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# ***WOMEN WRITING TRAUMA***

An analysis of psychological trauma in  
Ingeborg Bachmann's *Das Buch Franza*,  
Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*,  
Patricia Grace's *Cousins*,  
and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku's  
*Ruahine – Mythic Women*

Tanya Lee Allport

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and  
German.

The University of Auckland, 2009.

I hereby certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

# ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to explore how women express psychological trauma through the writing of fiction. By analysing the historical context of what psychological trauma has meant to women, and how they have represented it, the thesis proposes a model which is based on the recurrent sources of trauma for women, the ‘triple trauma’ of othering, violence, and voicelessness. By using cross-cultural examples from the writing of Austrian Ingeborg Bachmann, German writer Christa Wolf, and the New Zealand Māori writers Patricia Grace and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, questions are asked about the similarities and differences of how psychological trauma is represented through fiction, and what this means for the female protagonists of the texts, the female writers, readers and the cultures and societies out of which these writings originate. In analysing these relations, this thesis finds that the fictional writing about the sources and experiences of trauma can expose a range of ideological connections, and that the writing and reading about these connections constitutes a valid trauma discourse. This trauma discourse supports the aim of contemporary feminist traumatology which is to make women’s trauma visible, give meaning to it, and ultimately create frameworks that promote the healing (and prevention) of trauma.

*For Zarah and Ana-Lucia*

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## Introduction

This thesis is about discoveries. It is about the journey undertaken when “a human consciousness, integrated into its own culture, is faced with another work born of another culture which it expresses.”<sup>1</sup> It is about pluralities, which means not culture, but cultures, not certainties, but possibilities, or a range of representing and interpreting. This thesis looks comparatively at cross-cultural literary representation of a particular experience, which is women’s experience of psychological trauma, in the writings of New Zealand Māori writers Patricia Grace and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann and the German writer Christa Wolf.

This thesis is an expression of a literary encounter, accompanied by an analysis of the nature of this encounter. As a feminist comparatist writing a thesis on cross-cultural representations of female psychological trauma, I firstly need to locate the nature of this encounter as being marked by three distinct and leading themes, which influence text and theory choices. These themes concern the *hybridity* of readers, critics and myself (as both a reader and a critic); the *métissage* of analytical approaches; and the *juxtaposition* of particular literary texts.

The concept of hybridity as encompassing the writer, reader and theorist is borne out of the emphasis on pluralities as opposed to binaries in comparative literary analysis. Within comparative literature it is fundamental that in order to outline cross-cultural representations, the comparatist herself has to recognize her own placement at the crossroads of the literatures she is engaging with. Snaider Lanser states that:

[...] in order to resist inscribing dominance [comparative literature] would locate both its practices and its practitioners within their own cultural space.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the acknowledgement of the critic’s own multi-cultural hybridity that is advocated by current comparatist thinking, means that the question posed by James

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Chevrel, *Comparative Literature Today: Methods and Perspectives* (Kirkville: The Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1995). 1.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Snaider Lanser, "Compared to What? Global Feminism, Comparatism, and the Master's Tools," in *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, ed. Margaret Higonnet (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). 292.



Clifford “where are you between,” as opposed to “where are you from,”<sup>3</sup> is significant in the choices made in this thesis. As a hybrid with German ancestry from my mother’s side, and Te Ati Awa Māori ancestry from my father’s side, the interaction with the texts chosen for this thesis contains elements of “the story of the traces of cultural otherness discovered within and of ambivalent interactions with otherness confronted without.”<sup>4</sup>

The recognition of my own hybridity underscores what critics have highlighted as the value of comparative literary analysis: that it is a personal *reading journey* which moves towards ‘otherness,’ thereby crafting connections between seemingly essentially differing literary expressions. In this thesis this journey is undertaken by juxtaposing not just texts, but also by using analytical tools from separate sources. The consideration of my own hybridity and the subsequent selection of literary material that deals with women’s trauma are, like the writing of this material, a political and cultural act. The idea of linking interpretive discourses through the identification of pluralities is described by Margaret Higonnet as a:

[...] weav[ing] together [of] multiple disciplines in a reading practice that may be called *métissage*, a practice which recognizes that representation cuts across the boundaries of juridical, political, anthropological, and artistic discourses.<sup>5</sup>

In this thesis *métissage* means the joining of two specific disciplines, feminist comparatism and feminist traumatology. These are the main discourses guiding the construction of my own framework of analysis (the “triple trauma”),<sup>6</sup> and leading the choice and applications of the many analytical strands that are combined throughout the thesis.

