
Review: FREEDOM, BODILY TRAUMA, AND SURVIVAL: NEW TRAJECTORIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERARY CRITICISM

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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ESSAY REVIEW—II

FREEDOM, BODILY TRAUMA, AND SURVIVAL: NEW TRAJECTORIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERARY CRITICISM

Sandra C. Duvivier

Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. Pp. 134. Cloth \$39.50. Paper \$19.50.

Stephanie Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. Pp. 162. Cloth \$60.00. Paper \$23.95.

Roughly three decades ago African American women's literary criticism emerged as an important area of scholarly activity and it continues to play an integral role in increasing the visibility of African American women's literature within the academy and larger public sphere. Literary critics remain salient today because they take scholarly treatises on African American women writers along vital new trajectories. Their scholarship pays attention to relevant theoretical and thematic paradigms, while also foregrounding issues shaping the lives of black girls and women—as reflected in literature, past and present. In turn, African American women's literature, which occupies an important literary and cultural space, provides an avenue for these theorists and critics to explore the practical applicability of their scholarly analysis. Thus, African American women's writings and scholars studying the genre have a symbiotic relationship: one that also reflects the ever-evolving literary and cultural landscape.

Exemplifying the evolution of African American literature and critical scholarship, and in congruence with the current literary/critical moment, Jennifer L. Griffiths's *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance* and Stephanie Li's *Something Akin to*

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Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women offer new directions in the analysis of African American women's literature. The strengths of Griffiths and Li's works are manifold and will be explored in detail below, but especially significant is their ability to analyze African American women's literature from various time periods within postmodern, 21st-century paradigms, while not allowing a problematic presentist gaze to compromise their analyses. In addition, their readings of texts include works from a variety of literary genres and cultural disciplines, thus enhancing their scholarship. Also, their critical treatises problematize approaches to black women's bodies, freedom, and empowerment.

As Griffiths states in her introduction, *Traumatic Possessions* is concerned with literary and artistic representations of black female bodies as sites of traumatic memories—informed by ideologies of black female bodies in U.S. society, especially since the era of slavery. However, as Griffiths posits, these bodies, despite being subjected to marginalization, are not separated from voice and survival experiences. Her focus then is on the ways “moving away from the false projection of cultural anxiety onto survivors entails the actual bodily experience of trauma, or telling the body's story, instead of inscribing a story onto the body” (11).¹ Griffiths explicates these theorizations in five perceptive chapters.

The strengths of Griffiths's introduction, which sets a precedent for her entire study, include her problematizing seeming binaries concerning marginalization and voice, as well as her utilization of trauma studies, which are usually grounded in a Euro-Western, patriarchal context. In so doing, Griffiths challenges traditional representations in “trauma studies” and psychoanalysis and engages in dialogue with prominent literary critics such as Hortense Spillers, who call for more studies of black women's literature within a psychoanalytic framework.² In addition, Griffiths's text includes, but moves beyond novels, which have been heavily represented in African American literary criticism, as she explicates the varying ways black female bodies also function in performance texts. What follows is a rich critical analysis of black women's literature and culture in alignment with newer literary and critical spaces.

The introduction demonstrates Griffiths's expertise and extensive research into the subject matter. But at some points she privileges the works of prominent theorists, thus paying less attention to Griffiths's own interventions and contributions to literary criticism. Certain portions of the introduction almost threaten to undermine her voice. Moreover, the introduction would have been strengthened with an explicit mentioning of what distinguishes *Traumatic Possessions* from previous scholarship, as well as its important contributions to African American literary criticism, trauma studies, and studies of the body. Nevertheless, it accomplishes its task of establishing Griffiths's main argument and critical interventions.

