicates on Freud’s “discovery” of the historical trauma of the Jews, namely their murder of Moses, “forgotten” as a guilty secret, but preserved in racial memory and in its latency becoming fully known only in another time and place (16–18). Freud’s account of Jewish collective racial memory of guilt and traumatic secret in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Caruth argues, can “help us understand our own catastrophic era” (12).⁸ Her rethinking of the “possibility of history” thus posits a dissolution of historical factuality and foregrounds an atemporal human (universal) trauma, as expressed in her oft-quoted phrase that history is the history of a trauma (*Unclaimed* 64). In the dialogue with postcolonial theory, this transgenerational, psychohistorical, timeless model of trauma can, I would argue, only be sustained if a discursive relation is enabled with the historical particularity that is intrinsic to postcolonialism’s cultural and political research agenda. Equally necessary for a postcolonial trauma theory would be a rethinking of the concept of transmissibility, which has been central in trauma studies since the 1990s.

Transmissibility, the contagious impact of trauma, was first theorized in Felman and Laub’s influential study *Testimony* in 1992 as affecting the therapeutic or pedagogical situation in which traumatic narratives are received. Since then, transmission has been reconceptualized to include practically all situations where trauma is involved. For instance, Kaplan argues that trauma is transmitted to readers and viewers of popular media (21). Others, too, have argued the case for readers’ and viewers’ traumatization; Kalí Tal speaks of “the survivor-reader”, and Crosthwaite argues for “traumatic convergences” between readers and primary trauma victims, concluding that it is possible to speak of readerly traumatization, since trauma is not “the implantation of something coming from outside” but the “internal reviviscence of the traumatic memory” (170–71). Thus, while in Felman and Laub’s formulations transmissibility involved the empathic, “other”-directed responses during the face-to-face or pedagogic encounters with trauma narratives, it has subsequently been expanded to denote a very broad category of readers’ and viewers’ emotional responses. Transmissibility, as a core element of trauma studies, has thus become a particularly fuzzy concept that would need re-defining to be effective in postcolonial literary studies.⁹ Critique formulated by other trauma theorists endorses this, as, for instance, LaCapra’s warning against trauma theory’s tendency “to obscure the difference between victims of traumatic historical events and others not directly experiencing them. Nor should they become a pretext for avoiding economic, social and political issues” (*Writing History* ix).

In obscuring differences and collapsing distinctions, the present broad usage of transmissibility risks trivialization of trauma. To avoid this, the blurring of lines of distinction would need to be countered, by, for instance, defining trauma as the memory of an overwhelming, unassimilable and violent wounding directly incurred as a first-hand experience in order to differentiate it from secondary or vicarious traumatization. Trauma, whether experienced by actual people or by characters in literature, would gain significance if reserved for those directly affected, rather than for any vicarious experiences of bystanders, readers, viewers and so forth. For instance, trauma might be reserved for the victims of torture photographed in the Abu Ghraib jail in 2004 but not equally so, or possibly not at all, for the experiences of the viewers of the photographs (see note 9). In postcolonial literature, by the same token, characters directly traumatized under colonial rule would need to be differentiated from characters indirectly affected, a category that in trauma theory notably includes the perpetrators.¹⁰ The definitions of trauma and transmissibility, then, need to

be more clearly delineated for a useful integration in postcolonial literary studies in order to reverse the present tendency towards a blurring of distinctions, for instance, between textually induced trauma and actual historical trauma.

Critical questioning of trauma theory's central tenets, then, is necessary to the postcolonialization of trauma studies, in particular where they enable or obstruct culturally specific frameworks for the reading of historically induced traumas of colonization and decolonization. Trauma theory would need to be expanded to enable interrogations of the complex workings of trauma during colonization as well as in processes of self-construction under decolonization processes, in which complicity, guilt and agency are crucial issues. Writing about African literature after decolonization, Achille Mbembe points out the complexity of the "entanglement of desire, seduction and subjugation; not only oppression, but its enigma of loss" during decolonization, involving the realization that people "have allowed themselves to be duped, seduced, and deceived" (35). This (self-)critical scrutiny of complicity is not envisaged in the empathic, other-oriented ethos of trauma theory as articulated by Felman and Laub. While this ethos is unquestionably valuable in actual therapeutic situations and in classroom discussions of trauma narratives, in postcolonial criticism the complexity of psychic processes indicated by Mbembe invites a new positioning. The findings of the *StiN* project underscore the need for this re-routing. As Michael Rothberg's summation states, traumatic memory in postcolonial terms may involve experiences of complicity under colonial oppression, and thus, "attentiveness to complicity marks one promising path for [such] a differentiated approach" ("Decolonizing Trauma Studies" 232).

