"You-all in this together": Bond, Body, Vulnerability in Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose

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Abstract

This paper argues that Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose revises the classic slave narrative, in which an ex-slave gives an account of his/her journey from bondage to freedom in a single narrative arc. Instead of relying on one trajectory of character development, the novel contains two intertwined stories of a black woman's and a white woman's personal growth as well as the forming of an unlikely friendship between them. As a neo-slave narrative, the novel also encourages a broadening of the term "slave" to include a white woman to the effect that her liberation from social confines and her freedom and mobility correspond to that of a slave in the traditional narrative. The analysis of the two women's friendship is based on Judith Butler's concept of a common human vulnerability to loss and violence in her 2003 article entitled "Violence, Mourning, Politics." A recognition of shared corporeal vulnerability allows us to extend our conception of the human to those who have been denied humanity and to reimagine community in spite of differences.

Keywords: Sherley Anne Williams, Dessa Rose, the neo-slave narrative, Judith Butler, vulnerability, violence

> You say that I humanized her, but it's not the writer that does that. It is really her contact primarily with Dessa and the other runaways that does that. When she takes that baby in her arms, I mean, she is a person. She is a human being because that baby is a human being. . .
>
> Sherley Anne Williams on the character of Ruth
> (Shirley M. Jordan, 1993, p. 293)

In her interview with Shirley M. Jordan, Sherley Anne Williams talks about the circumstances surrounding the publication of her novel, *Dessa Rose* (1986), which details a female slave's escape to freedom and her friendship with a white woman who harbors slave fugitives. After she completed the novel, she was pressured by her editor to write a disclaimer to reiterate that the novel was in fact a fictionalized account.[1] In her prefatory Author's Note, as the disclaimer has come to be called, she states that all the characters and places in *Dessa Rose* are her own inventions while claiming another kind of truth altogether: "And what is [in the novel] is as true as if I myself had lived it" (Williams, 1986, p. 6). Despite its status as fiction, the novel is based on two separate historical incidents from the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1829 a pregnant black slave was tried and sentenced to public hanging for her crime of leading an uprising on a slave coffle travelling through Kentucky resulting in the deaths of two white slave traders, but the public execution was postponed until after she gave birth to her baby. The other incident involved a white woman in North Carolina who provided food and shelter to black fugitives.[2] The idea for the historical novel *Dessa Rose* germinated in Williams' deep regret that these two courageous women never met. She wants her readers, especially young black people, who she envisions as her primary audience, to see that slavery did not preclude the possibility of heroic action and love and to aspire to these ideals (Jordan, 1993, p. 289).

Historically, if slavery provided a venue for interactions between black women and white women at all, these interactions were determined by the dynamics of a mistress/slave relationship and often fraught with tensions. However, in order for her black and white woman characters to overcome their differences and form a bond based on mutual understanding and respect, Williams says she needs to imagine a scenario outside of the traditional slave culture where the two women can get to know each other but only on the condition that the circumstances are grounded in realism. They can neither be too fantastic nor too far-fetched; the reader needs to be convinced that the story "could actually have happened" (Jordan, 1993, pp. 286-287). This paper argues that in *Dessa Rose* this realistic scenario allows Williams to revise the slave narrative, the foundational genre which typically posits a self-revelatory impulse; an ex-slave gives a first-person account of his past life, usually from birth to maturity, as well as his journey from bondage to freedom, in a single narrative arc. Though the title, which Williams settled on because she liked the intended pun ("Rose" can be a noun and a verb) (Williams & Smith-Wright, 1993, p. 258), implies that the novel revolves around the main protagonist's ascent or rise in all its possible forms and manifestations, this neo-slave narrative does not rely on the use of a first-person slave narrator for the sake of immediacy throughout. In fact, instead of only one trajectory of character development, the novel contains two intertwined stories of mental and emotional

growth and charts not only Dessa's path towards freedom but also that of Ruth Elizabeth Sutton, the white woman who has helped shelter the black fugitives and embarks on a wild scheme to raise money for them to escape to the slave-free West.

In addition, my reading attends to the fluidity of the term "slave" in a neo-slave narrative and the ways in which it can be broadened to include a propertied white woman. On the one hand, Ruth is enslaved by the patriarchal system and circumscribed by her role as a white mistress in the institution of slavery. On the other hand, her unusual and reduced material circumstances and her diminished social status have increased Ruth's vulnerability to the contingencies of life and arguably put her on a par with the ex-slaves. Paradoxically, it is precisely the peculiarities of her circumstances, her identification with blackness, her intimacy with the black slaves and hence her marginalized status that liberate Ruth. Her ability to see their humanity and her friendship with them entail a necessary departure from the system of slavery and its stronghold in the South. Instead of returning to her family in Charleston, Ruth chooses to settle in "Philly-me-York," the term Dessa misconstrues from conflating Philadelphia and New York, using money from the scheme that the runaways concoct in order to dupe slave buyers. As a matter of fact, Ruth's social mobility as seen in her journey to the slave-free states in the north parallels that of a black fugitive in a traditional slave narrative.

My understanding of the reciprocal nature of their transformation has been informed by Judith Butler's concept of shared vulnerability outlined in her 2003 article entitled "Violence, Mourning, Politics," which was written in the wake of the September 11 attacks and President George Bush's call for military action. Butler raises questions concerning President Bush's claim made less than two weeks later that it was time for the nation to put grief behind and to restore a sense of order as quickly as possible through the exercise of the United States' formidable military power. For Butler, this alarming response signals the U.S.'s denial of its own vulnerability and is fueled by anxiety, rage, and a feeling of self-righteousness, to the extent that it constitutes a threat to universal human ties in general and international relations in particular. Contrary to what President Bush might want to believe, mourning is not altogether ill-advised and does not have to be equated with powerlessness; it can and should lead to what Butler (2003, p. 9) calls "an ethics of nonviolence.". Butler proposes that, instead of justifying the use of violence, the 9/11 incident should raise a new awareness of common human vulnerability and the ways in which it is unequally and unfairly distributed around the globe. Lost lives that are familiar and fit into the cultural category of the human are intensely and publicly mourned, while others suffer a form of "derealization," which means they do not count as lives and the losses of these lives are left out of discourse and therefore not "grievable." The discursive omission of these losses results in dehumanization.