Griffiths's first chapter explores black female bodies during slavery, when African American girls and women, in not owning themselves, not only had no agency or control over their bodies, but were also subjected to various offenses against them, including rape. Specifically, Griffiths analyzes Sherley Anne Williams's critically acclaimed, but relatively understudied novel *Dessa Rose* (1986), whose eponymous title character suffers bodily trauma after participating in a slave rebellion. Pregnant Dessa is brutally beaten by her owner, resulting in her genitals becoming damaged and bruised; and she also loses her lover Kaine at the hands of the slave owner. Dessa responds to this traumatic event, which is also intertwined with her body and sexuality, by experiencing a "death" in memory and is initially unable to tell her story. Making note of the interconnectedness between Dessa's sexuality and trauma, Griffiths posits, "For Dessa, the break in memory, the point of rupture in language, occurs across her genitals. The connection between her sexuality and the suppression of her memory is difficult to ignore. . . . The scarring marks an attempt to write over Dessa's access to the power and pleasure of her own body, to inscribe the law of racial ideology, and to erase violently her desire to claim her life as her own" (15).

Yet, Dessa's scarred body serves as a catalyst for her regaining memory, as it evidences her trauma. Her "embodied memory" also returns upon her meeting and interacting with Rufel, a white woman who harbors the fugitive Dessa in order to prevent her capture and punishment (death) for her role in the slave rebellion. Griffiths argues that despite Dessa's trauma, she still is a survivor mainly because of Williams's deconstructing white womanhood through Rufel, who is not only abandoned by her husband, but also has an affair with Dessa's enslaved friend Nathan. In challenging traditional ideologies of white womanhood as virtuous "true women," which are antithetical to traditional representations of black female identity—and in placing black and white women in dialogue rather than mere opposition—Williams depicts Dessa's survival and regaining of memory and provides a complex representation of white womanhood. Despite her trauma, then, Dessa is not voiceless, but "has freed herself in body" and "found a language and a narrative to shelter a vulnerable past" (33).

The second chapter delves into offenses against black female bodies during slavery through an analysis of the play *Venus* (1997), Suzan-Lori Parks's fictional delineation of the exhibition of Saartjie/Sara "Hottentot Venus" Baartman (1790?–1815). Baartman's body is indeed a site of trauma, especially as the enslaved Khoisian woman traveled from her native South Africa to Europe to become part of an exhibition displaying her supposedly large "sexual organs," which came to emblemize black female (hyper)sexuality. Although Baartman refused to have her genitalia on display during her life, her buttocks were on display. Her body (including her genitalia) and brain were exhibited after her death

at a French museum until 1974; and her remains were only returned to South Africa in 2002, after eight years of pressure from the South African government. After her death in 1815, Baartman's body was dissected by scientist Georges Cuvier, who likened her genitalia to that of orangutans, which provided "scientific proof" that black girls and women possessed animalistic sex organs.

Instead of telling a story of Baartman's marginalization and lack of agency, Parks renders Baartman complicit in her exploitation. Griffiths's concern here is Baartman's internalizing "perversity" as a survival strategy, including the ways her overconsumption of chocolate, complete with its racialized and sexualized implications as a stress reliever, indicates "her identification with herself as a consumable object" (44). As such, Parks's portrayal of Baartman complicates traditional depictions and the historical "memory" of Baartman's body being merely a site of victimization. In foregrounding *Venus*, Griffiths both analyzes an arguably underrepresented text worthy of critical attention and also boldly engages in controversial discourse on black female sexual exploitation versus complicity.

The salience of performance texts lies partially in their display of visual imagery in addition to showcasing relevant dialogues or discussions. In the case of *Traumatic Possessions*, performance texts allow for visual representations of "trauma embodied" as well as the responses and survival strategies to combat trauma. In addition to her analysis of *Venus*, Griffiths explores trauma and survival in other performance texts. For instance, in the third chapter Griffiths examines performance artist Robbie McCauley's play *Sally's Rape*, first performed in 1991, which is based on the rape of McCauley's great-great grandmother and former slave Sally. McCauley's intent, according to Griffiths, is to "begin the process of uncovering the denial of sexual violence against black women and the damage caused by this denial" (47). Through recollection, memory, and acknowledgment, black women, as emblemized by Sally, can move away from victimization as their presumed "testimonies."