For a postcolonial trauma theory, furthermore, the definition of trauma would need to be formulated more comprehensively to account more astutely for the aftermath of colonialism's systematic oppression, with its characteristics of prolonged, repeated and cumulative stressor events. The inadequacy of cultural trauma theory in this respect is noted by the editors of the *StiN* project, who point out that "the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for" and that this suffering has been "routinely ignored or dismissed" in trauma research (3–4). This formulation might seem inaccurate, since in fact chronic, collective trauma is a long-standing theme in trauma studies. Hartman, in 1995, had already presented trauma theory's range as including the chronic and the collective, due to its "emphasis on acts of violence like war and genocide" and its attention to "'familiar' violence such as rape, and the abuse of women and children" as well as the "nature of emotion and daily hurt" (546). Many publications in trauma theory since 2000 have addressed chronic, collective trauma in areas as diverse as postcolonial Britain, post-war Germany, Eastern Europe after communism, and, of course, the United States post-9/11. For instance, David Lloyd suggests that the after-effects of colonization for a culture are "identical with those for the traumatized individual" (212), and E. Ann Kaplan names as "specific collective traumas" colonialism, World War II, and 9/11, as well as the chronic variants of "quiet trauma" or "family trauma" (19).

For a postcolonial trauma theory, however, the concept of collective trauma needs a more thorough and culturally astute formulation. According to the editors of *StiN*, such a reformulation would necessitate a much-needed critical engagement with "the one-sided, Eurocentric focus" of trauma theory (2). In this respect, various contributors to the project criticize the Freudian model of collective trauma which poses that trauma undermines and weakens collective cohesion. Their conclusions therefore resist the notion, current in trauma theory since the 1990s, that trauma constitutes "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Erikson 471). Moreover, since trauma theory focuses on the post-traumatic stage

rather than the actual traumatic event, centrally PTSD and its many symptoms, the emphasis is on the affirmation of trauma's debilitating effects. This emphasis, as Luckhurst suggests, may take the form of "a kind of injunction to maintain the post-traumatic condition. To be in a frozen or suspended afterwards, it seems to be assumed, is the only proper ethical response to trauma"; this reasoning situates memory "entirely under the sign of post-traumatic melancholia" (210). If trauma theory in the work of literary studies is now understood as centrally posing the preservation of trauma, this orients approaches and interpretations towards themes of victimization and melancholia, and may obscure themes of recuperation and psychic resilience. The contributors to the *StiN* project respond with outspoken resistance to this, as do other postcolonial literary critics. Theoretical readings imposing this view reduce the "vigour and imaginative impact" of postcolonial literature, as Knudsen argues, by making the postcolonial condition "sound like a serious ailment when in fact it has given birth to strong-lived visions of cultural recuperations" (11). That the notion of a melancholic, chronically weakened, socially divided postcolonial collective racial identity is rejected so vigorously may be because it is reminiscent of Eurocentric Orientalist notions critically scrutinized in postcolonial studies since the 1970s. As Elleke Boehmer writes, the critical scrutiny of power relations and representations of non-western neo-imperialist tendencies remains a defining postcolonial concern today. Drawing on key publications of the past decade, she states that the postcolonial continues to signify "a theoretical and writerly force field preoccupied with *resistance to empire* and its post-imperial aftermath" and that it "correlates with struggle, subversion, the nation, the region, resistance to the global status quo – whether that be capitalist-driven colonialism or contemporary neo-imperial globalization" (143). Boehmer's emphasis on political contextualization thus further accentuates the differences in discursive practices between trauma theory and postcolonial theory that, as I have argued, need to be addressed.

