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Holding the Pen: Visions and Revisions of the American South in Sherley Anne

Williams's *Dessa Rose*

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Abstract: The paper traces the trope of partitioning and de-partitioning in Sherley Anne Williams's neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* (1986) to argue that the richly structured, polyvocal narrative reveals a political impetus: it privileges the protagonist's voice and vision in order to comment on the representational paradigm endemic to mainstream cultural representations of the American South. *Dessa Rose* challenges those well-known, white-authored representations of the South that either emit or distort the Black perspective. Its structure, especially its initial reliance on the monocular, fragmenting white gaze and its subsequent disruption of this mode of seeing ultimately allow Dessa to emerge as the only reliable narrator, thus amplifying—what is more, enabling—the eventual catharsis while producing a complexly fragmented vision of the South.

Keywords: neo-slave narrative, narrative authority, polyvocality, the American South, narratology

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The South has occupied a curious place in the American national imaginary: its portrayals, whether in literature, on film, or even in the discourse of historical reenactments, have tended to follow a certain representational paradigm that precludes the possibility of showing and seeing a version of history and society from more than one side. As Tara McPherson points out in her discussion of mainstream representations of the South, *Gone with the Wind* (M. Mitchell 1936; Fleming 1939), with its stock ‘mammy’ character, Ruth, perpetuates the image of the Southern belle without so much as a gesture toward the circumstances of the enslaved that made the existence of such privileged young women possible; similarly, Ken Burns’s award-winning 1990 documentary about the Civil War portrays Southern men as well-meaning patriots without exploring the racial logic of the war (McPherson 2003, 51-52, 115-117). Tim A. Ryan arrives at a similar conclusion after tracing the influence of Southern roots music on William Faulkner’s writing: Black and white perspectives are sequestered in much of Southern fiction at best, and Black voices are completely absent from fictional and non-fictional accounts of the region at worst (2015, 177). Indeed, the version of reality that is privileged in mainstream representations is invariably tied to white supremacy insofar as the most readily available cultural images engaging with Southern racial dynamics tend to privilege the white version of history at the expense of the Black American perspective, partitioning the two and often silencing the voices of Black characters.

Well-known, white-authored representations of the South that do portray Black perspectives have a complicated critical legacy. Attempts to depict Black characters by eminent writers of the South such as Faulkner and Mark Twain are now understood as being rooted in sympathy but not void of stereotyping. As an example, Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) features a Black woman character, Roxy, whose actions and motivations are central to the plot, but whom the novel's structure leaves strikingly silent. The denouement hinges on the titular white male character failing to ask Roxy why she decided to switch her white-passing Black son with a white baby; he assumes that she did so for selfish reasons. Had Roxy been given the chance to answer, not only could she have revealed her true motivations—to provide her son with the possibility of a better life—but a murder case would have been solved more swiftly (Lyman 1997, 27). Even more crucially, Roxy's answer would have thrown into relief the social constructedness of race by highlighting how easy it was for her son with 1/32 Black ancestry to pass successfully as white (Ibid, 27-28). The novel implicitly criticizes the Southern white patriarchy's complacency and racial bias (Wallace-Sanders 2008, 11), which, together with its reliance on racial stereotypes and its penchant for satirizing Roxy (Goldstein 2017, 12), results in narrative tension rooted in Twain's inner conflict between his progressive ideas and racial prejudice (Moynihan 2009, 819; Howe 1992, 515).

