

## Victoria Kuttainen, 'Trauma and Transit/ions,' Review of Gillian Whitlock. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*.

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**Gillian Whitlock. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.)**

Trauma as a, or *the* hot-topic of the 1990s has been widely commented upon. In critical discussions of literature and cultural studies, its signatures of belatedness, fractured testimony, and repetition became doxas of a critical academic language primed to the reception and circulation of trauma talk. The structures of testimony and witnessing were easily assimilated within the academy as models for reading, translating, and disseminating. In part, this easy absorption of trauma texts occurred because they conveyed a sense of urgency and renewed purpose to a critical enterprise languishing in the muck and morass of the culture wars. Decommissioned canons left a vacuum where Great Books of the Western liberal tradition had been somewhat displaced. And, as critical-theory fatigue set in and ennui began to emerge in response to the kind of impenetrable theory-talk that was fashionable in the 1990s, a niche market emerged for real stuff that mattered. Trauma also provided a seeming detour around difficult debates halted at the intersection of postcolonialism and the uncertainties and complexities emerging from third-wave feminism. Of course, because critics are—if nothing else—critics, the faddishness of trauma did not long pass unnoticed. It was observed that trauma had provided new millennial cannon fodder, which had spawned a critical trauma industry. This cynical charge about the appropriation of trauma emerged from an academic climate in which Schools of Literature—and struggling academics—were struggling to legitimate the continuance of their enterprise in troubled times. The cynicism also underscored an awareness of the realities of the commodification of academic discourses, and it suggested world-weariness in English Departments where it is no longer possible to pretend that the humanities, research, and teaching are immune from market trends. Into this climate of millennial exhaustion and cynicism, Gillian Whitlock has breathed new breath.

*Soft Weapons* is a stunning scholarly and intellectual tour de force, a model of excellent critical reading, and a sound argument for how and why reading—and reading well—still matters. In fact, *Soft Weapons* teaches why reading critically—to consider the transits of books as market commodities, tools of propaganda, acts of often compromised political resistance, authentic testimonies, and repositories of highly charged cross-cultural exchange—matters more urgently now than ever.

Appropriately for a book on contemporary autographics, Whitlock begins with a personal anecdote, telling the story of the inception of her own scholarly quest to understand a new form of autobiography circulating and sold in the transit of the War on Terror. This is the story of how Gillian Whitlock is arrested by a mass display of life narratives from Iraq and Afghanistan in a bookshop at Melbourne Airport in 2003. While she might have simply dismissed these books as *merely* 'soft weapons' strategically placed in a market hungry for stories of war and trauma emerging from the Middle East, she relentlessly pursues her difficult and perpetually shape-shifting subject-matter: contemporary life-writing as it emerges in multifarious, often multi-media and variously mediated forms in the wake of 9/11. While these life narratives might satisfy desires for marketing the exotic, framed in terms of Orientalist fantasies of how West might come to the rescue of the East and its women, Whitlock responds with an uncompromisingly inquisitive analysis of these texts as "rumped sites": those places where life narrative is brought to an edge to shape cross-cultural engagements' (199).

The cynical response, and the uninformed knee-jerk reaction to a scholar of such calibre taking on such a subject in the rough and murky cross-currents of cultural exchange in these troubled times might be that Whitlock herself is cashing in on trauma culture, in a parasitic way that capitalises on the market for exotic stories. A crass accusation might be levelled that she is simply taking the critical snapshot of an already parasitic book trade to the tertiary level. But Whitlock is clear: she is not seeking to profit from the trauma boom, which I have already argued, has now in part passed as an academic fashion anyway. Instead, Whitlock *is* noticing how, why, and in what particular forms traumatic life narratives transit into and through Western markets as testimonies of authentic subjects. She *is* noticing that certain lives and traumatic events DO matter, even if the way they pass into our awareness in the West is through transits tainted by exchange and profit, and even as the vogue for trauma has passed. And moreover, Whitlock is clear: her approach to these texts is respectful and by no means appropriative. She bookends her text with a comment from John Frow that makes this point succinctly: 'The focus of this book... is not on the reality of the Other but on the circumstances of its construction and the "we" who play and are played by this language game.'

Now is the time of life narratives, critics have repeatedly observed, and statistics support their observation that non-fiction, much more than fiction, is what is most published and most read these days. Whitlock

provides critical readers with new tools to consider how to read this highly charged form of non-fiction critically. Considerations of genre and mode, reader response, market placement, and the timeliness of publication and market uptake, along with other complex issues that are explained eloquently, simply, and urgently by Whitlock. These issues frame questions Whitlock asks and proceeds to answer by sharing exemplary and wide-ranging research that brings together many different cultural sites to provide ways to look at how rumpled intersections of life and narrative frame contemporary engagements with this form of life-writing and these kinds of popular non-fiction texts.