The investigative purpose of the *StiN* project was to bring about a "rapprochement" between trauma theory and postcolonial criticism. Its contributors found, however, that the trauma paradigm is limiting for postcolonial analysis, not only because of its orientation on ahistorical, structural trauma and melancholia but also due to what they considered its Eurocentric insistence on formal criteria of narrative rupture and aporia. These criteria for an "authentic" trauma literature derive from Holocaust studies and comprise interruptions, compulsive repetition of telling and retelling, and various modes of disjunction, as of style, tense and focalization (Eaglestone, *The Holocaust* 42–65). The contributors to *StiN* object to what they feel is the imposition of these criteria on non-western literary modes of expression. Luckhurst, too, points out the "prescriptiveness" of trauma theory's formalist criteria, explaining that the narrative devices to convey trauma in literature must necessarily be "disrupted, reiterated, recursive and non-closed" because "the impossibility of understanding the Holocaust makes other formal choices than those categorized as figuring aporia become unethical" (88, 89).

For a postcolonial trauma theory, a positioning of postcolonialism in relation to Holocaust studies seems necessary. This relationship is at present a developing area of research. In *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (2004), Eaglestone remarks that philosophers, cultural thinkers and historians "are now considering the complex and contentious relationship between the Holocaust, colonialism and genocide" and that in this process, "the Holocaust remains the centre of gravity" (42, 65). In his later article "Holocaust Theory?" (2008) Eaglestone proposes that trauma theory, owing to the fact that its "central point for thought" is the Holocaust, might more suitably be termed "Holocaust theory" (35). Arguably, renaming trauma theory as "Holocaust theory" would be in the service of historic specificity. There is, however, at present no indication that such a renaming is feasible; in

fact, comparativist studies of Holocaust and postcolonialism tend to emphasize shared concerns of justice, responsibility and memory despite seemingly disparate histories.¹¹

In literary criticism, the criteria of trauma testimony deriving from Holocaust studies are often classified as modernist and postmodernist formal aspects. Patricia Moran, for example, states that modernist narrative form, with its “emphasis on interiority, memory, psychological verisimilitude, and personal isolation, and its development of fragmented, non-linear plots, provides an ideal medium for the transcription of traumatic experience” (3). Similarly, a premise of the *StiN* project is that “traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies” (Craps and Buelens 5). In the project’s critical praxis, however, there was considerable resistance against this formulation; for example, Ana Miller, in her reading of Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*, concludes that this makes the model of trauma theory too “restricted” (159). Various other contributors to the *StiN* project explicitly object to the reductive and Eurocentric implications of what are considered the theory’s formalist criteria. We must note here that the imposition of western narrative models is a long-standing concern in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial (western) critics have been wary of appropriating non-realist narratives modes such as parody, self-reflexivity and non-linearity as postmodern without regard for their origins in indigenous traditions.¹² In postcolonial literary studies narrative features such as non-linearity and disrupted causality are acknowledged as inherent in oral narratives and explored for their purpose in indigenous cultural traditions.

Postcolonial critics who, like the contributors to the *StiN* project, have engaged with postcolonial literature from the perspective of trauma theory have also noted the limits of trauma theory. For the present discussion these findings accentuate important considerations. I therefore briefly present three examples. A first example is Susan Najita’s *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific* (2006), which adheres closely to Caruth’s aporetic dictum of unspeakability. Adopting its rejection of narratives of recovery, Najita distances herself from what she terms the “fetishized narrative of complete recuperation” (63). However, despite this a priori dismissal of themes of recovery and redress, Najita’s critical readings prompt the conclusion that aporia is too limiting a perspective, and that in fact the texts pose the need for political activism, social change and individual healing. This is the movement away from melancholy and “unspeakability” to resistance and recovery that accords with currents in trauma theory represented by Herman and LaCapra.