Comparably, critics have identified signs of Faulkner's internalized racial bias in his earlier writing, which, alongside his progressive beliefs, creates the underlying ambiguity and tension in his texts (Ryan 2015, 100). He has been hailed as an exemplary white author who refuses to usurp Black voices and instead stresses racial polyvocality (Werner 1983, 718), while also being condemned for being a conflicted man whose prejudice crops up in his fictional and nonfictional works alike (see Gorra's comprehensive re-evaluation of Faulkner's views on race in *The Saddest Words*, 2020). His 1931 short story, "That Evening Sun" subtly evokes *Pudd'nhead Wilson* insofar as a Black woman's motivations drive its plot. While

Nancy's fear of her partner drives the plot forward, the story is narrated by Quentin Compson. As we see the events unfold through his eyes, "That Evening Sun" is about him trying to remember and come to terms not only with what happens to Nancy but also with his Southern heritage (Ryan 2015, 100). As Nancy's character is filtered through Quentin's words, the reader is withheld access to her motivations—an authorial choice that, as Ryan argues, reveals Faulkner's growing understanding that his ability to represent Black characters is "circumscribed by the very assumptions, hierarchies, and barriers erected by white society" (Ibid, 104), and that Black people might trick or even mock white characters under the guise of being earnest and submissive, all in with the purpose of self-preservation—that is, to use Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s terminology, they might choose to Signify on them (Ibid, 122). Therefore, while the representational tactics of literary giants such as Twain and Faulkner are not regarded as explicitly racist, they are certainly embroiled in white supremacy and influenced by its attendant monocular representational schema.

Slave narratives and oral testimonies were among the first attempts that sought to intervene into the mainstream white discourse by offering to remedy such one-sided or incomplete representations; since then, a plethora of works of art, including neo-slave narratives have followed. One such story, Black American author Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) challenges the representational paradigm described above. It tells the story of a young, Black, enslaved woman who becomes a fugitive in the antebellum South sometime in the 19th century. While Dessa is the main character, each section has a different focalizer so that reader is introduced not only to Dessa's perspective, but to that of a white man and a white woman as well. The novel's polyvocal structure thus diverges from the narrative patterns not only of white-authored representations of the South but of traditional slave narratives as well. It presents the three characters' competing narratives including the moments in which these stories fail to meet. In the first sections of the novel, the characters'

worlds remain partitioned because they are either unwilling or unable to let go of their monocular vision. However, the epilogue, in which an older Dessa recounts her story to a group of loving listeners, serves to privilege Dessa's point of view, version of events, and voice, and demonstrates her ability to transcend the partitioning logic that earlier characterizes both the novel's structure and her own cognitive schema. After briefly introducing the plot, I trace the ubiquitous trope of partitioning and de-partitioning in *Dessa Rose*, i.e., how the novel's structure, especially its initial reliance on the monocular, fragmenting white gaze and its subsequent disruption of this mode of seeing ultimately allow Dessa to emerge as the only reliable narrator, thus amplifying—what is more, enabling—the eventual catharsis.

The eponymous character navigates a number of threatening situations during her journey from enslavement to freedom. After escaping from a slave trader's coffle,ⁱ she is captured and confined to a root cellar. She is sentenced to death, and her execution is delayed only because of her pregnancy: as the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* stated, the child of an enslaved woman would also automatically become a slave—that is, valuable property (Morgan 2018, 1). As she awaits her fate, she is interviewed—or, rather, interrogated—by Adam Nehemiah (or Nemi, as Dessa refers to him), a schoolteacher wishing to publish his way to wealth and status: he hopes to use the insights provided by Dessa to write a bestseller advising slaveholders on how to prevent riots. After a few weeks, she is rescued by fugitives and finds refuge on a small estate owned by a white woman, Ruth Elizabeth, called Rufel or Ruf, who harbors runaways somewhat reluctantly. On her way to Ruf's house, Dessa gives birth to her son, Mony. As Dessa recovers, the two women develop an unlikely friendship, and Ruf assists Dessa and other fugitives to run a scam in which Ruf repeatedly pretends to sell them but then helps them escape. The money thus earned ultimately makes it possible for Dessa and other fugitives to find their way to non-slaveholding territories. The conclusion of the plot sees an older Dessa surrounded by her new family, living in freedom. Previous critical

lines of inquiry into *Dessa* include the significance of her violence (as a woman) in attacking her owners (Burns 2013), the significance of music and Dessa's position as an infamous folk heroine (Seliger 2012), the representations of 'reality' and stereotypes (King 1993; Robinson 2011), the role of literacy and writing (Henderson, 1989), Dessa and Ruf's relationship (Bensedik 2020; Basu 2002; King 1993; Meese 1990; Porter 1991; Ferreira 1991), and Williams's relationship to the Civil Rights developments and Black Power in the 1960s (Rushdy 1990), among others. While several critics have touched upon Dessa's struggle for narrative authority (Byerman 2006; Goldman 1990; Henderson 2014; McKible 1994; Rushdy 1993), there is no sustained discussion on the novel's reliance on the trope of (de-)partitioning and its intertwining with the representation of the South.