The search for analytical tools within comparative literature practices that enable the bridging of the gap between the European and the indigenous, Polynesian texts, has called for a sorting through of the complex history of comparative literature as a

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<sup>3</sup> James Clifford quoted in Charles Bernheimer, "The Anxieties of Comparison," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995). 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Higonnet, "Introduction," in *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, ed. Margaret Higonnet (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). 2.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of “triple trauma” as an analytical framework is explored in chapter one of this thesis.

discipline. The starting point for this sorting has been the aim to open up silences within literary interpretation, the search for reading practices which, as Homi Bhabha states, are a way of getting to new “places to which theory alone would not take him.”<sup>7</sup> The current state of comparative literature has been fostered by what Charles Bernheimer, more than ten years ago, declared as essential to the discipline, which is that it has the distinction of being an “unstable, shifting, insecure and self-critical field.”<sup>8</sup> This makes it very suitable for a *métissage* of theory and aspects of theory, which reaches across borders.

Recent challenges to comparative literature as a discipline have come from the evaluations of its Eurocentric past, or as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states, the need to “undermine and undo” the practice of dominant cultures marginalisation and othering of emergent cultures.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary impacts of multiculturalism, post-colonialism, globalisation, and feminism have shaped comparative reading theories to being, as described by Haun Saussy ten years post-Bernheimer, “metadisciplinary,” in its “openness to new objects and forms of inquiry.”<sup>10</sup> To acquire this openness, Saussy stresses that the comparatist reads “*literarily* (with intense textual scrutiny, defiance, and metatheoretical awareness).”<sup>11</sup>

Comparative literature’s fundamental premise of opening a gateway to the ‘different’ therefore advocates reading against the grain, which is also inherent in feminist literary criticism. The comparative act of reading defiantly, or as Gail Finney describes, in order to “question traditional boundaries, to open up literary genres and traditions, to test conventional definitions,” is in accord with feminist literary theories.<sup>12</sup> Spivak describes feminism “as the movement with the greatest radical potential within literary criticism,”<sup>13</sup> and as such, its influence on comparative literature has been significant.

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<sup>7</sup> Homi Bhabha in Emily Apter, "Comparative Exile: Competing Margins in the History of Comparative Literature," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995). 92.

<sup>8</sup> Bernheimer, "The Anxieties of Comparison." 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia Press, 2003). 100.

<sup>10</sup> Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives and Selfish Genes," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006). 23.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gail Finney, "Whats Happened to Feminism?," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006). 117.

<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in Sarah Harasym, ed., *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990). 118.

Comparative literature's evolution towards the crossing of ever greater and more complex borders is, as Margaret Higonnet, states a connection that is on a par with:

[...] feminist theories of code switching and of double-voiced writing contest[ing] older notions of linguistic purity and coherence within national boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

The politics of power in regards to the writing, reading and judging of literature have become fundamental issues of comparative feminist analysis, as the questions of *who* writes, reads and analyses *whom*, and from which viewpoint, have become imperative. The awareness and challenging of gender dominance in this literary sphere have fostered questioning of "processes of marginalisation that exclude texts produced by minority groups and devalue 'minor' genres or movements."<sup>15</sup>

Comparative literary practices that have employed or supported such processes are confronted not just by feminist principles, but also by the developments of globalisation, democratisation and decolonisation.<sup>16</sup> This has led to the deconstruction of the notion of universality in regards to women's writing and reading, leading to the emphasis on 'difference' as a way to avoid the "homogenizing, westernising, monistic tendencies of comparative literature as an academic discipline."<sup>17</sup> Acknowledging the Eurocentric roots of comparative literature, theorists required new ways of interpreting without Eurocentricity being the standard for comparisons. The call for new theories reflecting this shift highlighted that while post-colonial feminist comparative literature was attempting to listen to silences within women's literature, it must, "with equal enthusiasm, listen to the silences imposed by theory."<sup>18</sup>

More recent developments in feminist comparative literature have moved away from focusing on dividing and differentiating, instead moving towards employing Spivak's

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<sup>14</sup> Higonnet, "Introduction." 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995). 61.