The validity and relevance of Butler's claims regarding shared vulnerability to violence and loss is not confined to the arena of international politics. They can be as effectively mobilized to strengthen the commonality between blacks and whites that has been denied by institutionalized slavery insofar as nations and individuals are both subjects: "Nations are not the same as individual psyches, but both can be described as 'subjects,' albeit of different orders" (Butler, 2003, p. 28). Using a psychoanalytical approach, the essay argues that, since we are "invariably in community" (Butler, 2003, p.16) and our bodies are "socially constituted," we are always already bound to others and are liable to be dispossessed or undone by our social relations to them. Being attached to others entails risks of losing those very attachments. Our embodiment means that we are vulnerable, always exposed to the gaze, touch, and violence of others; conversely, others are also subjected to our gaze, touch, and violence:

> The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to the touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. (Butler, 2003, pp.15-16)

This relational concept of the self, means that we are dependent on, and at the same time ethically responsible for, one another. Instead of giving in to an urge to retaliate when we are wronged or hurt and perpetrating even more violence, our awareness of common human vulnerability should urge us to protect others from the violence we ourselves have suffered. A recognition of shared corporeal vulnerability to actual violence, or the possibility thereof, and shared vulnerability to loss allows us to extend our conception of the human to those who have been denied humanity and to rethink the possibility of community and form a coalition in spite of differences. However, this recognition cannot be taken for granted; there are instances in which vulnerability fails to be recognized or becomes altogether unrecognizable:

> A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen. Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will

> not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the "unrecognizable," but when a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself. In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject. (Butler, 2003, p. 30)

For example, we perform an act of recognition when we say that someone is vulnerable and that proclamation sustains vulnerability and changes its meaning. In other words, there is no vulnerability prior to recognition. Successfully reimagining community requires that we recognize that everybody needs and deserves recognition, without which there can be no vulnerability and no basis for humanization.

I would argue that the first section of *Dessa Rose* entitled "The Darky" is replete with moments of failed recognition of a common human vulnerability, especially on the part of Adam Nehemiah, while interracial bonding between Dessa and Ruth in the second and third sections, entitled "The Wench" and "The Negress," has been enabled by a reciprocal exchange in which vulnerability is not only perceived and recognized but also responded to in some cases. In "The Darky," Dessa is being held in custody in the root cellar at Sheriff Hughes' farm in Marengo County, Alabama, for her crime of leading an attack on the white trader and his men on a slave coffle, while Adam Nehemiah, the white man who interviews Dessa and is eager to record her "confessions" in his journal to be used later as materials for his upcoming book on slave rebellion, tries to coax the details of the uprising out of her. The reader then learns about Dessa's life as she languishes in prison, awaiting death and mourning her multiple losses. She recalls her husband Kaine, who, maddened that the master destroyed his cherished banjo, had attacked the master and been killed. In a fit of blind rage Dessa then attacked him and the mistress and as a result was sold to the coffle, away from her family and everything she knew. The section ends on Independence Day when Dessa escapes from the dark cell with the help of her friends who managed to escape from the coffle and come back for her.

It might seem that in focusing on Dessa's and Ruth's parallel narrative trajectories, this paper privileges moments of intense female bonding while minimizing the importance of Adam Nehemiah. Yet Williams does not seem to allow him to gain new insights nor achieve any real personal growth, while Dessa and Ruth achieve a significant transformation through their contact. Nehemiah's role is mostly limited to "The Darky," which is filled with his frustration, disorientation, misrecognitions, misreadings, false starts, circuitous movements, as well as a literal and metaphorical "wild goose chase" (Williams,

1986, p. 68). When he briefly reappears near the end of the narrative, in a scene that is a reprisal of his first encounter with Dessa, he has become an unkempt, haunted, and deranged man with neither prospects nor credibility. Unwilling to give him too much control of the narrative, Williams decides to subsume his voice under the omniscient narrator: ". . . I could not have a white man telling even part of the story, because I didn't want to give him that much importance or that much control" (Jordan, 1993, p. 288).

Unlike the classic antebellum slave narrative, which posits the autobiographical subject/ narrator and has a distinct intended audience, "The Darky" is multi-layered and narratologically more complex. It is told by an omniscient narrator who relates the story for the most part from Nehemiah's perspective; the darky in the title is the term he uses to refer to Dessa. However, the section not only contains Nehemiah's reportage, reconstruction and interpretation of Dessa's story in his journal entries but also provides access to Dessa's consciousness and her recurring dreams of life on her home plantation with her family. Williams states that as she was struggling to supply a plausible explanation for the survival of an illiterate slave girl's tale since she "was writing in the days when black women had no history, when black people barely had one," she came up with the character of Nehemiah; he was "created out of Dessa's need, to serve Dessa's purpose" (Jordan, 1993, p. 250). Williams also tries to undermine his narrative authority:

> I used Dessa's dreams of home, in Chapter One of the novel, to counterpoint Nehemiah's narrative, and reined in his self-important haughtiness under third person narration. And in Chapter Two, Dessa quite literally snatches even that partial control from the white man, yanking the narrative from his point of view, relegating his voice to the journal entries that have by then been thoroughly invalidated—except for what they reveal about his character and his own unwritten desires. (Jordan, 1993, p. 255)

In addition to providing Dessa's back story, "The Darky" also depicts a struggle for representation between black orality and an oppressive white literacy (Rushdy, 1993, pp. 365-366), between an illiterate female slave and a "scribe of antebellum culture" (McKible, 1994, p. 224). William admits that this section, which is a revision of her earlier short story "Meditations on History" (1980), constitutes her protest against William Styron's controversial 1967 Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a novel based on slave revolt leader Nat Turner's confessions to Thomas Gray, a white lawyer who recorded and published them. Styron's neo-slave narrative quickly achieved canonical status and was touted as a master text, but black novelists writing in the same genre in the 1970's and 1980's, Williams included, were not

trying to imitate the white writer. Rather, Styron's novel provided for them an entry into heated discussions regarding such issues as historiography, race politics, and cultural appropriation (Rushdy, 1999, p. 18). Williams's portrayal of Nehemiah's obtuseness and arrogance seems to be her way of saying to Styron, or any person who through writing has exerted control over someone else's life, that he has missed the real story:

> "See what you missed. You went for the easy thing-the stereotyped thing. This is the real story that you missed." Once I had gotten that off my mind, I was through with Styron . . . (Jordan, 1993, p. 289)

Similarly, despite his broad knowledge of English literature, his success as the writer of *The Masters' Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*, as well as his expertise in preparing young men for university entrance, Nehemiah is revealed to be grossly inadequate at the task of reading and writing Dessa's history since he is incapable of recognizing her language, which is rooted in the African-American tradition, her story and its internal logic, and, most importantly, her humanity:

> He hadn't caught every word; often he had puzzled overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase, now and then losing the tale in the welter of names the darky called. Or he had sat, fascinated, forgetting to write. Yet the scene was vivid in his mind as he deciphered the darky's account from his hastily scratched notes and he reconstructed it in his journal as though he remembered it word for word.
>
> (Williams, 1986, p. 18)

As Ashraf Rushdy (1993) has pointed out, Nehemiah's representation of her story is a form of appropriation; "he transforms it by mishearing and misconstruing it" before he writes down his own reconstructed version of it (p. 369).

Moreover, his frequent references to animal body parts and characteristics in his description of Dessa indicate that he fails to recognize her and other slaves' humanity. These references are part of the discursive practice of othering that assigns animal characteristics to black slaves and serves to separate them from the superior white race thereby justifying their subjugation by whites in the slave system. For example, he wonders how "a female that far along in breeding" could be capable of such savagery and refers to scars on "the inside of her flanks" (Williams, 1986, p. 21). He uses the verb "whelp," (Williams, 1986, p. 21) which is a common expression when a female dog gives birth to a pup, in the context of Dessa's upcoming delivery. The chained Dessa's clumsy movement into the farthest reaches of the cellar reminds him of

"a wild and timorous animal finally brought to bay" (Williams, 1986, pp. 22-23).

The self-taught and self-proclaimed scholar also fails to establish a connection between significant events in his research into the roots of slave rebellion. When Dessa tells him about the day when Kaine attacked the master with a hoe and the master busted his head with a shovel, Nehemiah, anxious to obtain the details for his new book, which he believes will be "an intellectual as well as practical achievement, a magnum opus" (Williams, 1986, p. 31) and will elevate his social status in the planter society of the South, asks her what the story of Kaine's death has to do with her part in the rebellion and her attempt to kill white men. Dessa answers: "I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can." Dessa's reply connects the two separate acts of rebellion and reinforces Judith Butler's conception of the body as at once the site of vulnerability and agency; we are exposed to the gaze, touch, and violence of others and "bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (Butler, 2003, p. 15). Yet it is obvious that the consequences of inflicting violence and of killing are not the same for the master and the slave. Dessa's reply and its implications fail to prompt Nehemiah to probe deeper into the matter or to draw comparisons; instead, he is captivated by the sensationalism of the story: "[i]t had been an entrancing recital, better in its way than a paid theatrical …" (Williams, 1986, p. 20).

Perhaps the most revealing example of Nehemiah's failure to grasp the full import of Dessa's story that will allow him to see that they are, as Judith Butler argues, constituted by human ties and bound by a common vulnerability to loss and violence comes from one of his journal entries dated June 26, 1847:

These are the facts of the darky's history as I have thus far uncovered them:

> The master smashed the young buck's banjo.
> The young buck attacked the master.
> The master killed the young buck.
> The darky attacked the master—and was sold to the Wilson slave coffle.
> (Williams, 1986, p. 39)

For all his interview sessions with Dessa, Nehemiah only manages to come up with a linear, straightforward account of what he sees as egregious acts of rebellion; the so-called "history" is made up of violent actions, yet is void of references to feelings, attachments, and interpersonal relationships that have motivated those actions. He finds it hard to believe that Kaine flies into a rage over a mere broken banjo, even though he has already been told that for Kaine the banjo represents home and it is his only prized possession: "if he have it, home be his and the banjo be his. Cept he ain't got no home, so he just onliest

have the banjo" (Williams, 1986, p. 38). He also does not acknowledge the possibility of love among slaves; "darkies" cannot be "the subject of romance" (Williams, 1986, p. 39). Dessa's reminiscing about her love for Kaine, "the sweetest nigga as ever walk this earth" (Williams, 1986, p. 37) does not register in Nehemiah, for whom Kaine's life is not considered a life and therefore his death is not grievable.

Even though Nehemiah never owns a slave or never wishes to own one and therefore is not directly involved in a master-slave relationship, his books are part of the mechanisms that bolster the institution of slavery. In his new book black narratives are not only absorbed into dominant discourse but will also be used in the campaign aimed at suppressing black revolts. During his numerous interviews with Dessa, his thoughts often return to his concern for the book and his own personal gain. When Dessa comes down with a fever and sustains a deep cut on one of her feet, he prays to God that she does not die before he completes his research for the book. The horrific scarring of her genitals and hips which he learns about from the trial record does not elicit sympathy; her ex-mistress's practice of whipping and branding her in places on the body only the most careful buyer is likely to look before she sold her away and the slave trader's omission of this crucial fact on the coffle papers in order to fetch a high price from the next buyer only makes Nehemiah wonder how widespread such collusion is. Near the end of the novel, Dessa's scars become Nehemiah's means of identifying her, proving her guilt, and recapturing her. Given the nature of their interactions, his character does not offer hope for an ethical racial encounter or the forming of a cross-racial alliance based on the awareness of one's undeniable connection with others and the ability to perceive and recognize vulnerability. And if, as Butler argues, vulnerability is a precondition for humanization, Nehemiah's refusal to recognize it in Dessa means that she has been excluded from his conception of "the human." In his attempt to master Dessa's story and self, Nehemiah is blind to the fact that we are constituted by our social ties and vulnerability to loss and violence. A mutually beneficial and more ethical encounter based on an awareness of a commonality is made possible in the following sections under circumstances more conducive to personal growth.

