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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance* by Jennifer L. Griffiths

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## Patrick Alexander

Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 2010) 160 pp.

For well over two decades, scholars in the fields of African American literary theory and trauma/cultural pain studies have explored the relation between subjectivity and pained black bodies in history, literature, film, and popular culture. In her oft-cited essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers details how the Middle Passage and plantation slavery desubjectified African persons into flesh, how these distinctively Western regimes of bodily violation and containment unmade and degendered the African subject into "captive flesh [that] demarcate[d] a total objectification." Examining the brutal 1991 beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, California, Judith Butler and Houston Baker have revealed how the strategic removal of oral/aural expression from the video recording of King's beating prevented jurors from ever hearing the exculpatory and personal significance of this black man's screams. More recently, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf's reading of black bodily terror and the capitalist production of laboring bodies, Carol Henderson's study of scarification and the reclamation of the black body in African American literary texts, and Debra Walker King's theory of *blackpain* have continued these discussions of pained bodies and black subjectivity.

Penetrating as these analyses have been, however, none have attended to the ways in which traumatized black subjects have wrestled against racist and sexist frameworks in order to rewrite traumatic experiences on their own expressive terms. In her stunning work, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, Jennifer Griffiths introduces readings of African American literary and performance texts that directly engage the work of trauma studies/cultural pain scholars in order to expose a tension between experiences of racially-specific trauma and expressions of black subjectivity in U.S. culture. In five chapters on trauma testimony in African American literature, Griffiths establishes how the seeming breakdown of language and memory in trauma survivors' stories signifies not the end but rather the starting point of their narratives.

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By inviting readers in the break between the inscription of trauma on the body and the interpretation of that body's trauma in a racialized cultural context, Griffiths reveals black trauma survivors as expressive agents and not incapacitated, muted victims—as counterhegemonic interpreters of trauma, as it were. The trauma survivors who appear in the work of Gayl Jones, Sherley Ann Williams, Suzan-Lori Parks, Robbie McCauley, and Anna Deavere Smith are not, in Griffiths' estimation, straining to *verbalize* trauma; it is precisely these survivors' nonlinear, language-fracturing narrations of trauma that render them speaking subjects. Griffiths, in other words, reads the trauma narratives expressed by Williams's genitally-wounded Dessa Rose, Parks' overexposed Venus Hottentot, and Jones' womb-ruptured Ursa Corregidora as resisting and rupturing, exhausting and exceeding conventional forms of trauma testimony, which often overlook how a survivor's race and gender influence the expression and reception of his or her testimony. Thus, Griffiths' analyses of these characters' incomplete recollections, paradoxical pronouncements, and improvisational blues breaks brilliantly advance her book's thesis—that African American literature's trauma testifiers expose the dominant culture's (willful?) blindness to the racism and sexism that frame the testimonies of black trauma survivors.

*Traumatic Possessions* is clearly a volume of literary analysis, but Griffiths' way of weaving trauma theory and cultural critique into her close readings of African American literary and performance texts also bespeaks a critical eloquence. Perhaps this interlacing is most evident in the book's foundational first chapter, a chapter in which Griffiths elucidates how the memory lapses of a wounded bondswoman in Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* should be understood as signifying much more than the damage traumatic experiences have wreaked on her thought processes. For Griffiths, the memory failures of this woman, Dessa Rose, also emblemize how traumatized black women, by virtue of being perceived by the dominant culture as conniving truth-stretchers, must frequently search beyond the language of everyday speech in order to fully and authentically express the truths of their trauma. In other words, Griffiths' interpretation of a fictive slave-woman's testimony can't help but simultaneously offer commentary on the way in which experiences of trauma, racism, and sexism have jointly shaped black women's self-representations of traumatic experiences in U.S. culture since the era of plantation slavery. Griffiths' breathtakingly reflexive mediation between various scenes in Williams' novel and relevant contentions of trauma theorists and cultural critics thusly makes this implicit commentary almost explicit.