<sup>17</sup> Higonnet, "Introduction." 3.

<sup>18</sup> Obioma Nnaemeka, "Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology," in *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, ed. Margaret Higonnet (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). 303

notion of polyphony, or “plurivocality,”<sup>19</sup> as a way to emphasise *diversity* as opposed to *difference*. Plurivocality means allowing the individualities of compared texts to stand on their own, while simultaneously establishing connections across texts, readers, theories and cultures. Theorizing diversity means that there is potential for developments to take place outside what Spivak calls the “totalising interpretative acts” that are forms of “critical violation.”<sup>20</sup>

Obioma Nnaemeka describes a way of reading across women’s ‘differing’ writings as a process that needs to underscore *connections*. She calls for a “theology of nearness”<sup>21</sup> as a way to liberate the theories of comparative reading by establishing and celebrating associations:

[...] the possibility and/or reality of connection reminds me of a quilt. The quilt, separate patches revealing different and connected geographies and histories, suggests a lesson in possibilities, particularly the possibility of creating harmony out of contradictions. The quilt’s beauty transcends aesthetics; the quilt is beautiful because it is also a powerful political act and art.<sup>22</sup>

The *métissage* that is undertaken in this thesis aims to use aspects of already established feminist theory to construct a new theoretical model that can bring out such connections. The two main approaches used in this thesis, feminist comparatism and feminist traumatology, embody this kind of *métissage* as they, although distinctive in their specificity of discipline, have evolved from a similar history leading to the current challenges of post-colonial feminism.<sup>23</sup> Leading feminist traumatologists, such as Maria P.P. Root, echo feminist comparatism’s recognition of and celebrating of diversity:

Because of the role that feminist theory has played in attempting to validate the experience of persons with “other” status by sexual orientation, religious/ethnic identity etc., it seems that feminist

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<sup>19</sup> Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*.

<sup>20</sup> Spivak quoted in Higonet, "Introduction." 13.

<sup>21</sup> Nnaemeka, "Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology." 303.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 304.

<sup>23</sup> The history of feminist traumatology as a discipline and its relevance to this thesis are extensively explored in chapter one of this thesis.

theorists and therapists may be the persons most able to develop flexible models of mental health that may allow for diversity.<sup>24</sup>

Post-colonial feminist theories challenging the presumptions of universality and theory-based dominance over the 'Other' have expanded the parameters of traumatology. As in comparative literature this has shifted the focus onto silences within Eurocentric based traditions of analysis and practice. The joining of these two disciplines, comparative literature and feminist traumatology, creates a métissage in which the central similarity is based on the analysis and challenging of power structures with the goal of "creating a relational space where intersubjectivity and reciprocity become possible."<sup>25</sup>

It is the aim of this thesis to establish such a space, and to experiment with how these two disciplines can be used to craft Nnaemeka's "quilt of possibilities" through the analysis of two seemingly distinct literatures. The juxtaposition of the texts chosen for this thesis offers a testing ground for the hypothesis of creating a connection between what is a universal occurrence (the traumatising of women), and the individualised contextual creative, literary response to it.

This juxtaposition is built on the history of comparative literature, in which the establishment of grounds for comparison has been called "the permanent crisis of comparative literature."<sup>26</sup> Such a 'crisis' has been confronted by the move away from binary comparisons involving one language, continent or empire,<sup>27</sup> and has required drawing up new meeting places of cultures, languages and themes. Edward Said comments on the necessity of juxtaposing the discrepant, as it is extremely challenging to Eurocentric traditions and inclinations of comparison. In the choice of 'what to compare' Said sees the need to "move beyond insularity and provincialism...[as] an antidote to

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<sup>24</sup> Maria P.P. Root, "Resolving "Other" Status: Identity Development of Biracial Individuals," in *Diversity and Complexity in Feminist Therapy*, ed. Laura S. Brown and Maria P.P. Root (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1990). 202.