"The Wench," the second section of the novel, is also told in the third person alternating between Dessa's perspective and that of Ruth and charts the unfolding of the cross-racial encounter. Critics of the novel agree that part of Williams's achievement lies in her depiction of the world black and white women shared in the antebellum South, a place not readily available in historical scholarship (Rushdy, 1993, p. 367). Dessa has been taken by her friends and rescuers to Sutton's Glen after she gives birth to her son in the woods during her flight from imprisonment. When Dessa wakes up from her exhaustion-induced sleep in Ruth's feather bed and finds Ruth breastfeeding her own child and

Dessa's newborn, she becomes hysterical. Having worked as a field hand for most of her life, she has never really come into close contact with whites: " … I hadn't been more than a mile or so from my home Quarters till I was sold. Most of what I knowed about white folk, I'd learned on that coffle" (Williams, 1986, p. 175). Ruth's white complexion only serves to remind her of her mistress, whose cruelty has left Dessa with fear, loathing, and a deep distrust of whites. Ruth herself meanwhile has lost touch with her husband and her family and, most recently, has lost her black maid, Dorcas, whom she refers to as "Mammy" and who had been gifted to her by her parents. Dorcas' sudden illness and death have left a void in her life. Without a confidante to keep her company and calm her fears of an uncertain future, Ruth develops a habit of daydreaming and musing aloud to herself about her debutante season in Charleston as a refuge from the monotony of the present. When Dessa and her newborn first arrive their plight evokes a pang of sympathy in Ruth, prompting her to breastfeed him since she is the only lactating woman on the place and to tend to their most immediate needs. Sharing the master bedroom and the bed, Ruth and Dessa learn to read each other in a way they have never had to. They find themselves navigating the complexities of their relationship brought about by the intimacy of cohabitation and by Ruth's role as a wet nurse to Dessa's baby.

One day as Dessa is in bed half asleep and Ruth is fondly reminiscing about her busy social life in Charleston, Ruth's mention of Mammy gets Dessa thinking about her own mammy and they get into an argument which pivots on the relative meaning of this key word to which both try to lay claim.[3] In this emotionally charged scene, the previously lethargic and semi-conscious Dessa now vents her rage and bitterness at her innumerable losses. She has left behind her mother and her only surviving sibling; the other eight siblings either died or were sold away, never to be seen again. Even though Ruth and Dessa cannot seem to find any common ground at this point, the reader is reminded of Judith Butler's claim that despite our differences human vulnerability to loss can be a basis for commonality, that "[l]oss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all" (Butler, 2003, p. 10). Both Ruth and Dessa are haunted by the loss of a mother or a mother figure. Loss can leave us at a loss: "When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do" (Butler, 2003, p. 12).

The confrontation forces Ruth to reevaluate her relationship with Mammy; she no longer finds comfort in the familiar mental image of Mammy and feels that Dessa has taken away her Mammy and put a stranger in her place. Her frustration with Dessa and the discovery that she did not really know Dorcas even after eleven years together and the disturbing questions that it raises leads her to Nathan, the ex-slave driver who befriended Dessa on the coffle and helped her escape both times. Once Ruth grows closer to Nathan, he replaces Mammy as the means through which she gets to know the other fugitives living

on her place. Their easy friendship gives Nathan the courage to convince Ruth to join their daring scheme. With Ruth posing as their mistress, the fugitives can go into a town down in the black belt and she can "sell" some of them. After a couple of days those who have been sold will run away and reunite with the gang at a designated place. After they have run the same scheme three or four times, they will manage to amass a huge amount of cash, half of which will go to Ruth. "The Wench" ends with another crisis that threatens to wipe out the chance of a bond between Ruth and Dessa; walking in on Ruth and Nathan as they are having sex, Dessa is outraged and feels betrayed that her close friend Nathan will sleep with a white woman who Dessa indiscriminately equates with misery due to her experience with her ex-mistress.[4] Before Dessa is restrained and taken away by the other fugitives, she calls Ruth out of her name; Ruth Elizabeth Sutton is reduced to "Miz Ruint" (Williams, 1986, p. 159).[5]

Dessa is not the first black to address Ruth as "Miz Ruint," which is a derivative of Ruth and Rufel, a pet name Mammy used. When Ada, an ex-slave who has taken refuge at the Glen, calls her by that name, Dessa thinks that it connotes Ruth's craziness:

> Maybe she was crazy, Dessa thought, but not a killer. No, not a killer. Nathan and Cully would not have brought her here. Not a killer; but touched, maybe; strange in the head. What else could explain her own presence in this bed? (Williams, 1986, p. 115)

Sharing her bed with Dessa and thus disregarding established norms governing cross-racial interactions is a sign that Ruth is not quite right in the head. Yet Dessa's deliberate choice of epithet "ruined" is loaded with other meanings all of which are arguably applicable to Ruth. Possible meanings of "to ruin" include to destroy completely, to harm irreparably, to reduce to poverty or bankruptcy, or to deflower a woman by seduction and deprive her of chastity. Taking the epithet as a starting point, I would contend that Ruth's status as a white mistress has been troubled not only by her repeated crossings of the color line in the course of the novel but also by her ruined prospects and her association with blackness even before the start of the narrative proper. In other words, her life has lain in ruins even before she breastfeeds Dessa's baby or has sex with a black man.

Gretchen Michlitsch (2004, pp. 333-334), supporting her argument with Williams's claim that the character of Ruth starts out as "something of a stereotype" before fully developing into "this great-hearted liberal," sees in Ruth "a stereotypically passive and dependent plantation mistress." It is true that Ruth does have prejudices and misconceptions about blacks and is vulnerable and helpless without her Mammy and the runaway slaves; her ignorance about farm management means that if left alone she would not be able to work the land and

would likely be threatened with destitution and starvation. Yet Ruth is different from the spoiled white mistress at the Vaugham plantation in South Carolina where Dessa was born and raised; Kaine, Dessa's husband, told her how the white mistress would carry on until she could have her way:

> That how Kaine say it be. Say that how Mist's act up at the House when Masa or jes any lil thang don't be goin to suit her. Faint, else cry and have them all, Aunt Lefonia, Childer, and the rest comin, runnin and fannin and car'in on, askin, what wrong? who done it? Kaine hear em from the garden and he say he be laughin fit to split his side and digging, digging and laughin to hear how one lil sickly white woman turn a House that big upside down. (Williams, 1986, p. 18)

The portrait of Mistress Vaugham also conforms to the stereotype of a jealous white mistress common in ante-bellum slave narratives, who abuses her sexually promiscuous husband's slave concubine. Mistress Vaugham suspected that her husband was the father of Dessa's unborn child and that his jealousy urged him to kill Kaine, so she sold Dessa to the slave coffle out of spite.