The inspiration itself behind the story betrays the urge to challenge the representational paradigm described at the beginning of this paper. Not unlike Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,ⁱⁱ *Dessa Rose* is based on the amalgamation of two historical incidents in which women engaged in resistance during slavery (Williams 1986a, 5).ⁱⁱⁱ Williams found the first story in Angela Davis's "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), a pivotal essay that brought to light the significant role of Black women in resistance efforts, both violent acts of insurgency and quiet, domestic labor that ensured the survival of the community. Davis recounts an incident, citing historian Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), of an enslaved pregnant woman sentenced to death after being one of the six leaders of an uprising on a coffle. As Aptheker puts it, she was "*permitted* to remain in jail for several months" before her public hanging (1943, 287, emphasis mine). At around the same time, a white Southern woman, a mother herself, gave sanctuary to four or five fugitives on her isolated farm for years, provided them with food, and allowed them to store arms near her house (1943, 289). Williams remarks how "sad" it is that these two

women never met (Williams 1986a, 5), that is, the novel itself sets out to pull together perspectives and stories that have historically been separated.

Apart from the wish to bring together the stories of the two women, Williams was also driven to rewrite another novel while positioning a Black person as the focalizer and (eventually) the narrator of her own story. Reading William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) galvanized Williams to write the novella "Meditations on History" (1976), an early version of *Dessa Rose*. Whereas literary critics acknowledge that writers such as Twain and Faulkner are sympathetic to their Black characters, Styron has been accused of depicting Black life in a sensationalized and simplified way for financial gain without any attempt at authenticity.^{iv} He admits in his author's notes that *Confessions* is "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history" (ix); indeed, it has been criticized for appropriating and distorting a significant figure of Black history. Styron based his novel on *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late insurrection in Southampton, Virginia* (1831), a pamphlet published by Thomas Ruffin Gray, a lawyer who acted as Turner's amanuensis; therefore, Turner's account is multiply mediated and subjected to a number of revisions and retellings, yet, it is Styron's award-winning version that is canonized. In response to the novel that "travestied the as-told-to memoir" of Turner (Williams 1986a, 5), Williams, in "Meditations on History" and later in *Dessa Rose*, attempts to construct a history that sheds light on the tradition of resistance by Black women as elucidated in Angela Davis's essay, and one that centers a Black character instead of silencing or tokenizing her. The story of Dessa as a character who is able to present a comprehensive narrative thus stems from a de-partitioning urge to amend those canonized versions of Black people's stories that see them from a distinctly white and thus one-sided or distorted perspective.

Before truly centering Dessa on the narrative level, however, the first few sections of *Dessa Rose* offer a fragmented view of the protagonist. The prologue, the three chapters—