<sup>25</sup> Francoise Lionnet, "Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism Universalism, and the Practice of Excision," in *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, ed. Margaret Higonnet (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). 41.

<sup>26</sup> Ulrich Weisstein, "Lasciate Ogni Speranza: Comparative Literature in Search of Lost Definitions," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1989). 99.

<sup>27</sup> Such binary comparisons "obscure all the complex interweavings of cultural processes by masking the cultural and linguistic hybrids that emerge at their own limits." See Higonnet, "Introduction." 2.

reduce nationalism and uncritical dogma.”<sup>28</sup> Higonnet also asserts that the broadening of comparisons is essential as

[...] schemes that single out a language, a continent, or an empire all obscure the complex interweavings of cultural processes by masking the cultural and linguistic hybrids that emerge at their own limits.<sup>29</sup>

Badiou’s notion of *astuce*, which describes that comparativity “with the least relation guarantees the maximum of poetic universalism,”<sup>30</sup> also challenges traditional notions of what is comparable. The choices of the literary representations analysed in this thesis, one German-speaking author from Austria and one from former East Germany, and two New Zealand Māori women writing in English, have used these notions of the value that is gained from juxtaposing “seemingly disparate entities.”<sup>31</sup>

This thesis’s hypothesis, which is that the experiences of women’s psychological traumatisations contain universal aspects detectable through the comparative analysis of literary representations, is, as Haun Saussy states, an “experiment” which seeks to answer the “peremptory challenge: Why should we be interested in this encounter?”<sup>32</sup> We should be interested as the reality of psychological trauma and the struggle to conceptualise it are becoming increasingly visible in a world where local and global conflicts can be reported on and, through the means of an international media, be witnessed by people far removed from the actual site of the event. We know that horrible things happen to a great range of people, and are gradually more aware of the long-term effects on the survivors of such encounters. In this sense, psychological trauma is becoming a contemporary condition, as there is now unprecedented evidence of its contemporary and historical occurrence in large numbers of places, cultures and spheres.

Yet, while there may be this increased visibility of some types of violations that cause trauma and the consequences these have for the afflicted, there is also still a largely

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993). 43.

<sup>29</sup> Higonnet, "Introduction." 2.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Culler, "Comparative Literature, at Last," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006). 55.

<sup>31</sup> Françoise Lionnet, "Cultivating Mere Gardens? Comparative *Francophonies*, Postcolonial Studies, and Transnational Feminisms," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006). 105.

<sup>32</sup> Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives and Selfish Genes." 24.

undeveloped and silenced aspect in regards to the underlying mechanisms or structures that are traumatising, and the durability or replication of these in a global, historical context. Furthermore, the history of psychological investigation into trauma shows that there has been an ongoing power struggle over what constitutes trauma, both in experience, manifestation, representation and treatment. These aspects have contributed to the ongoing silencing of trauma experiences.

This is especially true in regards to people who even before encountering specific traumatic incidents have experienced silencing through oppression and marginalisation. Being already voiceless within a given culture or society, coupled with the additional burden of experiencing psychological trauma, which by its nature is the ‘unspeakable’ story, creates a strong conflict in which the challenge to express trauma becomes central. Finding a means to communicate the experience of trauma is therefore of vital importance to the person who has sustained traumatic events first-hand, or the person who has witnessed trauma.

As a reader myself I have long been affected, disturbed and intrigued by the many instances and the great range of trauma in fictional representations of women’s experiences by women writers. What has especially interested me is that traumatic experiences do not seem bound to a historical, social or cultural context, in the sense that writers from a great variety of historical and geographical locations and racial backgrounds have written, and continue to write about, women’s trauma. The questions that these extensive examples of trauma literature generate are centred around historical continuity of women’s trauma, identifiable similarities and/or differences in the representations, and the overall purpose, or meaning that these trauma stories convey in regards to the fictional, female protagonist, the female author, and the female reader.