While Mistress Vaugham's whiteness and her racial and gender prerogatives have been propped up by myriad mechanisms of the slave system, Ruth has left behind her a life of relative luxury complete with debutante balls, parties, and excursions. With her father being the junior partner in the family's up-and-coming cotton factorage, Ruth Elizabeth Carson might not be la crème de la crème of Charleston society, but she had access to her class privileges and enjoyed friendships with some of the most prosperous families. However, after her marriage to FitzAlbert Sutton and a relocation to northern Alabama, Ruth's family and social ties have been cut and she has been set adrift as a result of the unique circumstances of her life. Except for her young son and baby daughter, Ruth is the only white living among a group of runaway slaves at an isolated farm miles from the main road. Even before her husband's disappearance over a year ago, they had not had much success with the farm and did not have enough resources even to complete the family home they set out to build. Their financial difficulties and their repeated requests for loans caused a rift between Ruth and her parents. Since most of her own slaves had run away, she came to rely on the runaway slaves who had come to seek shelter at the Glen to cultivate the land. Before her death, Mammy provided a buffer between Ruth and the runaways living there, so Ruth never had to come in contact with any of them. Ruth finds herself in an unusual position; she *is* and *is not* a white mistress. She does not own these runaways, yet the neighbors think that they belong to her because a relationship other than one between mistress and slaves is simply unimaginable. The runaways might call her "Mistress," but, unlike her counterpart in the master-slave dynamics, she does not always command respect

and obedience from them and does not have the authority to discipline them or mete out punishment; e.g. when Dessa arrives at Sutton's Glen, Ruth is in the yard drawing water from the well, a menial task that Annabelle, Ada's daughter, should be doing for her. Her diminished social and economic status has shrunk the gap between Ruth and the runaways. When asked by Dessa if it is possible for her and the baby to move to the slave quarters, Ada tells her that the quarters are "[w]orse than a chicken run" and that the Suttons are not as prosperous as might appear:

> "Tell you, honey, these some poor white peoples. Oh, this room and the parlor fine enough, but you know what's outside that door? A great big stairway lead straight up to nothing cause they never did finish the second floor." (Williams, 1986, p. 116)

In addition to her increasing proximity to the runaways, Ruth's assumed kinship with Mammy also provides another entry point in an analysis of her peculiar position in the social and racial spectrum. While Ruth refuses to think about her husband, Bertie, and to contemplate what his absence means for their future, Dorcas, her Mammy, who died before Dessa arrives at Sutton's Glen, is very much a presence in Ruth's mind. If, as Butler (2003) argues, we are constituted by ties to others which are part of who we are, loss has a transformative effect on those who undergo it (pp. 10-11). Ruth still mourns her loss and frequently finds herself reminiscing about her time with Mammy. Snatches or sometimes even a complete replay of her conversations with Mammy, a reconstruction of scenes from their shared past both in Charleston and at the Glen, and, very importantly, projections of her own self-serving interpretations of Mammy's speech and actions constitute a major part of Ruth's section in the narrative.

Rushdy (1993) argues that Mammy's subjectivity is based on a model of kin relations and that her life story unfolds as a family narrative (p. 368). During her heated argument with Dessa, Ruth claims that she herself is "like [Mammy's] child" (Williams, 1986, p. 119). The claim is based on Ruth's naïveté about the relationship dynamics of institutionalized slavery. However, without ignoring Ruth's delusions, I would add that in juxtaposing two sets of "mother-daughter" relationships and having Dessa and Ruth argue over their "Mammy," which refers to two different women in their heads, Williams seems to be gesturing that Ruth occupies the same position as Dessa, that of a slave's daughter and hence a slave herself. After stomping out in frustration and a crying bout when her emotions are spent, Ruth shudders at the absurdity of her own claim since it can only mean that she is a pickaninny, "like the ragged, big-bellied urchins . . . running errands, cutting capers, begging coppers" (Williams, 1986, p. 125).

Ruth's identification with a black child is not the only source of her proximity to blackness. "The Wench," the second section of the novel, starts off by firmly establishing Ruth's whiteness; even in a narrative that, more often than not, calls attention to the various attributes of the bodies, including body shapes and skin colors, the multiple references to whiteness have a startling effect, with the word "white" being repeated no fewer than seventeen times in the first two pages in which Dessa regains her consciousness. Dessa wakes up in Ruth's feather bed with white sheets in her white-washed room at Sutton's Glen to Ruth's very white face with its "milky glow," (Williams, 1986, p. 86) "skin as pale as hoecake dough," (Williams, 1986, p. 84). However, the narrative takes a decided turn and "blackens" Ruth by virtue of her claiming, consciously or subconsciously, an identity position normally assigned to blacks as well as by her many white-black social transgressions.

After establishing Ruth's whiteness, Williams proceeds to give us, through Ruth's point of view, a flashback to the scene of Dessa and the baby's first arrival at Sutton's Glen:

> There was something in the ashen skin, like used charcoal, the aimless turning of the head that had kept Rufel silent. The baby had started to cry, a thin wail muffled by layers of covering. The girl's eyes had fluttered open and seemed to look imploringly at Rufel before rolling senselessly back into her head. "Go get Ada," Rufel had ordered without hesitation. "Take her on into the house; bring the bucket," she said as she bent to look for the baby.
>
> She shouldn't have done it; Rufel had been over that countless times, also. If anybody ever found out. If they had been followed. But nothing of that had entered her head as she picked her way carefully up the steep back steps, the baby hugged close to her body. The girl's desolate face, the baby's thin crying—as though it had given up all hope—had grated at her; she was a little crazy, she supposed. But she could do something about this, . . . Something about the girl, her face— And: She—Rufel—could do something. That was as close as she came to explaining anything to herself. The baby was hungry and she fed him. (Williams, 1986, p. 95)

A few pages later, Ruth revisits the scene in her mind, a sign that she is still somewhat bewildered and tries to justify her own action to herself, insisting that she has done it "without thought" and it seems "natural" to her. What is even more remarkable is her claim that the pain she experiences when she sees the baby is almost physical:

> The sight of him so tiny and bloodied had pained her with an almost physical hurt and she had set about cleaning and clothing him with a single-minded intensity. And only when his cries were stilled and she looked down upon the sleek black head, the nut-brown face flattened against the pearly paleness of her breast, had she become conscious of what she was doing. A wave of embarrassment had swept over and she had looked guiltily around the parlor. (Williams, 1986, p. 101)

Michlitsch's reading of this particular scene emphasizes Ruth's sympathy and her "reflexive, unconscious, and natural" response to their plight and Ruth's description of herself as "having been acted upon" by their appearance: her face and his cry grate at her and his condition pains her (Michlitsch, 2004, p. 333). I would add that Dessa's baby exemplifies Judith Butler's idea about the primary scene of vulnerability that unfolds at birth. Since bodily vulnerability starts with life itself, it precedes the emergence of the self and the process of individuation. As a vulnerable newborn, we are "given over to some set of primary others," the first group of people we are exposed to, who might or might not provide the kind of primary care and life-sustaining support we direly need to survive. In other words, there is a distinct possibility that we might perish because we have been denied these things, given over to nothing and no one. Dessa's traumatic loss, her injuries at the hands of her master and mistress, her subsequent ordeal on the slave coffle and during her escape have taken a physical and emotional toll on her, her body produces no milk and is too weak to nurse the baby. In this instance it is not that the primary caregiver refuses to give support; she is not in the physical condition to do so.

It seems that Williams purposely evokes details of the body during this primary scene. Ruth's eyes are drawn to Dessa's "ashen" skin, the movement of her head, her imploring eyes, her "desolate face," which possesses a certain quality Ruth cannot yet name but is definitely cognizant of, as well as to the baby's fragile and bloodied body. At that very moment if Dessa's eyes and the baby's thin wailing are pleading for recognition of a common corporeal vulnerability, Ruth's recognition thereof constitutes a response in kind for it takes the form of a pain that is *almost* physical. Ruth does not elaborate on the pain but it is quite likely that the sight of the mother and the newborn reminds her of her own agony and vulnerability during the difficult births of her two children. This moment of recognition is crucial to the emergence of an interracial connection precisely because recognition cannot be taken for granted. Butler contends that when it does happen, it constitutes vulnerability, which in turn, is a prerequisite for humanization. Only then is it possible to have an ethical encounter between two parties. When asked about Ruth's transformation over the course of the novel, Williams identifies the first moment of encounter

and, by extension, the breastfeeding that follows shortly as proof of Ruth's humanity, which is constituted by her recognition of the baby's humanity:

> When she takes that baby in her arms, I mean, she is a person. She is a human being *because* that baby is a human being, and whatever her conflicts about it-and despite the fact that she is shown as this kind of silly, stereotyped white woman-she had to have at least that much initial humanity in order for me to even work with her at all. And once she had allowed herself to be human on that level, then she is open to all the other lessons that Dessa and the other runaways had to teach her.
>
> (Jordan, 1993, p. 293)

Ruth's recognition stands in stark contrast to the absence of recognition of Dessa's jealous and spiteful ex-mistress, who falsely believed that Dessa's baby was fathered by her husband and took revenge on them by selling the pregnant Dessa away to the Deep South where a grim fate awaits the mother and the "bastid" baby (Williams, 1986, p. 41).

However, it does not mean that the attachments formed as a result of cohabitation and fundamental human needs can resolve differences and distrust in a short period of time. Dessa only grudgingly lets Ruth nurse her baby because Ruth reminds her of her ex-mistress whose cruelty scarred her physically and emotionally. For Dessa, who, except for her mistress on the most traumatic day of her life, has never seen white women up close, Ruth's body still figures as a site of alterity, not of recognition. Dessa looks at Ruth's red mouth and sees "an open wound across the milky paleness of her face" (Williams, 1986, p. 89). Once Dessa wakes up and almost suffocates in terror because Ruth, who is sleeping in the same bed, is holding her. Ruth's red hair looks like blood (Williams, 1986, p. 164) and feels slippery, unlike blacks' kinky hair and her gray eyes are like "wet mortar" (William, 1986, p. 175). Dessa also hears stories from Ada about how she had had to dress her mistress's head; "[s]he could fair turn your stomach talking about white folks' hair, way it flew every which-a-way; said it smelt like dog fur when it got wet" (Williams, 1986, p. 235). Based on this example, it is whites, not blacks, who belong with animals. Ana Nunes (2011) argues that the novel's innovativeness lies in using Dessa's point of view to upend the long-standing cultural constructs regarding blackness and whiteness; it is whiteness, not blackness, which has been racialized and redefined as strange and unattractive (p. 177).

For Ruth, once the baby is quietly nursing and the exigencies arising with the new arrivals have been handled, she starts noticing the differences between his nut-brown face and her own pearly pale breast and is overwhelmed by feelings of embarrassment and guilt. Later, after her argument with Dessa leaves her seething with anger which only increases after she discusses it with

Nathan, she hears the baby crying in the bedroom but "she [shrinks] from the thought of nursing him, a pickaninny, seeing this for the first time as neighbors might—*would*—see it. His dark skin might as well be fur" (Williams, 1986, p. 127). The reader can see that she still has a long way to go before she becomes the "great-hearted liberal" Williams envisions her to be. Ruth's resentment towards Dessa and Nathan partly brings about her relapse; she momentarily adopts the attitude of her white neighbors, who conceive racial differences in terms of differences between species: It is not long before she suffers a pang of remorse and shame about taking out her anger with the mother on the fragile newborn:

> He was such a tiny thing to have so big a voice, so fierce a will, she thought. A careless hug could kill him, yet he demanded care and trusted that someone would provide it. Shaken by a sudden wave of protectiveness and remorse, she climbed back in bed and bared her breast to his searching. (Williams, 1986, p. 130)

