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*Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African
American Women's Writing and Performance* (review)

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recasting difference as constitutive of rather than disruptive to communication, suggests an alternate reading of such charged encounters. Grandt's repeated deployment of the phrase "telling inarticulacy" recalls Édouard Glissant's *opacité* (opaqueness) and Brent Hayes Edwards's *décalage*, both of which posit difference as that which is to be negotiated rather than resolved. In that light, the role of Toomer's protagonists is, perhaps, not to be the South's "true" bards but to appreciate how figures like Fern and Father John are themselves, in their own ways, the keepers of their region's culture. Likewise, perhaps the significance of the Allman Brothers Band's music rests not in its capacity to grasp African American experiences of racialized violence, but rather in its ability to evoke such realities, and in so doing, prompt conversation about them.

The attention Grandt pays to the racial and regional limits of Afro-modernism might have been more constructively applied to the gender dynamics underlying the "breakdown of communication" in Afro-modernist texts. As Nellie Y. McKay has argued, many of *Cane's* male protagonists fail to capture the women they desire because of "an inability to see [them] as a person rather than only as a woman." If Wright's "Long Black Song" reflects debates "about ownership" (of "time and history," "progress and modernity") in the postbellum South, the story also recalls struggles over who "owns" the black woman's body, especially when that body is uncritically equated with the land. Why must Sarah "embod[y] the ritual ground she inhabits" (62)? Why can Silas not be identified with the farm that he has painstakingly acquired and worked? Such questions would have provided a means of addressing the masculinist tenor of many early to mid-twentieth-century works of African diasporic modernism, and Grandt's analysis would have benefited from their consideration.

This oversight is redeemed, however, in the study's penultimate chapter, a discussion of contemporary novelist Tayari Jones. Through readings of her fictions *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) and *The Untelling* (2005), Grandt credits Jones with destabilizing "not only the sense of community and indeed humanity of [the South's] inhabitants, but also (vernacular) language and storytelling itself" (107). Such destabilization is important because it refuses to privilege any position, be it gendered, racialized, or regionalized, leaving instead all perspectives open to interrogation. From her depiction of the social drama surrounding the Atlanta Child Murders to her exploration of the personal tragedy of a young woman facing early menopause, Jones marshals both the inadequacy and the power of language, and by extension, the potential of modernist forms to illuminate as well as complicate the human condition.

Jennifer L. Griffiths. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance.* Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2009. 134 pp. \$39.50.

Reviewed by Carol E. Henderson, University of Delaware

Anyone who picks up a copy of Jennifer Griffiths's *Traumatic Possessions* will be struck by the image on the cover—a taped picture of three women looking back at you. These women—who vary in age and temperament—appear to embody different ways of knowing. That is, their body language and clothing suggest that they have a story to tell . . . a story that one might wish to know—a story that could tell us something noteworthy about the lived experiences of black women. But it is the central figure in the photograph that arrests the viewer. Her eyes are piercing. She is the one figure whose eyes tell you that her story won't come easy. Her direct gaze into the camera asks: Should I trust you? Or better yet, Should I trust you with my story?

Although seemingly a roundabout way to address the nuances of Griffiths's book, these women stand in, for me, as caretakers of the intimate and sacred everydayness of living black and female in America. These voyages are sojourns of discovery, ones that assay the ability of the mind and spirit to balance the haunting realities of misdeeds done to the flesh. As Griffiths makes clear in her preface to the book, the writers and playwrights she examines in *Traumatic Possessions* test our notions of a split between body and voice, as the survival of the characters examined hinges on our understanding of the cultural imprints etched on the flesh. Specifically, figures like Dessa Rose, Rodney King, Ursa, and the Hottentot Venus have to negotiate their moments of truths in public spaces that appear to place limits on their ability to speak their social injustices. Thus, one's figurative struggle with a racialized social script becomes a complicated process of testimony as the dynamics of intersubjectivity place memory and body in direct dialogue with each other. One must draw on the other to accommodate the refiguring of the limits of language in order to speak into existence the body's pain.

Another important element of Griffiths's theoretical analysis of trauma and the black body is her attention to the process of meaning-making through the memory of the flesh. As Griffiths delineates, the repetitive recitation of survivor narratives in African American culture appears to be an effort to get the reader/viewer not only to listen with an empathetic ear to the nuances of a story, but to also become a sentinel of the process that enables the listener to help author/character fashion meaning from the chaos of trauma. "Challenging traditional narratives that restrict form and content," writes Griffiths, "they build new forms from memory fragments and bodily states" (12). Hence, private histories reinforced in the discursive limits of the black body create a dialogue between the dominant culture's version of the "official" narrative of a moment and the personal meaning trapped in the painful silence of singular and communally weighted legacies. Griffiths's *Traumatic Possessions* situates itself squarely within other modes of trauma enquiries found in Holocaust studies and postcolonial and critical race scholarship. Her efforts at affecting the more universal aspects of human suffering are efforts to move away from the false projection of cultural anxiety mapped onto the survivors' tales and bodies, acknowledging the individuality of the traumatic experience while creating a tapestry of discursive reinterpretations that probe and critique the spectacle of reading/witnessing the language of the body in multiethnic public spaces.