Jo Collins’s article “The Ethics and Aesthetics of Representing Trauma” (2011) presents a second example of an engagement with trauma theory that results in an eventual rejection of the concepts it set out to implement. Engaging with theories of transmissibility and reader reception of trauma narratives, Collins argues against trauma theory’s claim that audience empathy can be integrated in a model of “testifying”. In line with postcolonial critiques outlined above, Collins ultimately rejects trauma theory because it deflects political understanding: the concept of the cathartic role of literature as testimony overlooks political concerns and thus constitutes a limit to postcolonial theory. A third example is Park Sorenson’s book *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary* (2010), which urges a return to the text as a re-routing of postcolonial literary studies away from political concerns and modes of resistance. However, in employing trauma theory to advocate this “narrative turn” Sorenson, like other postcolonial critics, also finds trauma theory inadequate: its emphasis on melancholia, in particular, constitutes a crippling self-reflexivity.

While these three recent publications serve to exemplify the areas to be negotiated in a postcolonial trauma theory as delineated in my discussion, Anne Whitehead elucidates a further, serious limit of the trauma paradigm for postcolonial praxis. In an article on Soyinka’s fiction, Whitehead questions the practice of mislaying a western

construct (i.e. trauma theory) on to the very different experience of suffering and oppression narrated by African postcolonial writers, observing that “Soyinka forces us to encounter a response to trauma that asserts the relevance of localized modes of belief, ritual, and understanding, thereby undermining the centrality of western knowledge and expertise” (27). This critique of the Eurocentrism of trauma theory’s dismissal of the significance of religious belief systems is yet another matter that would need serious consideration in the further “rapprochement” between trauma theory and postcolonial studies. The western trauma model does not acknowledge spirituality as a reference point; indeed, its deconstructivist mode denies the possibility of regeneration through ritual and belief systems. The hegemonic trauma model thus obstructs entry to meanings underlying vital cultural non-western practices and beliefs. This makes it inadequate for an engagement with indigenous literatures that explores trauma in the context of ritual and ceremony. Hegemonic trauma theory’s aesthetics would need to be expanded in the intersection with postcolonial theory and reconceived to theorize not only melancholia and stasis but also processes inducing resilience. This would accord with what Boehmer sees as postcolonialism’s emphasis on a commitment to the continuation of life (142). In “decolonizing” cultural trauma theory, agency and empowerment might need to be incorporated as modes of theorizing trauma’s aftermath. As Chinua Achebe emphasizes in a recent essay, while colonialism “was essentially a denial of human worth and dignity” we must understand that “the great thing about being human is our ability to face adversity down by refusing to be defined by it, refusing to be no more than its agent or its victim” (22–23).

In his concluding words to the 2010 Vienna conference on trauma, memory and narrative in contemporary South African fiction, convenor Professor Ewald Mengel emphasized the public and collective value of the TRC hearings of narratives of atrocities and traumatization under South Africa’s apartheid regime. One of the conference conclusions, he observed, was that trauma theory would need to be reconfigured to allow for a reading of these testimonies and of post-apartheid novels as conciliatory in character, and as initiating a process of healing. The findings of the *StiN* project similarly call for a redirection of trauma theory; as Rothberg concludes in his summation, its contributors seriously question whether in its present form “trauma provides the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world” (“Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 226). Possible directions in which to reconstruct this framework to respond to postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory and trauma will involve reorientation towards narratives that are forward looking, striving for subversion of the traumatic experience rather than its containment in melancholia.

* * *

In delineating the central concepts of trauma theory and their implications for postcolonial literary studies, this essay’s aim has been to present a detailed discussion of the possibilities and impossibilities in the relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. The plurality and growing number of responses to trauma theory in postcolonial criticism demonstrate the ongoing appeal of trauma theory, despite the limits to interpretation that it also often imposes on postcolonial readings. With the continuing interest in trauma theory, and the growing number of postcolonial critics drawing on it, there is a risk that inherent inconsistencies are overlooked and reproduced and that the present tendency to blur lines of distinction (as in notions of intergenerational transference) may lead to a lack of theoretical rigour and consistency.

