



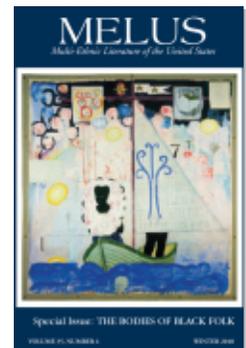
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Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance (review)

Nina Mikkelsen

MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 35, Number 4, Winter 2010, pp. 195-196 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



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Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance. Jennifer L. Griffiths. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010. 160 pages. \$39.50 cloth; \$19.50 paper.

Jennifer L. Griffiths studies the subject of traumatized individuals in literature with particular attention to how black women in US history have been represented and on the post-traumatic recovery process in which subjects begin to make sense of the body's complex, contradictory, and dissociated memories. As she explains, "memory becomes encoded on a bodily level and resurfaces as possession," and "only a connection to another body can bridge [the] break between body and language" (1). For the healing process to begin, the subject must grant her story reality by telling it to an empathetic listener who can bear witness to the memory and affirm the traumatic experience.

To investigate how gender and race affect the listener's interpretation of the survivor's story, Griffiths focuses on an "intersubjective dynamic involved in the creation of testimony after trauma . . . as it relates to the black female post-traumatic experience across generations and cultural contexts" (3). She ties these contexts specifically to a "landscape of memory that supports white supremacy or misogyny through selective memory, collective forgetting, and denial of testimony that could threaten its hegemony" (10). The white listener or writer, the "official interpreter" (12) of the courtroom or historical records who mishears or misreads the teller's story, precludes or weakens the traumatized subject's healing process. Turning to playwrights and novelists for inspiration, Griffiths discusses how from the time of slavery to the present, black women have struggled to verbalize their understanding of rape and torture, human trafficking, bodily violence, and the sexual stigma that results from rape or severe personal degradation.

Three plays, *Sally's Rape* by Robbie McCauley (1994), Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1997), and Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), illuminate narrative strategies and forms used to explore "the body's place in narrative" (12). Two novels, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams and *Corregidora* (1975) by Gayl Jones, flesh out historical and intergenerational challenges for reclaiming the traumatized black

female. The discussions of *Dessa Rose* and *Corregidora* produce gripping and illuminating stories of the black woman “trapped in painful silence with individuals, family systems, and the community” who ultimately becomes “the active creator of her own testimony” (13).

If there is one weakness in Griffiths’s study, it is the divided focus between novels and plays, or at least this particular set of plays. Griffiths states that she is focusing on the black woman in US history, so the inclusion of *Twilight* (with its male survivor) and *Venus* (with a European setting) blur the focus. In addition, so little emerges about Venus’s motivation, intentions, and ability to become an active creator of her own testimony that the use of this text seems questionable. The issue of the study’s scope raises questions about what role imaginative literature plays in the larger corpus of such representations—questions Griffiths does not answer. Also, the book would be strengthened by a longer conclusion that points to areas for future investigation. Many important areas of interest emerge in this study: traumas of slavery and its aftermath; the black female body as public spectacle for the historical global audience; the black sexualized female body as producer of cross-generation narratives; cross-generational narratives producing collective and individual trauma; the black female as creator of her own testimony for disrupting the oppression of collective memories; testimony as a speech act involving body, voice, and memory; and uses of technology to counter white supremacist perspectives. It would be interesting to discover if any one of these areas stood out for Griffiths as more critical or consequential for further study.

Perhaps of equal or greater importance, Griffiths might have explored additional examples in the literature of trauma that resonate with what is arguably the most representative literary text here, *Corregidora*. Yet despite these concerns, *Traumatic Possessions* opens up important new possibilities for investigating trauma, the human body, and memory. It also allows us to discover black women in literature who seek or find empathetic listeners for their life-changing and life-affirming stories.

Nina Mikkelsen

Independent Scholar