

Trauma, Temporality, and Testimony in Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*

MARINELLA RODI-RISBERG

Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* is an experimental, non-linear and multi-perspective work composed in free-indirect speech that poetically depicts the horrors of contemporary familial sexual abuse linking it to the tragic history of slavery. In the process, the novel breaks with literary conventions by referencing Western classical myths and classics, biblical stories, and African American literature and culture, including slave stories and spirituals. Herron's novel also blends the generic styles and traditions of epic, myth, realism, fairy tale, and historical fiction. Consequently, critics and reviewers have called it variously "an epic," "a multi-voiced historicized narrative," and a "contemporary narrative of slavery" (Christian 152; Daly, "Whose Daughter" 473; Keizer). While Herron's novel can be said to be all of these things, *Thereafter Johnnie* is primarily a trauma narrative of the family and the nation, in which the generic and narrative (con)fusion of the novel indicates innovative narrative techniques in order to represent a traumatized consciousness, which is, in turn, characterized by what Michelle Balaev calls a "lack of cohesion" (xvi).

Herron was identified as a survivor of familial sexual abuse when the novel was published (see Britt; Mills, "Can You Believe It"; Mills, "Three Therapists' Opinions"), and within the context of the recovered memory/false memory syndrome debate of the nineties, the early work by African American women writers was even seen, as Gillian Harkins puts it, "as a historical record of incest survivor

writing" (115): however, rather than exploring *Thereafter Johnnie* as a testimony in this sense, this paper examines—by drawing on contemporary literary trauma theories—trauma-inscribed female bodies in the novel as testimonies. More specifically, it examines the potential liberation of the abused and traumatized daughter who in Herron's novel represents a source of conflict between linear or historical time and traumatic time—a locus where traumatic experiences that have been repressed are encoded through violence—and ultimately argues that the temporality of the daughter and her testimony reflects a disjoined, traumatized consciousness which is at odds with linear narratives and discussions of emancipation that accommodate the repression of a painful history.

Although it was critically acclaimed when it was published in 1991, Herron's debut novel has since suffered from a lack of critical attention. Fewer than a dozen scholarly analyzes have been published on it (see Breau; Champagne; Daly, "Seeds"; Daly, "Whose Daughter"; Glave; Harkins; Keizer; Roberts). While it is not possible to establish precisely why *Thereafter Johnnie* has been largely ignored by critics, in her review of the book, Barbara Christian predicted that the incest in the story would be "disturbing" to feminists because of the way it was represented: "In *Thereafter Johnnie* both father and daughter seduce each other . . . And Herron writes of their sexual intercourse in language so erotic it approaches the divine" (154). Unlike the first contemporary incest narratives to confront incest from the daughter's perspective such as Alice Walker's *Color Purple* which introduces father-daughter incest "as a powerful father-figure's brutal assault upon a helpless girl-child" or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* which describes the incest between father and daughter "as a powerless father's sense that sexual love is all he can give his wounded daughter," the daughter, rather than coming across as a victim of incest, in Herron's novel "appears to be an active agent" (Christian 154, 154-55). This paper queries, however, if what is so unsettling in this story—apart from what Thomas Glave calls "the disturbing gaze at incest" (86)—is not, in fact, the reader's difficulty in coming to terms with the issue raised by the idea of incest within the context of race and slavery; a difficulty which might well account for the silence on the part of the critics.

While existing studies on the novel often concentrate on questions of complicity and agency, and how these issues ultimately extend to its readers (see Keizer 166; Roberts 1071), it is also possible to view Herron's novel as forcing readers to examine their role as witnesses so they can move beyond the duality of seducer or seduced and focus instead on how the traumas that result from abuse and oppression are culturally produced. Whether the daughter is assigned the role of victim or agent she reveals something about our response as readers. The novel asks readers to critically analyze their judgment of the daughter. As readers we are forced to accept or refute myths and cultural stereotypes of black deviance. These include: that incest is normal in black communities, that black women have an over-active sexual appetite, and cannot, therefore, be sexually abused or raped but actually instigate both consensual and abusive sexual relations (see

Wilson 7-10, 118). At a first glance, Herron's erotic representations seem to corroborate these stereotypes. However, *Thereafter Johnnie* negotiates the reader's understanding of victim and abuser in contexts that involve racial trauma. Also, while it is true that continual graphic depictions may produce a numbing effect on readers which could weaken their impact, it is also true that strong images can be the most effective way to shake readers out of their complacency. As Jennifer Griffiths points out in another context, striking graphic representations may be needed to "overcome the stereotyping" of marginalized individuals (35).