Focusing in the fourth chapter on Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1975), Griffiths again explores black female bodies as sites of sexual trauma through the *Corregidora* women, some of them products of rape—and later incest—at the hand of a Brazilian plantation owner. The protagonist Ursa *Corregidora* is, like the other female characters in Griffiths's study, a physical embodiment of trauma and memory; her physical appearance signifies her family's history of interracial rape. Additionally, Ursa, who is encouraged to "make generations" to tell the story of her foremothers' traumatic history and ensure that her familial line survives, loses her ability to do so after her husband Mutt violently attacks her. Thus, Ursa's body, like the generations of women before her, is also a site of trauma and violence. However, despite losing her ability to bear children, Griffiths posits that Ursa is able to give her testimony through singing the blues. Moreover, diverging from the

arguments of other critics, Griffiths argues that Ursa's body, which had been a site of a legacy of violence and rape, becomes the site of a possibility of a "new world song" as she finds newer, more self-actualizing ways to address her family legacy. Because of Ursa's new world song, "transgenerational trauma finds at last a form and a voice" (88).

In chapter five Griffiths investigates trauma through Anna Devere Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), which chronicles Smith's attempts to provide testimony to the traumatic narrative of Rodney King, whose videotaped brutal beating by Los Angeles police officers led to days of rioting in 1992. Smith's play was inspired by the aftermath of the acquittal of the officers who attacked King and is based on her interviews with persons responding to or personally affected by King's beating and the verdict on the police. Using these interviews, Smith embodies these individuals in her enactments of their testimonies to counter the perceived silencing of Rodney King, as the acquittal evidences a dismissal of his physical testimony/embodied trauma. Through Smith's performance, Griffiths contends, she "occupies the position of survivor and listener, emphasizing the process by which memory transforms from a purely private to a more externalized, public form" (97).

What *Traumatic Possessions* does lack is a "conclusion," with only a brief concluding paragraph at the end of the fifth chapter. As a result, Griffiths misses the opportunity to restate the importance of her project and call for new trajectories for African American literary criticism that build upon her analysis, such as works that incorporate trauma and psychoanalysis; employ texts beyond the traditional novel; analyze the ramifications of marginalization while not ignoring possible transcendence; foreground theoretical paradigms without compromising close reading; and privilege the body, among other things. Nevertheless, *Traumatic Possessions* is a groundbreaking contribution to the various critical fields it inhabits, including, but not limited to, African American literary studies and criticism, performance and trauma studies, and feminist literature.

Stephanie Li's *Something Akin to Freedom* consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a coda and addresses issues of trauma, memory, violence, and black women's bodies. However, as Li asserts in the introduction, her primary concerns are the ways African American women writers problematize notions of freedom and bondage. In particular, she explores how certain literary characters made choices to remain in situations of bondage in order to obtain a particular type of "freedom," which she views as "a socially-produced concept that reflects popular ideologies as much as individual desires" (11).³ Freedom, then, is not fixed and should not be analyzed statically. Moreover, Li argues that by choosing bondage, these women express their freedom to choose their personal situations. Li uses the term "bondage" instead of "slavery" because while she, like Griffiths, also pays

considerable attention to slavery, Li also examines texts that address the ramifications of the legacy of slavery, but are set in the post-emancipation era.

Li's introduction makes use of Harriet Jacobs's personal narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) to further illuminate the choice of bondage and its possibly liberationist implications. Li focuses on the autobiographical text of Harriet Jacobs and her decision to remain in bondage in slave territory in a tiny garret in her grandmother's house after escaping slavery, rather than fleeing immediately to the North, so she could remain near her children and grandmother; and *Sula*'s decision to harm herself, emblematic of black female violation during slavery or legal bondage, to protect herself and her best friend Nel from being attacked by older white boys. These incidents call attention to the ways freedom was limited for black girls and women, particularly during times of racial tension, depicting slavery and the violation of black female bodies as described in Jacobs's narrative, and highlighting Jim Crow policies and offenses in the early 20th-century setting of Morrison's *Sula*. They show how freedom and bondage "represent shifting negotiations of power and control that are mediated by personal desires and connections to others" (5). These forms of bondage and freedom emblemize what Li refers to as "intra-independence," which is "a form of freedom that is grounded in the preservation and care of meaningful social networks" (11).