There is, then, a need for a more precise as well as a more comprehensive understanding of trauma. A more precise conceptualization of trauma, which would differentiate between directly vs indirectly incurred traumatic experiences, is necessary to counter the movement to a trivialization of trauma (where it can denote any form of distress). A more precise critical positioning with regard to the divergent currents of thinking on trauma is needed to establish transparency and consistency. A more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma is needed to theorize collective, prolonged, and cumulative experiences of traumatization. These involve complex issues of complicity, guilt and agency. A further, more comprehensive configuration of trauma would enable culturally astute and politically and historically factual contextualization. In this respect, trauma theory's foundation in Freudian psychoanalysis may be acknowledged as a point of departure that invites further expansion as well as emendation to enable an openness towards non-western, non-Eurocentric models of psychic disorder and of reception and reading processes.

Notes

1. Trauma theory has not gained such centrality in other academic disciplines. Intellectual historian LaCapra discusses the lack of interest in philosophy and history in some detail in *History in Transit* (106–83).
2. To note, among others, David Attwood, Elleke Boehmer, Ruth Leys, Achille Mbembe, and Anne Whitehead.
3. For a detailed discussion of the complexity of this history, see Leys, *Trauma* (2000).
4. See Bracken and Patty.
5. Leys states that this is unquestionably its foundation, even if researchers in the field of trauma studies now prefer to assume that Freud's work "has been completely superseded" (*Trauma* 11). Luckhurst suggests that the ongoing marginalization of Freud's theories may cause the decline of trauma theory (211).
6. In summarizing the early and late formulations of trauma as they are relevant to the discussion of Caruth, Felman and other trauma theorists, I have had to exclude the many intricacies of Freud's formulations and reformulations as well as the substantial re-working of his theories by later scientists. For this, see Leys, *Trauma*.
7. With respect to Caruth's reading of Freud, Leys' detailed, rigorous examination demonstrates many flaws, as for instance Caruth's failure to acknowledge that Freud rejected the notion that traumatic symptoms are caused by an *external* reality (*Trauma* 272).
8. It may be necessary to add that there is no mention of this murder in Jewish scripture or historical accounts. Luckhurst and Leys both doubt the value of *Moses and Monotheism* for present theorization. As Luckhurst writes, "largely ungrounded speculations such as this on prehistory were typical of Victorian anthropology" (10); Leys shows that Caruth misreads Freud's text by partially quoting passages and omitting crucial phrases in what Leys terms "glaring alterations" (*Trauma* 282).
9. Moreover, there is also evidence that readers and viewers of traumatic material are not in fact impacted to any serious degree. Visual evidence of human suffering provided by the photographs of torture in the Abu Ghraib jail in 2004 evoked no political protest or upsurge of emotion in the United States, but rather a relative indifference, as a study by Eisenman demonstrated. Luckhurst, referring to this study, speculates whether this may be due to the expansive "rise and rise" of the trauma paradigm, which now "shockingly fails to address atrocity, genocide and war" and concludes that "notions of 'cultural trauma' might block pathways to practical politics" (212–13).
10. This follows from Caruth's reading, in *Unclaimed Experience*, of the Tancred and Clorinda myth which assigns the role of trauma victim to the murderer, Tancred. While psychic traumatization incurred by perpetrators is a very real phenomenon, it would need to be differentiated from other forms of traumatization.
11. See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.
12. See Mukherjee.

Notes on contributor

Irene Visser is a Senior Lecturer in Modern English Literature in the Department of English Language and Culture at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, where her main areas of concentration are American Literature and Postcolonial Literatures. Her theoretical interests are in the interdisciplinary relationships between literature, postcolonialism, theology and anthropology. She is the co-editor of *Family Fictions: The Family in Contemporary Postcolonial Literatures in English Texts* (2005) and *Transforming Holiness: Representations of Holiness in English and American Literary Texts* (2006). Recent articles include "Exclusion and Revolt in Witi Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*" (in *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 2008) and "Words Against Death: Rites of Passage in Ana Castillo's 'So Far From God' and Patricia Grace's 'Baby No-Eyes'" (in Dodgson-Katiyo and Wisker, eds., *Rites of Passage in Postcolonial Women's Writing*, 2010).

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