While the baby's vulnerability evokes a feeling of protectiveness in Ruth, its mother's vulnerability to violence as a bodily being gives rise to a moment of identification so intense that Ruth can *almost* feel her pain. When Nathan tells Ruth about how, as a punishment for her attacks on the master and the mistress, they had branded her along the insides of her thighs and had "just about whipped that dress off her and what hadn't been cut off her—dress, drawers, shift—was hanging round her in tatters or else stuck in them wounds," and put her in a small closed sweatbox to let her sweat out in the sun, Ruth can "almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench's thighs" (Williams, 1986, pp. 134-135). However, in the back of her mind, Ruth cannot shake off her fear that Dessa and Nathan had killed whites before when they were escaping from the coffle. And she remains skeptical about Dessa because she thinks that there is more to the story she has been told. It is important for Ruth to actually *see* the scars to believe Dessa's tale, an act that is reminiscent of white buyers' inspection of the naked bodies of enslaved blacks paraded and exposed to the gaze on an auction block, a recurrent trope in the traditional slave narrative. When Ruth actually sees Dessa naked as she is getting dressed, the experience comes as a shock to her: "[Dessa's] bottom was so scarred that Rufel had thought she must be wearing some kind of garment. . . . The wench's loins looked like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so no hair would ever grow there again." The narrator tells us that mixed emotions of sympathy, acute embarrassment, and regret sweep over Ruth and she "[flushes] painfully" (Williams, 1986, p. 154). The curious use of the word "painfully" links this scene with the arrival scene when Ruth experiences a pain that is almost physical at the sight of the bloodied baby and the scene in which

she can almost feel the unbearable pain in Dessa's branded thighs after Nathan's description of Dessa's punishment. Back when her husband Bertie was still at Sutton's Glen, he did not encourage Rufel to venture far beyond the house and except for Mammy, she had not had a chance to associate with blacks. She knew her husband whipped their slaves but after she had pleaded with him and the screams had stopped bothering her, she refused to ponder on the matter despite the fact that she has always known, subconsciously, that her husband probably took to whipping them in the woods out of her hearing. Ruth's physical proximity to Dessa and the other fugitives, together with her knowledge of their histories, allows her to recognize their vulnerability and her recognition often takes the form of bodily response to the pain that she witnesses. Moreover, the experience also allows her to take stock of her husband's and her own complicity in the slave system.

It is not until "The Negress," the third and last section in the novel, that an unlikely, yet strong bond of friendship is forged between the two women. Here, after having presented slavery from many perspectives in the earlier sections, Williams turns to a first-person narrative and lets Dessa unapologetically tell her own story in an unhampered manner and in her own dialect. Unlike the traditional ante-bellum slave narrative, which is aimed at a sympathetic white audience and which seems to claim that literacy acquisition is conclusive proof of the ex-slave narrator's humanity and suitability for citizenship, *Dessa Rose* privileges orality and a sense of community among blacks. Occasionally, Dessa directly addresses her listener(s), who she alternately calls "child," "children," or "honey." In the Epilogue the reader finds out that she tells her story to a blood relation she simply refers to as "the child," who writes it down and repeats it back to her probably for the sake of accuracy. The aging Dessa fears that her mind starts to wander and wants to preserve her family history on paper. It is imperative for her that this oral testimony be written down and preserved for posterity and that her children and grandchildren hear it directly from her and her husband's mouths how they achieved freedom.

Dessa recounts how finding herself at Sutton's Glen, she tries to come to terms with her newfound freedom and the dear price she has paid for it; "(m)any the day I cursed freedom; it took everyone I loved in girlhood from me" (Williams, 1986, p. 171). Since she has hopes for a better future for the baby, Mony, she decides to come on board with the fugitives' scheme to raise seed money for their journey to the slave-free West even though she finds Ruth unworthy of her trust and they are not on good terms since Dessa's feelings are still raw from what she sees as Nathan's betrayal of their bond when he sleeps with Ruth. At times, though, Dessa is struck by how comical it is that a socially and culturally superior white person like Ruth is "working for negroes" (Williams, 1986, p. 182). When the group embarks on the journey, in a reversal

of roles Ruth, who acts as Mammy nursing Dessa's baby, becomes the mistress, and Dessa poses as Ruth's maid and "Mammy" for Clara, Ruth's daughter. On the first night they stay at a plantation owned by Mr. Oscar. In retrospect, Dessa claims that this is where she begins another part of her "education"; she will learn what she has missed as a field hand. Back when she escapes from the coffle and wakes up in Ruth's bed, she accepts that she cannot go back to her home plantation and has already held a wake for the death of that life in the sheriff's root cellar. The experience at Sutton's Glen, of seeing a white woman nursing a black baby or of seeing a "free" black has yet to be properly processed; she becomes someone she knows and does not know. This is perhaps why she declares that Ruth's bed is a grave and a birthing place to her (Williams, 1986, p. 197).

What the new experience at Mr. Oscar's has taught her is a lesson in shared vulnerability. In a show of generous hospitality, Mr. Oscar, whose wife and children are visiting relatives elsewhere, hosts a dinner where both he and Ruth have had quite a bit to drink and flirt with each other. Late at night, Mr. Oscar breaks into the bedroom where Ruth and Dessa are sleeping. In a farcical but meaningful scene, the two women beat him up with pillows, stomp him with their feet, and manage to drive the drunk Mr. Oscar away. The scuffle lessens the hostilities and racial divisiveness that characterize Dessa's attitude towards Ruth and it provides her with a deep understanding of a corporeal vulnerability to violence that white and black women share:

> But really, what kept me quiet was knowing white mens wanted the same thing, would take the same thing from a white woman as they would from a black woman. Cause they could. I never will forget the fear that come on me when Miz Lady called me on Mr. Oscar, that knowing that she was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselfs and each others. (Williams, 1986, p. 202)

By virtue of her embodiment and of being a woman in a patriarchal system, Ruth is subject to the lustful gaze, touch, and violence of Mr. Oscar, to what Dessa calls "ravishment" (Williams, 1986, p. 198). As she is travelling without her family's protection, this "big, what you call ruddy-faced white man" (Williams, 1986, p. 197) can rape her "cause he can," his agency and prerogative guaranteed by his gender. Ruth's call for Dessa's help constitutes what Butler calls a request for recognition and Dessa's actual help and her claim regarding Ruth's helplessness enact "the very recognition of vulnerability," without which vulnerability cannot be sustained (Butler, 2003, p. 30). Ruth's earlier recognition of Dessa's and the baby's bodily vulnerability and Dessa's recognition of the very same condition in this scene engage them in a reciprocal exchange whereby each partner recognizes that "the other needs and deserves

recognition" and that "each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement" (Butler, 2003, p. 31). Because of this incident and the fact that they spend so much time together on the road Dessa admits that they have become somewhat closer and she has developed "some trust" for Ruth. They have decided to keep this incident a secret; Dessa feels that revealing it even to those they are close to would have been almost like telling on herself (Williams, 1986, p. 202). Again, her identification with Ruth to the point that the possible attack on Ruth's body feels like her own exposure to violence is testament to the possibility of a coalition.