Li's introduction is well delineated and projects an innovative analysis of African American women's literature. In the introduction she not only complicates notions of freedom and bondage, but engages the dialogue among scholars and critics about freedom, bondage, black female bodies, and sexuality, while highlighting her own text's critical intervention. Li also defines key points without being unnecessarily dense. At one point in the introduction, however, there is a questionable reference. In describing an enslaved black woman's acceptance of the "cult of true womanhood," Li associates it with the phrase "white middle-class values," which historically had applied only to white women (12). Though "womanhood" was associated with whiteness, the "middle-class values" of self-discipline, deferred gratification, and respect for learning were accepted by African American women, enslaved and free, who lived as "virtuous" a life as possible, under the most oppressive conditions.

Through an exploration of slave narratives, and drawing upon historical and literary treatments of slavery, chapter one further complicates notions of "freedom." Li challenges the ways certain slave narratives and historians project freedom along a linear trajectory, privileging escape as the primary form of resistance. The most popular slave narratives, which "describe flight as the ultimate goal of the slave and suggest that individual liberation is the most effective, if not the only, respectable approach to bondage," usually foreground the stories of the formerly

enslaved without obligations to family or community (21). Such an individualistic understanding of freedom does not take intra-independence into account, nor does it consider the revolutionary nature of those who resist slavery, but do not necessarily take flight largely because of familial responsibilities. These were primarily enslaved women who had children and/or families to nurture and protect. In addition, freedom was a precarious concept for fugitives who, if recaptured, would be returned to slavery given the terms of the fugitive slave laws. In caring for their children, enslaved women, though in “bondage,” resisted an institution that denied them ownership of their own bodies, labor, and children. Li further discusses Harriet Jacobs’s presentation of freedom as closely interrelated with the best interests of her children.

In chapter two Li explores Hannah Crafts’s recently discovered 19th-century text *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (2002), and though some critics refer to it as a “novel,” Li views it as a “form of idealized self-presentation that is coupled with unconstrained social critique” (46). Crafts, a pseudonym for a fugitive slave whose true identity and name varies according to the critic who is discussing the book, depicts the life of Hannah, an enslaved woman who has a precarious relationship to bondage and freedom. Unlike the married enslaved couple Charlotte and William in *Bondswoman’s Narrative*, Hannah refuses to flee slavery when the opportunity presents itself. Yet, like Charlotte who chooses escape to protect a marriage that might easily be threatened by conditions of enslavement, Hannah’s decision also resides in her social ties. Although an enslaved worker, Hannah is treated well in the Henry household, and perceives escape as an act of betrayal against these slave owners. Flight to the North in contrast represents a possible divergence from her comfortable existence. Hannah’s decision to remain in bondage lies in what she perceives as the “freedoms” associated with the Henry household. However, Li contends that she appears in many ways aligned with whiteness and white womanhood, and even perceives some enslaved workers as being somewhat complicit in their own oppression.

Hannah decides to flee, however, after being sold to new owners, the Wheelers, thus showing that slaves’ “privileges” are never guaranteed or fixed. She is forced to wed Bill, an enslaved man to whom she has no attraction. Rather than compromise her ideals of true womanhood, to which she vehemently subscribes, Hannah decides that freedom from sexual oppression and exploitation is the only way she could challenge a now oppressive bondage. *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* ends with a free Hannah having strong connections with the African American community, reunited with her mother, teaching at a school for black children, and married to a Methodist minister who is free from the corrupting influence of slavery (62). Li offers not only a well-argued analysis of bondage and freedom in Craft’s text, but also a thoughtful discussion of this newly discovered

work. This chapter is particularly groundbreaking, and will help to increase the visibility of a text that will achieve an important place among narratives of slavery in African American literature.

Chapter three examines the bondage and freedom of Louisa Picquet depicted in another understudied text, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave Life or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (1861), written and transcribed by interviewer Reverend H. Mattison. Li describes “plaçage,” an arrangement in which largely light-skinned free women of color engaged in sexual/romantic relationships with white men to ensure their physical and financial survival (67). Louisa Picquet became the concubine of a white man and the “relationship” resulted in her freedom from enslavement, thus suggesting the possibly liberationist elements in negotiating the terms of bondage.