This thesis questions the *function* of trauma fiction by women. How do the writing, reading, and the *analytical* writing about trauma, interact with the general discourse on women’s trauma in the societies contextualising the writings? Does writing fictional trauma have any kind of impact or interface with real- life trauma conceptualisation, expression and resolution, or in other words: can it contribute to a better understanding of both the things that traumatise, and the way that trauma affects women, or is fiction merely an abstract entity that has no bearing on how trauma issues are perceived? In this

regard, the questioning of the impact of reading is part of a much larger discourse of analytical theory, which poses questions about human and social learning.

The composite layers of readers' and writers' *hybridity*, the *métissage* of analytical approaches, and the *juxtaposition* of particular literary texts foregrounds the multiple interactions and kinds of polyphony which Nnaemeka calls a "powerful political act and art." What this thesis is aiming to do, foremost and principally, is to create the quilt of connections that can serve to illuminate the many facets mentioned above, but also to find a framework which explores this on a thorough and re-producible level. It thereby seeks to establish an approach that

[...] allows us to link the cultures of decolonisation, immigration, and globalization within a framework that seeks common denominators...[which] can help us go a long way toward a rethinking of the place and nature of theoretical investigation within our [comparative] discipline.<sup>33</sup>

In the first chapter of this thesis, *Women and Trauma*, the concept of psychological trauma is investigated from a socio/historical framework in order to ascertain how women's trauma experiences have been, and are, defined in historical and contemporary social discourses. The chapter analyses the sources of trauma for women, examining them through the framework concept of the 'triple trauma.' The triple trauma model focuses on three processes that are crucial to trauma: the creation and experience of the Other; the use of violence as an enforcer of difference; and the trauma of voicelessness. This chapter specifies the wounding of trauma, and links women's trauma to representational practices of writing about trauma. The last part of this chapter establishes the subject of women writing fiction about trauma, introducing the historical contexts of Ingeborg Bachmann, Christa Wolf, Ngahuia Te Awekotuku and Patricia Grace.

Chapter two analyses trauma in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Das Buch Franza*, and Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*, and Chapter three explores trauma in Patricia Grace's *Cousins*, and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku's *Ruahine- Mythic Women*. In both chapters the framework of

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<sup>33</sup> Lionnet, "Cultivating Mere Gardens? Comparative *Francophonies*, Postcolonial Studies, and Transnational Feminisms." 105.



the triple trauma is applied against the fictional representations, as the processes of othering, the experiences of violence and the depictions of voicelessness are analysed in each text. The chapters end by linking trauma to the specific depictions of the *wounding* of trauma, comparing these to feminist theories of trauma manifestation.

Chapter four, *Transforming Trauma*, is concerned with investigating the value of writing and reading the fictional women's trauma story. The chapter engages in a comparison of representational literary strategies used by Te Awekotuku, Grace, Bachmann and Wolf, and the extent to which each work suggests the resolution of trauma, or the healing from trauma, for the female protagonists. The questions of whether and how such resolutions apply to the process of writing fictional trauma *and* reading about fictional trauma are posed by comparatively analysing the issues of trauma resolutions for the writers, readers and societal context of each narrative. The chapter ends with a hypothesis about how these fictional trauma representations fit in with and/or support feminist traumatology's aim of using an expansive conceptualisation of women's trauma to express, heal, and ultimately change, the traumatisation of women.

It is hoped that this thesis in itself can contribute towards these aims of feminist traumatology, by providing some answers in regards to the representation of women and trauma. Furthermore, it is hoped that this thesis will help to raise some of the necessary questions which surround the reality of the perpetuation of trauma and the many, predominantly silenced and unheard, experiences of women. Any questioning of trauma, not just from the contexts that I have chosen for this thesis, but in a wider, global framework, can work towards challenging the mechanisms that underlie the actuality of trauma, and thereby become an involvement in a discourse that is crucial to human life and development in the twenty-first century.