Griffiths's analysis relies heavily upon a reconsideration of the vestiges of slavery and its aftermath. Three of the five chapters included here deconstruct, and then reconstruct the memories of chattel bondage. They also reconstruct the memories of the wounded female ancestral figures who testify to the ways traumatic memory possesses the living bodies of their progeny as that memory simultaneously renders impact upon the material lives of those it possesses. In chapter one, Griffiths argues that Dessa Rose's memory is frozen at the devastating moment of the death of her lover Kaine, and that the scars snaked around her inner thighs—scars she got for resisting captivity—remind her of this death daily. It is only when those scars are "read" by the blind female slave Aunt Chloe, recontextualizing rebellion as resistance with the touch of her hand, does Dessa's traumatic story get reframed in the annals of her history for generations to come. With Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, a novel Griffiths investigates in chapter four of *Traumatic Possessions*, the uncanny spaces of post-traumatic stress are used to indicate the limits of language in Jones's text. Song becomes central to protagonist Ursa's attempts to unbraid her sexual development from the rape legacies that dominant the narratives of her maternal grandmother and mother. To heal herself, Ursa constructs a "new world song" that is transformative and transgenerational—it is a testament to the power of artistic reinvention at the site of familial crisis.

In chapters two, three, and five, Griffiths asks her reader to explore what it means to consider the performance of traumatic memories in public and private

spaces. In chapter two, Griffiths returns her critical optic to the enduring legacy of Sarah Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus in the early nineteenth-century global economy. Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* poses questions of human trafficking and a recognizable victim within the public spaces of the laboratory, the courtroom, and Piccadilly Square—all locations intimately tied to Baartman's identity. Griffiths argues that in Parks's play, we witness the making and unmaking of Baartman and the men in her life as her body is conspicuously consumed in the masquerade of competing cultural productions. In chapter three, Griffiths examines Robbie McCauley's Obie Award-winning play *Sally's Rape*, and focuses on the links between kinfolk and the unutterable within private and shared memory. These investigations begin the process of disclosing the denial of sexual aggression against black women and the damage such denial causes. Central to the analyses of both *Sally's Rape* and Anna Deavere Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* in chapter five is the notion of an audience-as-character relationship that is formed in the crucible of the theatrical space. Here, the audience performs a third level of witnessing ritual that acknowledges the traumatic experiences of the performer, and processes these instances of torture in a manner that undermines efforts to silence wounded bodies. In Smith's case, the 1992 beating of Los Angeles resident Rodney King serves as a catalyst to examine the historical perception of offenses directed at African American men. Griffiths's methodological approach in this chapter is to expose the lingering and unsettled modes of knowing that select, order, and allegorize memory within social and media forces—forces that “quickly move to seal the [King] incident within a dominant, racialized frame” (90). Smith's performance of these mechanisms of control within the public space of the stage allow audience and performer to critique law enforcement agencies that see men like King through colored lenses. These post-memory exercises create alternative narratives for the reinterpretation of physical evidence, such as the videotaped beating, the expert testimony of Charles Duke and Daryl Gates, and the scars on King's person that are shockingly elided in historical discussions of the case. In reconstituting the elusive narrative of not only King's bodily and psychological wounds, but also other historical bodies that have been forgotten and unaccounted for, Smith's play becomes a vehicle for a communal remembering of racial malfeasance against black flesh. It is in returning to the body, and to all of its accumulated knowledge, that Smith and the other authors in Griffiths's text re-envision a holistic being that sees the body's pain and spiritually exorcises this body in the communal light of redemption and reconciliation.

Traumatic Possessions is a critical exercise in repatriating the generational and geographical boundaries of collected histories. The legacies of trauma portend a cultural anxiety that limits the telling of the black body's story within prescribed social paradigms. Yet, as Griffiths demonstrates, such boundaries are porous, at best. For if one wants to tell a story, that story will be told through either traditional or unconventional means.

Stephanie Li. *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women*. Albany: SUNY P, 2010. 162 pp. \$60.00.

Reviewed by Venetria K. Patton, Purdue University

Something *Akin to Freedom* troubles one's notion of freedom. Li explores what many would consider an unthinkable act—choosing to remain in bondage, or entering bondage in order to attain other goals. She begins with a passage from Toni Morrison's *Sula* in which Sula elects to slash off the tip of her finger as a threat