Evincing the importance of social ties, Li contends that Picquet placed herself in another form of bondage to publish her narrative and purchase her mother’s freedom. Picquet was subjected to the prejudices and narrative control of her interviewer, Rev. Mattison, whose presentation of her life was informed by his own perceptions of blackness, sexuality, and skin color. Li contends that Mattison “co-opts the narrative” in his attempts to describe Picquet’s struggle on his terms (83). What results are endorsements of her character (mainly from whites) that “serve to erase Picquet’s narrative authority entirely,” while she becomes an “object of others’ observations and judgments” (84). Nevertheless, even within this system of bondage, Picquet’s objective is met and her mother’s freedom is purchased. Again, Li’s examination of this understudied text is noteworthy, and addresses freedom, race, color, and sexual exploitation in ways that remain relevant.

Drawing upon memory and trauma studies, Li, like Griffiths, also examines Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*. Chapter four explores the ways memory, particularly those involving slavery and a legacy of black female sexual abuse, leads to emotional and spiritual bondage. In acquiescing to the demands of Ursa’s “Great Gram” and “Gram,” the *Corregidora* women continue to “make generations,” and thus recapitulate sexual violation that they faced as a result of slavery, reinscribing their personal abuse and transferring these traumatic memories to their descendants (93). Thus Li also analyzes the problematics of intra-independence. Ursa’s great-grandmother and grandmother’s emphasis on the womb “as the primary site of female value” cause the women to be “reduced to a physical function and alienated from any notion of personal desire or sexual pleasure. By shifting attention from the purely sexual to the reproductive, Great Gram and Gram stress the creative potential of women. However, they appropriate the female body as a tool rather than claim it as a means of asserting personal agency” (91).

Despite a legacy of trauma and violation, *Corregidora* presents possibilities for newer legacies. Li contends that Ursa’s breaking family tradition by losing her

ability to have children presents her with ways to create an identity outside of sexual violence. Li also posits that heterosexual union, particularly between Ursa and Mutt, also offers possibilities for freedom from the oppressive Corregidora legacy. Ursa's real and imagined discussions with Mutt allow her to acknowledge her family's legacy, but to move beyond it and expose her vulnerability. Her voluntary sexual encounter with Mutt, resulting in an ambiguous conclusion openly debated by critics, also signifies her attempts to rescue her family's past. Therefore, there are possibilities for a loving relationship between Ursa and Mutt, as their reconciliation may present a new union free of violence and abuse.

Rather than a traditional "conclusion," Li closes *Something Akin to Freedom* with a coda that revisits the texts examined along with the novels of Toni Morrison. The coda advances Li's thesis along a new trajectory in her recognition that bondage loses some of its metaphorical efficacy when dealing with texts set in the post-slavery era, such as some of Morrison's works, because the "enemy" becomes more difficult to pinpoint. Given the abundance of issues currently plaguing African American women, Li argues that war, instead of bondage, becomes the dominant metaphor to describe these conditions. This state of war, however, does not result in African American women's inability to achieve freedom. Citing a passage in Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), Li's text ends with the image of a free black woman and the possibilities for this woman to appear in "the work of future writers to envision and narrate" (131), thus calling for more empowering representations of African American womanhood.

Something Akin to Freedom is a poignant, consistently engaging, and groundbreaking contribution to African American literary criticism, African American and cultural studies, Women's Studies, and other fields; and Li makes excellent use of her primary source material. More importantly, the studies by Li and Griffiths refuse to locate black women characters solely within the context of victimization and suffering that would deny their humanity. Both works will hold an important place in African American literary criticism, and help to propel the scholarship along newer trajectories.

NOTES

¹Jennifer L. Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance* (Charlottesville, VA, 2010). Page numbers for quotes are placed in parentheses in the text.

²Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL, 2003). See also Nell Irvin Painter, "Introduction: Claudia Tate and the Protocols of Black Literature and Scholarship," and Barbara E. Johnson, "Allegory and Psychoanalysis" in "Symposium on the Works of Claudia Tate," *The Journal of African American History* 88 (Winter 2003): 60–71.

³Stephanie Li, *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women* (Albany, NY, 2010). Page numbers for quotes are placed in parentheses in the text.