each introduced with a proem—and the epilogue provide a multitude of entry points into who Dessa is. The short prologue, with an unnamed, non-participant narrator and Dessa as the focalizer, contains a dream sequence with one of the few positive erotic scenes in (neo-)slave literature. It starts and ends with a song by Kaine, the father of her yet-unborn child, in which he professes his love for her. Her memories of him are interrupted by the realization that she is in chains, already in the cellar. The first chapter, “The Darky,” centers Nemi as he interrogates Dessa for his book. His voice is mediated by the omniscient extra-diegetic narrator, but through his journal entries and free indirect speech, his perspective is still eminent. Dessa’s answers are also included, but as Nemi often trails off or interrupts her, his voice subsumes that of Dessa. He says he “must speak *with* her again” (Williams 1986b, 23, emphasis mine),^v without realizing that this one-sided interrogation is far from an actual, balanced conversation. Additionally, he often forgets to write down key details and loses track of what Dessa is saying. On the one hand, his ineptitude is a parody of an individual white man who paternalistically assumes the position of the storyteller and -shaper but, due to his monocular vision, fails to understand and convey the experiences of a Black person while also failing to finish his magnum opus. In particular, Nemi is the parody of Styron and Gray, both white men who, Williams believes, attempted to capture and distort a Black person’s voice. Nemi “think[s] himself qualified by virtue of his race and gender to record and interpret Dessa’s story” (A. Mitchell 2002, 75) while also hoping to profit off of slavery, albeit indirectly. The reader is led to understand that Dessa Signifies on Nemi without him noticing: even though her answers are confusing on purpose, Nemi fails to recognize that her “loquacious [and] roundabout” answers or her mumbling (23) are tactics of evasion and subversion—much like the practice of Signifyin(g) in which Nancy engages in Faulkner’s “That Evening Sun” (Ryan 2015, 121-122). On the other hand, Nemi’s ignorance and hubris are also an indictment of the literary establishment that privileges certain kinds of literary

production that serve the interests of the (white, affluent, and racist) readership (Rushdy 1999, 143), similarly testifying to a one-sided, oftentimes deliberately distorting logic of racial meaning-making. Therefore, his attitude is perhaps shown in exaggerated terms but his arrogance is meant to expose typical (Southern) white male prejudice, making his voice not only his own but that of his peers as well.

The proem of this chapter—"You have seen how a man was made a slave..."—subtly sheds light on another aspect of the novel's organizing principle. In Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, the quoted sentence concludes with "you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 1845, 65–66) and introduces Douglass's retaliation against the abuse of a slave breaker, thus foreshadowing Dessa's resistance. Douglass's *Narrative*, being a *written* account of a *man*, comes from a place of relative privilege at least compared to Dessa's situation. Insofar as the proem relays the words of a Black man but the chapter foregrounds a white man (Nemi), the trope of partitioning is evident here as well. The account(s) written by men like Nemi could never incorporate nor legitimate the experiences of men like Douglass. Even though Nemi is obsessive and incoherent, he still has more privilege than the Black characters in *Dessa Rose*, much like other, real-life white men appropriating the voice of the oppressed are more privileged and are considered more reliable than those whose stories they tell, no matter how subjectively or inaccurately. The chapter thus starts with the voice of a Black man only to contrast it with the delusions of grandeur Nemi has. In doing so, it obliquely comments on the fact that narrative authority does not necessarily go hand in hand with objectivity. This juxtaposition not only subverts the narrative authority of Nemi (and, by extension, of men like Styron) but it also lays the groundwork for Dessa to emerge later as a more reliable narrator.

The next chapter, "The Wench," supplements Nemi's narrow point of view. Here, Dessa's and Ruf's perspectives are mediated by a narrator. "The Wench" includes Dessa's

recovery, the stories of some of the fugitives, and the cautious beginnings of Ruf and Dessa's friendship; however, the main focalizer is Ruf. The proem of this chapter—"... I have plowed and planted and no man could head me..."—is taken from an 1851 speech by Sojourner Truth, who, not unlike Dessa, escaped slavery with her baby. Just as the context of the quote—"Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman?" (Stanton 1881, 116)—centers gender, the chapter also problematizes various gender issues. Not only does it explain Ruf's circumstances as a helpless, white woman abandoned by her husband, but also sheds light on the gendered abuses committed against both Black women and men. As opposed to Douglass's written, carefully edited and authenticated, published account, Truth's line is taken from an impromptu, oral performance in which she laments her lack of privilege. As we are moving away from written accounts and male perspectives, the reader is inching closer to getting to know Dessa.