The timing of *Soft Weapons* might be read as opportunistic by cynical critics but, on the other hand, it provides timely guidance into difficult and still emerging writing that engages with 'breaking news.' The day after I committed to writing this review, I opened up a national newspaper to a two-page spread on Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Somali-born feminist, author of the autobiographical *Infidel*, and the former Dutch parliamentarian who had collaborated on a film on the oppression of Muslim women, *Submission*, with Theo Van Gogh who became the target of a successful assassination attempt in the name of Islam. It is not only because Hirsi Ali's testimony about the brutalities of Islam has been fashioned by her and others into a 'soft weapon' assault on the policies of multicultural immigration in Holland that books like the *Infidel* show why Whitlock's intervention is critically important now; it is also because her autobiography is used to convey Hirsi Ali and her campaign as an authentic and straightforward subject. The highlighted extract from the article, symmetrically balanced on the second page to offset the full-page photograph that features Hirsi Ali's direct and intelligent gaze is: 'Ayaan Hirsi Ali has no need for literary shenanigans when the narrative of her life story is so compelling.' Surely, Hirsi Ali's autobiography is no shenanigan (of the kind Whitlock adeptly addresses in Chapter Five: Tainted Testimony), but the equation of authenticity with a lack of artifice betrays a common response unable or unwilling to examine the constructed nature of life-writing, its technologies, its use of rhetoric, and the various arguments, political movements, or endorsements that are folded into written lives like the epitexts and peritexts Whitlock so expertly unravels.

Whitlock's bibliography is a consummate 'must-read' list. But *Soft Weapons* itself ranks among the top scholarly publications of the last few years: next to Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present*, and Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* all of which have clearly also influenced and energised Whitlock's thinking. For me, this book has been a watershed that has provided guidance for how to proceed at the crossroads of third-wave feminism and postcolonial theory that has raised the question of how one bears witness to the agency of women inadequately represented as subaltern or third-world women. Ever since Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' critics have been arrested by her observation that subaltern women are discursively produced and locked inside colonial discourses. The derailing of the project of second-wave European-American feminism that this entailed has left many academics unsure of how to proceed with urgent issues regarding the suffering and exploitation of large groups of women. Whitlock's work goes right to the heart of these difficult issues, and keeps in mind the ethical imperative to not look away in the face of philosophical complexities. Her culturally sensitive treatment to the radical otherness of Eastern women frames the act of reading itself as a complex engagement with otherness, and an openness to mutual transformation. But her consideration of reading does not endorse the kinds of self-satisfying bibliophilia she discusses with respect to Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* either: a text which affirms an untroubled Western liberal humanist tradition. Cleverly, Whitlock frames the Nafisi phenomenon in terms of Derek Gregory's 'architectures of enmity'; for Americans reading this book, they glimpse a kaleidoscopic prism mirror view through which the West sees itself and its traditions affirmed in reflection of Iran, with which, Whitlock explains, the USA has been haunted in an embrace of mutual fascination since the 1970s. Whitlock is careful also to distinguish many different 'kinds' of Eastern women—Nafisi is a product of the Iranian intellectual diaspora and her book is identified as a form of exilic literature, the main mode of which is romantic nostalgia. This sort of treatment reveals that Whitlock's sensitive framing of cultural otherness is not completely 'hands off': she discusses texts in ways that call all of her cultural and literary training to count, and which display the high level of intellectual responsibility she brings to her material by calling upon wide ranging historical scholarship and an impressive immersion in popular culture and current affairs. For those who think they can continue on with their second-wave feminism untroubled by issues raised by postcolonialism and cross-cultural exchange: they'll certainly think again after they check out Chapter Two: The Skin of the Burka, a fascinating account of the American feminist's fascination with the veiled woman. Whitlock traces this Western fetish for the veil back to Eighteenth Century Orientalism and the Western enthrallment with the harem. Whitlock's account of the intersection of Zoya from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan with Oprah Winfrey and Eve Ensler (author of *The Vagina Monologues*), who stage her unveiling at a media spectacle attended by thousands of women in Central Park in New York, is a compelling discussion of how Afghan women so often humbly and strategically trade on Western women's desire to make them objects of their own liberation in order to convey an albeit compromised political message and draw attention to their cause.

While the 'veiled' life narratives that Whitlock discusses here might be compromised, they are at least heard; perhaps her most tragic chapter concerns narratives of refugees who write what she calls 'Testimony Incarnate' from the prison camps of the 'carceral archipelago' (80). These stories are not heard because they will not be listened to; they are turned away from, and not read, and they certainly do not find a market. These subjects, Whitlock explains, are abject bodies who do not fit the narratives of citizen-subjecthood that discipline modern lives. These are stories which require an extreme form of testimony—written on the body—a form that marks them physically as victims because they will not be heard and

because they unsettle the comfortable reading position of the benevolent empathetic armchair traveller. Many of these stories urgently do need to be heard, and Whitlock's *Soft Weapons* provides much more than a mere guidebook. It demonstrates an ethical imperative to persist with difficult reading and difficult issues, in difficult times.

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