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Recognizing Violence

When are stories of violence good? In a media studies universe, this is not a common question. Violent images are gratuitous, harmful, too influential, anti-social, dangerous and expressive of the worst commercial impulses toward sensation and shock. But it is a question worth asking, not to mechanically invert prevailing wisdom but to consider the reception of traumatic narrative in terms the media violence literature doesn't address. In this presentation, I ask that question to explore how readers of particular traumatic narratives, Dorothy Allison's novels *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Cavedweller*, find recognition and common cause across such otherwise distancing forms of social difference as class, race, sexual practice and *habitus*. Some of the readers interviewed describe themselves as having survived traumas of various kinds, others do not. This is not a case, then, of saying that "once traumatized, we are siblings under the skin." There are ways in which experiences of trauma in common *do* bind people, offering conversation, solidarity and, as the victims' rights movement illustrates, a platform for organizing. But solidarity is not a necessary effect. More important in this discussion is how trauma narratives mediate cultural recognition broadly, among a group of Allison readers who find the world anew in her work, neither simply concluding "that is not me" nor "I am like that" but remaining invested in the specificity of trauma and (in contrast to the generality of drama). The possibility, then, is that through a variety of symbolic means, trauma narratives mediate recognition in terms that anti-violence frames cannot articulate. I offer the analysis in the spirit of using cultural studies to discover cultural resources—those resources that more defensive critiques presume to be missing, squelched or merely coy.