



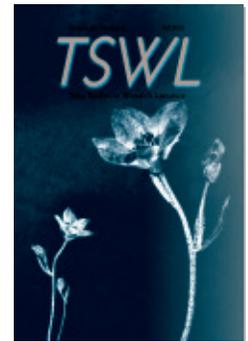
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*Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African
American Women's Writing and Performance* (review)

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TRAUMATIC POSSESSIONS: THE BODY AND MEMORY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING AND PERFORMANCE, by Jennifer L. Griffiths. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 134 pp. \$39.50 cloth; \$19.50 paper.

In her original and perceptive book *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, Jennifer L. Griffiths draws on the work of contemporary trauma specialists Dori Laub, Judith Herman, and Bessel van der Kolk as she focuses on the bodily resonance of traumatic experience in the works of contemporary African American women novelists and playwrights. "Since trauma evades conscious understanding," Griffiths explains, "memory becomes encoded on a bodily level and resurfaces as possession." As the survivor "relives the original experience through a body memory," struggling in the effort to verbalize the trauma, there is a "break between body and language," which can be bridged by telling the trauma story to an empathic listener (p. 1). Indeed, testimony "depends on a relationship and a process between the survivor and the witness, as memory emerges and reunites a body and a voice severed in trauma" (p. 2) In the testimonial encounter, which depends on an intersubjective dynamic between the survivor and witness and which makes public the private trauma, the empathic witness-listener "comprehends the bodily response accompanying the struggle for a language to express the chaos of trauma" (p. 2). But even as testimony "offers a public enactment of memory," problems arise when the transmission of the trauma testimonial happens within a racialized public space where the "dominant cultural voice performs a kind of dubbing over the scene of violence" in a denial of the survivor's testimony (pp. 5, 9).

After offering in her introduction an overview of trauma theory and a discussion of the usefulness of Holocaust studies to an analysis of trauma and race, Griffiths devotes the rest of her study to an investigation of literary and performance texts in which the authors creatively attempt to read the legacy of the traumatized black female body against the dominant racist perceptions that would deny the survivor's testimony and silence her voice. Griffiths begins her analysis with an insightful discussion of Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* (1986), which is a contemporary rendering of the female slave's experience. "For Dessa," Griffiths explains, "the break in memory, the point of rupture in language, occurs across her genitals," which are damaged when the pregnant Dessa is savagely beaten by her white slave master (p. 15). To the white writer Nehemiah, Dessa's scarred body and damaged genitals are evidence not of her trauma but of her "insubordination and beastliness" (p. 18). However, when an old blind slave woman gently touches Dessa's scarred body, her "ability to feel and to know the meaning of Dessa's scars creates a new reading, one that bears

witness to suffering without condemning the survivor to silence” (p. 32).

Like Williams in *Dessa Rose*, Suzan-Lori Parks focuses on the plight of the traumatized black woman in a racialized public space in her play *Venus* (1997), which is based on the life of Sara Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus. Brought from South Africa to Victorian England, Baartman was put on display because of her physical features, in particular her protruding buttocks. Not only does Baartman’s situation of captivity, as Griffiths argues, resemble the contemporary plight of trafficked women, but Baartman, in a common survival strategy of those held captive, comes to identify with her victimizers and against her own body. When Baartman’s supposed rescuer, the Doctor—who is based on the historical figure Dr. Cuvier—has sexual relations with the woman he “plans to dissect posthumously,” he becomes the ultimate victimizer of Baartman (p. 44). As Parks uses the Doctor’s relation with Baartman to reveal “the paradoxical intimacy involved in traumatic experience,” she implicates those critics or viewers who fail to recognize the trauma that “occurs within or because of this intimacy” (pp. 43, 45).

Viewers are also implicated in Robbie McCauley’s play *Sally’s Rape* (1994), in which McCauley draws on the story of her great-great grandmother Sally, a slave who was raped by her white master. During the slave auction scene, in which a naked McCauley stands on an auction block while her white co-performer Jeannie Hutchins urges members of the audience to bid for her, McCauley “travels to the site of a specific historical trauma,” and as her “vulnerability to the pain of that history becomes contagious,” members of the audience confront their “own unspoken relationship to the horrors of the past” (p. 56). *Sally’s Rape*, writes Griffiths, creates “a new kind of interracial encounter in public space” as the performance of McCauley and Hutchins “allows bodies to come together to process information that can only be understood as within an intersubjective dynamic, a relationship, or a ‘reciprocal reflection’ between women” (pp. 63, 67). Similarly, Gayl Jones in her novel *Corregidora* (1975) focuses on the haunting and traumatic legacy of slavery in telling the story of Ursa Corregidora. If Ursa’s sexuality has been shaped by the Brazilian plantation owner Corregidora, who raped both her great-grandmother and her grandmother, she ultimately is able to witness trauma in the public testimony of her blues singing through which the intergenerational trauma of the Corregidora women “finds at last a form and a voice” (p. 88).

In her final chapter, Griffiths moves on to a fascinating analysis of Anna Deavere Smith’s play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), which is based on the Rodney King beating, the trial of the police officers who beat King, and the riots that followed the verdict. While the video of King’s beating documents the severe bodily trauma that King suffered, the evidence given during the trial of the police officers who beat King transforms the

suffering King—who is “writhing and wailing in pain” on the video—into a “brute incapable of feeling human sensation” (p. 94). Through her series of monologues, Smith disrupts the “relentless, retraumatizing loop of the videotaped beating and the courtroom scene,” and she allows “the bodily memory a presence in public space by reproducing not only the words but also the gestures, affect, and body language” of her interview subjects (pp. 93, 95). Smith also creates a “new community in the aesthetic space of her performance” as she reintegrates the “individual voices that have been isolated in trauma into a community of survivors” (pp. 98-99, 101).

An innovative and compelling work, Jennifer Griffiths's *Traumatic Possessions* is a very welcome addition to contemporary trauma and race studies. By drawing on the observation of clinicians that “the body matters when recovering from traumatic experience,” Griffiths, in her return to the body, points to new interpretive directions for the study of trauma in African American literature and performance works (p. viii). As Griffiths weaves together the work of race and trauma theorists with an analysis of literary and performance texts, she, in her role as critic-reader, becomes a vital and empathic witness to the traumatic hauntings of Rodney King, Venus, Ursa, Dessa, and Sally. This is an original and worthwhile work, and Griffiths is a trustworthy guide as she offers critical and public testimony by illuminating the haunting legacy of body matters in race-related traumas.

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DARK EYES ON AMERICA: THE NOVELS OF JOYCE CAROL OATES, by Gavin Cologne-Brookes. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. 282 pp. \$24.95.

Gavin Cologne-Brookes applies pragmatist theory to the study of Joyce Carol Oates's novels. He argues that the trajectory of her career starts with her emphasis on the private, the individual, and the exclusionary and then progresses to the public, the collective, and the inclusionary, but he does not endorse the opposition of the personal and political. Rather, he demonstrates that even Oates's semi-autobiographical novels are social novels, thus her characters often reflect Oates's own pragmatic approach to her art, life, and social engagement. The result is a major work not only in the scholarship on Oates but also in the application of pragmatist theory to literary analysis. Moreover, its wit and readability make it suitable for students who want to see a model of pragmatist criticism.

Although his focus is on Oates's novels, Cologne-Brookes addresses