Overall, the structure of these first two chapters renders possible the copresentation of both Dessa's and Nemi's, as well as Dessa's and Ruf's understandings of their reality. The reader gets a glimpse into how enslaved communities *and* white Southerners experience and then narrate the same events, including riots, escapes, or encounters with each other. Despite the simultaneous presentation of the two interpretations, Dessa's and Nemi and Ruf's worlds fail to meet in these chapters since the white characters refuse to believe the enslaved woman and discredit what she says, illuminating the unwillingness of white discourse to "recognize the Slave's world as an alternative or competing world because the violence that produces the slave makes it impossible to think 'Slave' and 'world' together" (Wilderson 2010, 52). This representational mode merely seems to—but does not in fact—trouble the tradition of portraying the South and its racial dynamics in terms of partitioning. Even though the reader is presented with all three accounts, Dessa's and the white characters' understandings remain

sequestered at this stage, meaning that the monocular logic of representation remains in place in the first two chapters.

The fragmented structure described above reflects on Dessa's invisibility as a person and the incommunicability of her plight, highlighted by the variety of fragments, stereotypes, and controlling images^{vi} through the prism of which others see her. Rumor spreading among slaveholders has it that Dessa is a "'fiend,' the 'devil woman' who had attacked white men and roused other niggers to rebellion" (Williams 1986b, 21); she is "'the virago,' the 'she-devil'" (Ibid, 22), which piques Nemi's curiosity. Wilson, the slave trader, holds her in "unnatural, superstitious awe" (Ibid, 22). Even though she is not raped, other white men tend to sexualize her: "not all mens acted animals towards us, understand, but enough of them did till this is what we always feared with them ... I had seen the way some white mens looked at me, big belly and all, when I was on that coffle" (Ibid, 178). Ruf claims that she sees no color, which confuses and even infuriates Dessa. Ruf in fact can barely distinguish Black people from each other (Ibid, 140ff), she re-names and appropriates a Black woman as her mammy^{vii} to whom she then compares Dessa (Ibid, 119), and imprints her mental images of minstrel characters on another Black woman (Ibid, 93). While Ruf is compelled to help Dessa, the empathy she extends toward her is not based on actually seeing her as a person for a long time. Dessa's fragmentation thus mirrors the fragmentation of the narrative.

A key incident, which then becomes a source of conflict between Dessa and Ruf, illustrates the monocular nature of Ruf's worldview. After Dessa gives birth on the run, she is in a coma-like state and thus physically unable to provide her newborn with early postnatal care. Ruf takes over and starts nursing the baby, inverting the traditional Southern script of Black slaves becoming wet nurses for wealthy white women. At first, "Rufel had taken the baby to her bosom almost without thought, to quiet his wailing" (Ibid, 101); yet, the narrator comes back to this moment repeatedly, meaning that Ruf keeps rationalizing her decision and

re-phrasing her reasons for herself: “The baby was hungry and she fed him” (Ibid, 95); “she could do something about this, about the baby who continued to cry ... she—Rufel—could do something ... the baby was hungry and she fed him” (Ibid, 95). Ruf continues to tussle with this unusual arrangement that goes against social norms: “still, she had felt some mortification at becoming wet nurse for a darky. She was the only nursing woman on the place, however, and so continued of necessity to suckle the baby” (Ibid, 102). Social expectations compel her to animalize and alienate Mony: “she shrank 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” (Ibid, 127, emphasis in the original). These affective intensities thus betray Ruf’s inability to reconsider her biases that partition her world from that of the baby and undergird her inability to make sense of their temporary living arrangement.