After weeks on the road moving from town to town, the fugitives have made approximately thirty thousand dollars and are supposed to be meeting those they have "sold away" at the last stop in Arcopolis. As Ruth and Dessa are awaiting the others, Ruth tells Dessa that she is thinking of settling with the runaways in the West instead of merely accompanying them to Council Bluffs, possibly in Iowa, to guarantee their safe passage to the West as originally planned. Ruth reasons that she has no wish to be reunited with her family in Charleston and to live in the slave system; now that she knows what she knows about blacks, she does not think that she can restrain herself from speaking up against the system and its horrendous practices. Dessa does not warm to the idea, because she is firmly against Ruth's relationship with Nathan and angers Ruth by saying that it is scandalous for a white woman to be "chasing all round the country after some red-eyed negro" (Williams, 1986, p. 218). While she acknowledges that the Ruth whose face she saw when she first came to in that white bed is not "the one [she] partner[s] with on [the] journey," Dessa, unlike Ruth, who thinks that she is "talking friends," cannot, at this point, conceive of friendship between blacks and whites as a possibility: "[t]his was the damnedest white woman. White as a sheet and about that much sense—sleeping with negroes, hiding runaways, wanting to be my friend" (Williams, 1986, pp. 218-219).

After Dessa storms out of their hotel room, she encounters the now deranged and dirty Nehemiah, who tells the local sheriff that she is a hardened criminal wanted by the law. In Dessa's narrative, she gets her revenge in the form of her representation of Nehemiah; his stature and name have been reduced; Dessa simply calls him a "trifling little white man," irreverently refers to him as "Nemi" and notes that he throws his head back like a horse. When Ruth arrives, Nehemiah tells her his version of Dessa's criminal history, which is partially true and his accusations that Dessa slept with men, killed white people, and worked roots seem to have shaken Ruth's trust in her. Even though Nehemiah demands that Dessa be subject to a body inspection which he believes will reveal her scars, Dessa and Ruth manage to present a united front, insisting to the sheriff that they are mistress and maid travelling alone with a lot of money and that they will not let a man inspect Dessa. The sheriff asks an ancient black

lady simply known as Aunt Chole, whose eyes are so milky that Dessa believes she might be blind, to perform the task. However, these milky eyes can recognize Dessa's vulnerability; after hearing Dessa's whispered plea that she is ashamed about her scars from a fire accident, Aunt Chole runs her calloused yet gentle hand over Dessa's back, which is not scarred, and pronounces: "I ain't *seed* nothing on this gal's butt. She ain't got a scar on her back" (Williams, 1986, p. 231, emphasis mine). Probably a slave herself, Aunt Chole is acutely aware of a female slave's vulnerability to the gaze, touch, and violence of others and her recognition helps Ruth and Dessa outwit Nehemiah. There is nothing else the enraged Nehemiah can do but rant and hurl insults at them:

> "You-all in this together"—grabbing at us—"womanhood." He was down on his knees, scrambling amongst them papers. "All alike. Sluts." (Williams, 1986, p. 232)

On the one hand, his accusation that the women are all in this together simply comes from his conviction that Ruth has been in collusion with Dessa and he has been robbed of his chance to capture Dessa. On the other hand, his use of the term "womanhood" does not discriminate between black and white and being "in this together" can invoke a form of female bonding based on being "in this" vulnerable female body. After Dessa's ordeal is over, Williams gestures towards a rethinking of community by having Ruth and Dessa form a relationship of equals. Ruth is not "Miz Ruint," "Miz Lady," or "Mistress," while Dessa Rose has regained her real name and is no longer called "Odessa" or "the Wench":

> "My name Ruth," she say, "Ruth. I ain't your mistress." Like *I'd* been the one putting that on her.
> "Well, if it come to that," I told her, "my name Dessa, Dessa Rose. Ain't no *O* to it."
>
> (Williams, 1986, p. 232)

Farah Jasmine Griffin (2001) argues that in becoming "sisters and friends who save each other," Ruth and Dessa inhabit "an interracial feminist utopia that rings untrue to many readers …" (p. 835). However, even as Williams portrays both women's mental and emotional growth as a result of their encounter, their freedom from confinement and the development of their friendship, she does it all within the boundaries of realism. Dessa realizes that for all her love and respect for Ruth and for all that they have learned about each other and been through together, they are not able to "speak but so honest without disagreement" (Williams, 1986, p. 233). Much as they would love to celebrate their victory over Nehemiah, the reality of nineteenth-century America

does not allow them to hug each other, not even in darkness. The Epilogue reveals that Dessa and the other fugitives settle in the West, where they enjoy relative freedom. The reader learns from Dessa that if Nathan had asked for Ruth's hand in marriage, she would probably have agreed to it. Instead, they part ways and Ruth lives on as part of Dessa's family lore. She finds a new life in the Northeast after she has been liberated from the confines of patriarchy and her role as a white mistress.

Notes

1. This disclaimer was "really more or less an afterthought to the novel" and "not the original plan" (Jordan, 1993, p. 289), yet it is prefixed to the novel because Williams wishes for Dessa to have the last word at the end of the novel.

2. Williams reveals in the Author's Note that both stories came from Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1947).

3. For a thorough analysis of the signifier Mammy, Ruth's reconstruction of Dorcas, and their relationship, see Ashraf Rushdy's article "Reading Mammy; The Subject of Relation in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*."

4. Williams claims that the biggest obstacle to a cross-racial coalition between black women and white women was the belief that white women "were stealing" black men from black women and that her depiction of the relationship between Ruth and Nathan is her way of finding out whether it will throw a monkey wrench in the works and whether mutual respect between the women can develop despite this complication (Jordan, 1993, p. 293).

5. Mary Bucholtz (2016) explains that the African American expression 'to call someone out of their name' means to defame or insult through name-calling. The person who has been called out of his or her name suffers a form of social displacement as a result (p. 274).

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