It is inevitable that investigating the testimony of trauma in an African American context invariably raises issues of race, and intervenes in the critical debate on the matter of contemporary trauma concerning the deployment of trauma theory, which is based on psychoanalysis and its tendency to attribute universal features and responses to traumatic experiences, to specific texts and their contexts. Jennifer Griffiths, however, explores in *Traumatic Possessions* "the complications that arise within traumatic response and witnessing encounters that cross identity differences, including race and gender" (97). More to the point, Griffiths examines "the interactions between the black female body as a site of inscription for cultural values and the body as a source of the memories in the production of testimony," and emphasizes the importance of "acknowledging the actual bodily experience of trauma, or telling the body's story, instead of inscribing a story onto the body" (5, 11). Following on from Griffiths's work, I suggest that Herron examines the connection between, on the one hand, the body inscribed by stereotypes that reflect cultural values, and on the other, the body in which traumatic memories are stored, showing that the racism inscribed onto the body causes trauma which is then, in turn, remembered by the body, and that this bodily memory is ultimately used to produce testimony. Herron attempts to create in the reader resistance to the perpetuation of trauma and to view the black female body not as an object discursively inscribed by generations of traumatic experiences but as a witness-bearing subject which calls into question the sequential narratives and histories of emancipation.

Herron's novel is a multigenerational story of trauma and testimony set mainly in Washington D.C. and it relates the story of a black middle-class family consisting of John Christopher Snowdon, his wife Camille, and their daughters Cynthia Jane, Patricia, and Eva. The story revolves around the incestuous relationship of Patricia and John Christopher: Patricia was sexually abused by her father at two and she begins to pursue him at fifteen. They begin a sexual relationship two years later on the same night that Patricia's sister Eva is raped by a white vagabond. A child, Johnnie, is born of the incestuous union between Patricia and her father. Seventeen years after the relationship with her father has ended, Patricia takes her own life by drowning in the Potomac. Her lover Diotima returns to Mexico and Johnnie goes on a quest to find out about her family's past and cultural history. In the novel's last chapter, the consummation of Patricia and her father's incestuous relationship and Eva's molestation are ultimately linked to

slavery through an account of the rape of the sisters' forebear, the slave Laetitia, by her owners. The non-linear narrative begins (and ends) with Johnnie assuming the role of a disembodied witnessing light, as a descendant of Diotima's tells the story of the apocalyptic demise of the United States, after a futuristic race war has been waged against the country by developing nations.

The link between the body and testimony is visible throughout the text; *Thereafter Johnnie* offers a new understanding of traumatic witnessing through the trope of the body which is psychologically, culturally, and historically inscribed by the letter X. Trauma is contained in the physical experience of characters in the form of living personal consequences of history as Herron calls attention to the high cost of repressing trauma both in individual and communal contexts. The recurrent body in the form of an X is a symptom of unresolved trauma caused by racial and sexual abuse. This return of the X shape in different bodies makes possible a re-visiting of the traumas of the past in such a way as to make witnessing possible in the present. This kind of corporeal witnessing calls attention to present day sexual abuse in an African American context and the history of both collective and individual traumas during the period of slavery.

The first time the X is explicitly mentioned is halfway through the book in a chapter entitled "The First Time." The reader witnesses a scene where father and daughter engage in incest, indicating Patricia's recollection of the first time she was molested in early childhood in a second moment and through the body. This narrative technique of recounting evokes what Michelle Balaev calls "narrative dissociation," employed to convey the workings of the mind and a character's perception of the interaction "between internal and external realities" (xvii). Patricia perceives the world around her in the present but she also remembers what happened to her when she was two, or rather, her body does. The shifting scenes between past and present mark a change in the protagonist's identity from adolescent back to infant as, in a dual vision, she describes two states of consciousness and sees both present and past contemporaneously. From a state of bewilderment in present time Patricia is transported to a different place in the horrific past, causing the boundary lines between the present and the past, fifteen years earlier, to become blurred. Patricia has lost her place in time or rather, within her body, she exists in two times simultaneously: "Shaking and trembling and no one to hold her as she shakes and trembles in her first orgasm, not this time but the first time . . . hidden, forgotten, violated by a touch of her father's fingers upon her two-year-old clitoris" (Herron 120). Thus both the molestation of Patricia's infant self and the later abuse take place contemporaneously in a kind of eternal present. The two incestuous incidents are separated merely by the words "not this time but the first time." The bodily memory that produced trauma in the first place is triggered by an orgasm in the present, the unconscious corporeal reaction to a similar situation in the past, when Patricia's original trauma occurred: "fifteen years later her body stiffens into a catatonic X of horror, violation violently enforced pleasure and pain" (121). The narrative dissociation here

resonates with what can be called corporeal time, in the sense that dissociation is often portrayed through what Balaev refers to as “the disjunction of time” (xvi).