All throughout the first chapter, Griffiths asks: how does cross-racial witnessing impact black women's narrations of trauma? To think through this question, Griffiths repeatedly turns to the body of Dessa, the wounded bondswoman, for answers. Dessa is Griffiths' quintessential pre-Emancipation female trauma survivor, one whose narrative presses against the same ceiling of silencing interpretive frameworks as post-Emancipation black women's trauma testimonies: racism and sexism. Yet Dessa, whose participation in a slave rebellion has resulted in the death of her enslaved lover and earned her a brutal beating and branding in her genital area, can mistakenly be read as a woman who has been traumatized into incoherent speech. Griffiths rightly insists that the temptation to *only* read Dessa's disjointed recollections of these experiences as the numbing effect of trauma on her mind and mouth reinforces the racist, sexist interpretive framework that her first witness imposes on her. Dessa's first witness is Adam Nehemiah, a white pro-slavery writer who interviews her so he can advance his book project. This man, who Griffiths describes as

possessing “a predetermined understanding of Dessa as inferior in both gender and race” (16), is so busy reading conventional historical narratives about criminal bondswomen onto the body of Dessa that he fails to make any sense of her trauma testimony. Griffiths points out that “the flatness of Dessa’s narration reveals more about her condition than Nehemiah has the capacity to recognize” (19), that Nehemiah’s detached eugenicist presence and *unsympathetic* witnessing ultimately compels Dessa to search beyond everyday speech in order to make meaning of her severe trauma. Thus, Dessa “breaks” precisely at those moments when a sympathetic witness cannot be found: she (reflexively?) stops expressing her trauma in speech familiar to Nehemiah and slips in and out of hum-and-sing interludes whenever she feels trapped by the racist, sexist framework within which Nehemiah wishes to interpret her testimony. Perhaps this is Griffiths’ most profound insight in the first chapter and in *Traumatic Possessions* as a whole: that black women not only struggle *through* trauma-ravaged memories in order to express and make meaning of their traumatic experiences but also *against* a culture of witnesses who have desubjectified them, who have always already written in their “properly-functioning” minds the official story of black female trauma.

Griffiths’ work is also distinguishing because it explores these issues of race and trauma testimony through the eyes of African American playwrights: three of the book’s five chapters detail how black bodies in trauma are creatively imagined and performed on stage. In a chapter on Suzan-Lori Parks’ play, *Venus*, Griffiths demonstrates how Sara Baartman, can, on stage, finally be imagined as a speaking subject. Parks’ Baartman—a character drawn from the experiences of a real black South African woman who was forced to publicly display her buttocks to crowds in nineteenth-century Europe—is, under Griffiths’ telescoping lenses, a human being who possesses and expresses an unimagined trauma testimony. Engaging the work of Judith Herman on trauma in perpetrator/victim relationships, Griffiths reads Parks’ Baartman as expressing what the real Baartman might have indeed expressed, had anyone cared to listen: the dual trauma of having her raced body regularly made into a spectacle while also being denied the balm of romantic and familial love. Griffiths’ sensitivity to how the stage plays up the dominant culture’s refusal to empathetically witness black female trauma is also illustrated well in her analysis of Robbie McCauley’s play *Sally’s Rape* in the book’s third chapter.

As a whole, *Traumatic Possessions* succeeds in bringing to light how racism and sexism can obscure some incredibly rich and complicated trauma testimonies. It also implicitly expresses a call-to-action, an insistence that the arts—particularly writing and performance—must help in the work of humanizing black traumatized subjects. Perhaps the implicit nature of this call is the work’s only drawback. Throughout her book, Griffiths is so meticulous about merging close readings of literary or performance works with relevant discussions in trauma theory that there is little room for her to articulate how she sees her readings participating in the empathetic witnessing that she’s clearly calling for. I had hoped for an explicit acknowledgement of this call in an epilogue, if nowhere else. I should note, however, that this final remark in no ways takes away from the sheer brilliance that Griffiths exudes in *Traumatic Possessions*. For in the end, Griffiths’ work is a must read. It demands attention beyond the offices and classrooms of academics. Given its potent discussions on the politics of racial violence and human trafficking amid its critical assessments of traumatized nonwhite subjects, *Traumatic Possessions* also belongs on the shelf of any serious human rights advocate.

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