While Ruf is undoubtedly making a sacrifice both by breaking a taboo and by volunteering maternal labor, her care for Mony only traumatizes Dessa further. The sight of Ruf nursing Mony invokes a variety of strong affects in Dessa: she even screams at the sight of Ruf’s white body in intimate contact with the baby (Ibid, 88). Dessa is aware that this is an unusual arrangement: “it went against everything she had been taught to think about white women but to inspect that fact too closely was almost to deny her own existence” (Ibid, 117). Not only does it upset her worldview and extend the boundaries of what is acceptable in Southern slaveholding society, it also makes her question her worth as a mother: Dessa feels she ceases to exist insofar as Mony’s needs for nurturance and intimacy are being met by another person while his own mother is unable to care for him. Dessa’s milk supply eventually dwindles and she is horrified upon the realization that she could not feed her baby even if she were to recuperate (Ibid, 116). Her initial shock turns into shame for not being a good enough mother and woman (Ibid, 170), that is, her hurt maternal autonomy fundamentally challenges her self-worth. At the root of this personal crisis lies her inability to

let go of her own monocular schema that refuses to think together her child's Blackness and Ruf's whiteness.

Dessa's trauma-informed aversion to white women further complicates this situation. Her neurotic former mistress is complacent in the dehumanization of enslaved women. She prevents Dessa from being a house slave and thus being closer to Kaine because she is jealous of the young woman being near the master: "Mist's ascares Masa gon be likin the high-colored gals" such as Dessa (Ibid, 18). Experiences like this lead Dessa to conclude that "white woman was everything I feared and hated" (Ibid, 169). The numerous references she makes to Ruf's whiteness indicate that Dessa is overtaken by the novelty and ubiquity of white skin as she has never seen white women in such intimate settings, in their own homes, with their hair down, in close proximity to her. When they first meet, Ruf is merely a body for her, with her whiteness as a marker of alterity. The act of Ruf breastfeeding Mony, since it involves Black and white skin in close contact, is positioned as something sinfully carnal through its implications of miscegenation: "sometimes it seemed to Dessa that she [Ruf] was drowning in milky sin" (Ibid, 117). Dessa is disturbed by the corporeal aspect of the intimate connection between Ruf and Mony, and is suspicious of her, evident in her "surreptitious examination of the child when Rufel returned him after nursing" (Ibid, 140). On the one hand, Dessa's confusion and disgust are understandable given her earlier horrific experiences with white slaveowners; on the other hand, they betray that her worldview is fundamentally impacted by the fact that she—albeit for different reasons than Ruf—cannot think together two realities. In her cognitive schema, the world inhabited by white people has been shut off from the world inhabited by Black people for so long that Ruf's mere presence—let alone her extreme proximity—is leading her to the brink of a mental breakdown.

Williams's evocation of the Mammy stereotype encapsulates the rift between white and Black concepts of family and motherhood, and reveals the oft-denied dependence of

white families on Black reproductive labor. The Black Southern Mammy's portrayal as a loyal, content servant eager to care for and love the children of the white, slave-owning family, failed to reflect on the realities of enslaved womanhood, what is more, it served to obfuscate the systemic harnessing of Black women's reproductive and childrearing capacities.^{viii} Ruf remembers her mammy, Dorcas, lovingly. Dorcas nicknamed the young Ruf "Fel" (Ibid, 124), while the family named Dorcas 'mammy' to make it sound like she has been with them for a long time, thus signaling their status as an established slaveholding family (Ibid, 123). Ruf uses Dorcas's proper name so rarely that she (Ruf) forgets it by the time she grows up (Ibid, 119). Thus, they name each other, but with a marked difference in power relations. Dorcas does not know when she was born or how old she is, but Ruf determines her (Dorcas's) birthdate arbitrarily (Ibid, 90). The white woman romanticizes and appropriates her, and Dorcas's emotional and physical labor is taken for granted by her owners. Dorcas, in a fashion typical of the artistic representations of the Mammy figure, always gives young Ruf advice (Ibid, 96), earns the girl's praise by dressing her well (Ibid, 118), and is the only one to recognize and remember every slave at Ruf's place (97). After her death, Ruf's loneliness is only eased by the presence of the fugitives; she uses Nathan "much as she had Mammy, as the means through which she participated in the life beyond the yard" (Ibid, 147). Ruf's memories of Dorcas shape her early interactions with Dessa. Ruf cannot fathom why a Black person would not be deferential and warm toward her: she finds it astonishing "to see eyes so like Mammy's, staring such hatred at her" (Ibid, 98).