Patricia’s mental confusion resonates throughout the narrative in an interrupted and a non-linear fashion interspersed with an alternative mythology of her own creation: in an effort to recover what official history denies and to voice her own personal experience, she sees the immolation of her family as the cost of survival. Consequently, the novel interweaves biblical characters, such as Lot and his daughters, with present realities; this interrupted narrative reflects in turn Patricia’s confused state and expresses her way of coping with the guilt of having derived pleasure from the incest and participated in it.

In the face of oppression and trauma, Patricia’s strategy for affirming her human agency is to reclaim testimony through having a child. She is not driven to reenact or relive the trauma as much as to (pro)create a witness as a mechanism for survival. The link between body and testimony is hence literalized as a corporeal testimony. In *Thereafter Johnnie*, procreation is depicted as representing an urge to transmit testimony to descendants. Herron’s novel links procreation with bearing witness by insisting on the etymological relationship between *testimony*, *testify* and *testis*, *testicle*. While the original meaning of the Latin *testis* was ‘witness,’ *testis* also suggests notions of passing on not merely genes but also knowledge. Ross Chambers, in this connection, discusses the etymological roots of testimony:

many words in English and the Romance languages derive from Latin *testis*, and in German the verb *zeugen* (from *Zeug*, stuff)—from which *Zeuge*, “witness,” and *Zeugnis*, “testimonial” derive—means both to bear witness or give evidence and to procreate, presumably on the theory that it is the male who fathers (and the female who merely bears) a child. So it is the idea of “having the right stuff”—of being legitimated to *pass on* (genes, property, and information)—that is semantically active here, and credibility is the criterion by which witnessing is judged. (18)

Herron’s novel insists on testimony as evidence; the child, Johnnie, is living proof of incest. Patricia’s pregnancy and her refusal to accede to her father’s plea for abortion almost give him a heart attack (Herron 214). Choosing to give birth rather than to undergo an abortion entails agency and control over body and future alike. As Brenda Daly points out, “it is generally assumed that the seed is the property of the father who sows it in the body of a woman” and “whoever controls the seed controls the future” (“Seeds” 108, 103). *Thereafter Johnnie* portrays a daughter who not only, as Daly puts it, struggles to act as an agent of her own body (107), but as I suggest, to use her body as testimony as well. Patricia’s sister Cynthia Jane, however, sees Patricia more as the sexual predator than the prey and her sister Eva is also, seemingly, traumatized: some critics have suggested that Eva too may have been molested by their father (Champagne 163; Keizer 184n14; 187n24). Eva envisions her body in the shape of an X as she is being raped which connects the event with Patricia’s experience of incest (Herron 102).

Ultimately Patricia's and Eva's raped bodies are linked to their forebear Laetitia's violated body through the X shape that their bodies take on. This means that the familial, cultural, and historical dynamics of incest are made corporeal in the novel. This connection is first made explicit in the last chapter in a primal scene where Rowena, Camille's mother, watches her mother, Laetitia, and her slavers:

The two masters standing with their private parts exposed, holding the naked Laetitia horizontal between them. The young master between her legs with his hands gripped around her thighs, the old master at her head, his hands hooked under her shoulders and Laetitia was held in the air in the shape of an X in order to be fornicated. (Herron 238)

Herron with this book indicates that slavery is the primal scene for African Americans, from which a "curse" has come upon the Snowdon family:

'The females shall be raped and the males shall be murdered.' And the males that are not murdered shall be sold, and to certain ones of the males that are neither murdered nor sold, to certain of those few males come late into the house marrying, and to certain of the males born to the house but who nevertheless survive murder and slavery—to these shall be given the power of revenge upon the females of their own house who consented with the white males for their destruction, these males shall be given the female children of their own house, and these shall be raped. And raped again. (239-40)

The stories of the traumatized bodies are a result of the repressed and unstated past (and present) where the body is the site of sexual trauma and enslavement in the past as in the present. Laetitia is her owner's mistress and child-bearing machine: "we can fuck her like this 'cause she's our nigger" her masters tell Rowena (238). The dynamic between Patricia and John Christopher mirrors the family's past; on the last occasion of their having sex, the latter tells Patricia: "I own you. I can do what I want with you now," echoing the words of Laetitia's masters (14). By making this history present in the body of the character the cultural narrative which allows people to implicitly accept institutional rape against women is interrupted. Consequently, the father becomes an instrument of the institutional racism that he himself has experienced, and incest becomes less an individual act by a single perpetrator than a socio-cultural evil practiced by a white racist and patriarchal society.

