

## BOOK REVIEW

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

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The primary title of Jennifer Griffith's new critical work, *Traumatic Possessions*, evokes a spontaneous trajectory of signification. One thinks almost immediately of illicit possession—slavery, rape, and appropriation—possessions that are governed by racism, sexism, and greed. One thinks next, perhaps, of being possessed by the traumatic impact of an illicit possession—a haunting created by the trauma of the possession. Finally, one thinks, of possessing or controlling the trauma—a self-possession after healing. A crucial element in moving through this trajectory is narrative; one needs a story to move from victim to survivor.

Griffiths' text explores the problematics of generating a healing narrative from an African American female perspective found in a range of diverse texts. She works with two novels, Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, a neo-slave narrative, and Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, a story of transgenerational rapes and their legacy, and one play, Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*. *Venus* addresses the display of Sara Baartman as spectacle in London's Piccadilly in 1810; she was also known as the Hottentot Venus. Griffiths also analyzes two performance pieces/plays, Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, an interracial negotiation of rape and its legacy, and Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Smith's *Twilight* addresses the complexity surrounding the Rodney King beating and trial of the police officers involved in the attack. Using these five pieces, Griffiths focuses on the attempt to relate a personal narrative of trauma and the elements blocking this expression.

Despite the explicitly racial context of the analysis in *Traumatic Possessions*, the value of this text extends beyond the

study of African American literature and performance pieces, and beyond trauma studies to include significant concerns of feminist scholarship. It is valuable first because women have, unfortunately, been globally and historically traumatized, often as a direct result of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny. Another example of Griffiths' return to feminist concerns is her framing of chapter two, which interrogates the display of Sara Baartman as the Hottentot Venus. She begins with the question "Can you recognize victims of human trafficking among the people you (health-care providers) help every day?" (34). Her alignment of human trafficking, a global women's issue, with the positionality of Sara Baartman as spectacle definitively shifts the focus from race to gender, despite Baartman's identity as a native from South Africa; gender intersects race in Griffiths' analysis of Parks' *Venus* as it does in several chapters of this critical work. The author's foregrounding of trauma response, testimony, witnessing, and language as potential obstacles to constructing a narrative and the body as a response to these obstacles clarifies the ways in which women's issues wend in and around the concerns of race. Griffiths has chosen race as the critical lens for this text; but she has also chosen the works of African American women as a base.

The response of those who have been traumatized (in the five pieces chosen) by rape, racial violence, and display as public spectacle is found again and again to be severely limited in terms of voice. Identified as a key element in women's liberation movements and the accompanying shift from passivity and domination to agency, voice is an especially crucial element in the recovery of trauma victims. And yet, as Griffiths asserts, this voice is precluded by substantial and protracted gaps in memory, limits of language, the lack of open and responsive witnesses (to testimony), racism, and sexism. Victims of trauma cannot remember—do not want to remember. It is not safe in the face of racism and sexism. It is not safe without a supportive witness. It is not possible without language.

Delineating her research and work with language in preparation for her performance piece, Anna Deavere Smith says "In L.A. people were less articulate, which was a good thing for me because I'm looking for the place where language fails, where people have to struggle to find words." Griffiths explains that these "breaking points of language" constitute "portals of entry into a

forgotten world. They reveal the bodies buried in memory, left outside history . . ." (98). Using these "portals of entry" Smith inserts her body and uses it to provide the necessary testimony; she moves around the gaps of memory and gaps in language. The body is used, although it is used in different ways, in almost each literary/performance piece (in the text) to move beyond these gaps. In McCauley's piece, for example, the two performers "hold each other's hands and push back and forth . . . in a continuous rocking motion," physically demonstrating the tension between their very different social and racial positions (58).

Exploring other obstacles to the creation of a healing narrative, Griffiths examines how voice and testimony are blocked by witnesses who have their own agenda, and cannot or will not hear the trauma that has occurred. In chapter one and five, it is racism that precludes Dessa Rose and Rodney King from being heard. This preclusion is compounded by the official narrative of the experts, both inside and outside the courtroom. Whether it is rape or another trauma, women and people of color have not been able to make their voices heard. Their voices are displaced by the official narrative of the authorities—police officers, attorneys, and judges.

As Griffiths demonstrates, these voices are also frequently displaced by the master narratives generated through racism and sexism. Examining the "Uncanny Spaces" created by the traumatic repetition of the story of the rapes of Ursa's great grandmother and grandmother in *Corregidora*, the author turns to a consideration of shame (68). She writes "In the patriarchal culture, these stories function within what Sandra Lee Bartky has called a 'pedagogy of shame' that instructs young girls about the inherent danger and corruption of their bodies. Not directly connected to specific actions, the experience of shame and guilt in relation to their bodies and sexuality stems from the female socialization process . . ." (75). This "pedagogy of shame" is an integral part of growing up as a girl in most societies. It is seen, for example, in restrictions established for young Chicanas through the archetypes of the Virgin of Guadalupe or Virgin Mary and La Llorona, the weeping woman, and in the cautionary tale of No Name Woman in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Unfortunately, as Bartky asserts, "to the extent that we so often accept the lesser lives that are offered us, and insofar as we

internalize intimations of inferiority, we must assume that the inculcation of shame and guilt in women is a pervasive feature of social life” (75). For those who have been traumatized, the shame and guilt of the master gender narrative is much more crippling—it can prevent voice and testimony, and ultimately the creation of a healing narrative.

Narrative can help us make sense of trauma, and offer a means to move beyond it. Griffiths offers a solidly scholarly text that employs feminist theory, trauma theory, and African American literary and performative theory to show how these authors, playwrights, and performers work with and through the body and past the gaps generated by trauma.

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