The conflict between Dessa's and Ruf's differing concepts of 'mammy' comes to an apex during a heated argument in which Ruf displays her distorted vision of slaveholding society. When Ruf childishly tells the recovering Dessa stories about parties and dresses, Dessa is utterly uninterested and even disgusted by the trivial details and Ruf's self-aggrandizing tendencies. Ruf's constant references to 'mammy' remind Dessa of her own

mother and finally cause her to erupt: “Wasn’t no ‘mammy’ to it ... Mammy ain’t made you nothing! ... You ain’t got no ‘mammy’” (Ibid, 118). Ruf shakes, yells, and hisses as Dessa taunts her:

Dessa’s voice [seemed] to pin the white woman in the chair. ‘See! See! You don’t even not know ‘mammy’s’ name. Mammy have a name, have children.’

‘She didn’t.’ The white woman, finger stabbing toward her own heart, finally rose.

‘She just had me! I was like her child.’

‘What was her name then?’ ...

‘Mammy,’ the white woman yelled. ‘That was her name.’ (Ibid, 119)

Dessa starts telling her about her own mother, which the offended Ruf disregards before storming off, thereby denying narrative authority to both her ‘mammy’ and Dessa. Then, she remembers Dorcas’s name “with painful clarity” (Ibid, 123), thinks that it was absurd to think of herself “as Mammy’s child, a darky’s child” (Ibid, 125), but insists that Dorcas loved her (Ibid, 125). Their argument thrusts Ruf into a sudden identity crisis that compels her to consider that her mammy was indeed a person, who might have had children she was separated from (Ibid, 128). Her confusion is, however, mere discomfort compared to the painful memories it triggers in Dessa. After years of upholding the fiction that house slaves are unconditionally selfless and loving quasi-relatives, Ruf is forced to “consider how the fictive ties on which she has based her most intimate bonding relationship are ‘fictive’ in the worst possible sense—they are delusions” (Rushdy 1993, 377), that is, Dessa’s words slowly but surely start to trouble Ruf’s cognitive schema.

Even though Dessa continues to be the Other for the white woman for months, the gradual changes in how Ruf perceives her—that is, Ruf’s increasing willingness and ability to think Black and white together—contribute to Dessa’s recovery. It is only after listening to Harker describing Dessa’s ordeal in brutal detail that Ruf begins to consider the validity of

Dessa's experiences. Harker's metaphorical, even sentimental language calls to mind those descriptions of extreme violence that slave narratives and abolitionists employed in an attempt to incite sympathy in their readers and listeners. White witnesses derived pleasure from such accounts, as Saidiya Hartman notes (1997, 20–22); indeed, Ruf recoils but listens with fascination that borders on the perverse. She almost feels Dessa's pain on her own thighs (Williams 1986b, 135), that is, she acknowledges Dessa's suffering only insofar as she (Ruf) can identify with it by becoming a proxy for Dessa, with pain being "the conduit of identification" (Hartman 1997, 20). However, it is this substitution that further effaces the personhood of the other while re-inscribing the captive's "hyperembodiness" (sic)—the tendency of the enslaved to exist as merely a body in the white imaginary (Ibid, 19). Williams dramatizes the limits and "precariousness of empathy" (Ibid, 19) alongside the effects of the white woman's socialization into white supremacy. Ruf first partitions what she knows about Dessa from her understanding of the suffering of the enslaved that she might have heard about in theoretical terms. Finally, however, seeing Dessa's scars *and* hearing Harker's testimony, along with getting to know and ultimately listening to Dessa, challenge Ruf's monocular vision. The horrors of enslavement are first mediated through the flesh, but the combination of visuals and narrative is still not sufficient for the white witness to understand the suffering of the enslaved: perceiving Dessa as a person is.