Herron significantly places Patricia's body in her attempted seduction of her father on the National Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. That the history of the nation and the Snowdon family's past are linked is also highlighted by the daughter's name Patricia which is a variant of *pater* (father) and *patria* (nation). Literature such as Herron's challenges cultural myths about traumatic experiences, uncovering repressed personal histories as consequences of cultural traumatic events. It investigates the black daughter's potential emancipation from a nation-state born within a racist patriarchy by conceiving of its apocalyptic demise and the birth of a new one through the discourse of incest, paralleling present-day incestuous violations with the histori-

cal institution of slavery and its family structure of interracial rape and incest committed by white slave owners, thus bringing these events to our awareness. Not only will Johnnie be a testament to what has happened between Patricia and her father but Patricia believes that while she herself symbolizes the fall, not only of Washington D.C. but the United States, her daughter will restore its soul. However, just as it is not the incestuous union between daughter and father that brings about the apocalypse but the injustice to the African Americans, the soul of the nation cannot be redressed as long as they remain in bondage: the Proclamation did not put a stop to white supremacy and racism, manumission does not equal freedom, "Slavery won't go away," Johnnie says (Herron 174). The temporal rupture created and conveyed through the corporeal, which bears witness to the past in the present in the novel, expresses a disjoined traumatized consciousness and disrupts the linear and sequential narratives of emancipation that allow the repression of a painful history. Thus, the body's traumatic time reconstructs the progressive history of emancipation. A black roach crushed by Camille against a white pillowcase, "flightless wings and senseless antennae misshapen into a pulsing X" (230), demonstrates that the bodily X is an indirect reference to emancipation in the novel, and indicates how in African American history, folk-tales of how Africans trapped in slavery wished to 'fly away' to freedom as expressed in the words, "All of god's chillen got wings" in the spiritual sung by the three Snowdon sisters (50).

Herron's novel is often challenging for readers, both regarding form and content, but it is always testimonial. According to the novel's logic, the traumatized body simultaneously breaks down the boundaries between past, present, and future, and emerges as a faithful witness that testifies to private violations and a history of slavery to which the private trauma is linked. This kind of testimony incorporates both contemporary and past bodies. Herron's text elicits a reaction from readers, forcing them to recognize the violence implicit in the gender and racial exploitation of bodies: to create for themselves a position from which to address difficult issues such as incest and slavery and to heighten awareness of America's past of slavery and abuse.

WORKS CITED

- Balaev, Michelle. *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2012. Print.
- Breau, Elizabeth. "Incest and Intertextuality in Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*." *African American Review* 31.1 (1997): 91-103. Print.
- Britt, Donna. "The Author, the Relative, and a Question of Incest: Carolivia Herron's Disputed Tale of Childhood Horror." *Washington Post* 25 June 1991, D1. Print.
- Chambers, Ross. *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2004. Print.
- Champagne, Rosaria. *The Politics of Survivorship: Incest, Women's Literature, and Feminist Theory*. New York: New York UP, 1996. Print.
- Christian, Barbara. "Epic Achievement (1991)" Rev. of *Thereafter Johnnie*, by Carolivia Herron. *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000: Barbara Christian*, ed. Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2007. 152-56. Print.
- Daly, Brenda. "Seeds of Shame or Seeds of Change: When Daughters Give Birth to Their Fathers' Children." *This Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women's Writing*. Ed. Julie Tharp and Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb. Bowling Green: Popular, 2000. 103-23. Print.
- . "Whose Daughter is Johnnie?: Revisionary Myth-making in Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*." *Callaloo* 18.2 (1995): 472-91. Print.
- Glave, Thomas. "Regarding Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*, So Long Swept Aside: Why?" *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. 78-89. Print.
- Griffiths, Jennifer L. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2009. Print.
- Harkins, Gillian. *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009. Print.
- Herron, Carolivia. *Thereafter Johnnie*. New York: Random, 1991. Print.
- Keizer, Arlene R. *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Mills, David. "Can You Believe It?" *Washington Post*, 25 June 1991, D2. Print.
- . "Three Therapists' Opinions." *Washington Post*, 25 June 1991, D3. Print.
- Roberts, Jessica Forbes. "A Prayer for Mourning: Seduction and Trauma in Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*." *Callaloo* 28.4 (2005): 1060-73. Print.
- Wilson, Melba. *Crossing the Boundary: Black Women Survive Incest*. Seattle: Seal, 1994. Print.