Despite traumatizing Dessa in the short run, her argument with Ruf about what mammy means ultimately helps Dessa heal by triggering her to incorporate her own motherhood into her sense of self. Ruf's self-absorbed appropriation of Dorcas and entitlement to a Black woman's labor bring to the fore Dessa's pain of having been separated from her own mother. This prompts the still physically weak Dessa to sit up and deliver a monologue about her own mother, Rose. She names all of her siblings, recounting how many of them lost their lives. She makes several references to how slavery disfigures mother-child

relationships and childhood by separating the families and forcing the children to work: Minta dies before the owners (and not her parents) can name her; Seth is the first child to survive long enough so that he can start working on the fields, but he soon dies just like Jeeter, another sibling; and Caesar is trampled to death by a horse that he holds for the owners' white guest (Williams 1986b, 119–20). First unwittingly, then consciously, Dessa continues the labor of remembering and recounting “the names now the way mammy used to tell them, lest they forget, she would say; lest her poor, lost children die to living memory as they had in her world ... telling the names until speech became too painful” (Ibid, 119). Anne E. Goldman identifies this conversation—or, rather, monologue—as a crucial moment that allows Dessa to assume her mother's place by voicing the mother's memory (1990, 321). This is the first instance of Dessa deliberately sharing her family history with anyone at length. Her initial intention is to hurt and shame Ruf, however, she continues after the white woman leaves the room, which suggests that she is startled by the strength of the memories: “Even buried under years of silence, Dessa could not forget” (Williams 1986b, 120). The confrontation with Ruf stems from a moment of epistemological violence, and it ultimately motivates Dessa to assume a maternal position after she realizes that, with her own mother gone, she is responsible for keeping the memory of her lost family members for the sake of the next generations. This realization and identification with a maternal position gives her a sense of pride and allows her to bring formerly partitioned facets of her self together.

After her pivotal outburst during their conflict about mammy, Dessa warms up to Ruf but still partitions key aspects of her story—this time, however, she does so willingly, out of self-preservation. She continues to mistrust Ruf's ability to comprehend fully a Black woman's experiences (Ibid, 216). Ruf grapples with realizing her own privilege and uses what she can as a white woman of modest means to assist and protect the fugitives, often risking her own life. The narrator suggests that Ruf has infantile impulses and is blind to her own

white power for a long time, but overall, she is portrayed in a sympathetic light, not for being a white savior for Dessa but for complementing Dessa's ingenuity and courage with her privilege granted by her skin color and upbringing. The scheme they take part in strengthens their bond, their friendship gradually develops, and an older Dessa remembers her fondly (Ibid, 236). Still, she treats the white woman in a fundamentally different way from how she approaches Black women: Dessa maintains a degree of fragmentation out of self-defense.

With the passing of time, Dessa gradually recovers from the trauma of losing Kaine, being kept in bondage, and giving birth under perilous circumstances, and slowly reaches the stage in which "memory emerges and *reunites* a body and a voice severed in trauma" (Griffiths 2009, 2, emphasis mine), ending the former partitioning of the two. The third chapter, "The Negress," as the title implies, offers a more intersectional and integrated approach to understanding the main character. While the word 'wench' is already somewhat racialized as well as gender-specific, "The Negress" attempts to think "the darky"—race—and "the wench"—gender—together, thus ending the partitioning implied by the chapter titles and giving the comprehensive story of Dessa as told to her family in the first person. Her language is quite close to standard English, as if it has been edited for the purposes of a published narrative, which suggests that her voice is still mediated. It tells the story of the fugitives' scheme and various adventures, Dessa's discovery of the affair between Ruf and Nathan, a fugitive, as well Dessa's relationship to Harker, who becomes her lifelong partner. Harker asks her to dance using the French he learned "down in N'Orleans" (Williams 1986b, 185), which is referenced by the proem, "my negress, would you like to dance with me," a line from the lyrics to "Cajun Waltz" (1974) by Black male blues musician Taj Mahal.^{ix} The first proem is from a published narrative, the second from an improvised speech, and the third from a song—that is, a genre of the oral tradition—whose inclusion signals the novel's increasing privileging of orality. In this chapter, after frantically searching for Dessa for years, Nemi

finally finds her but with the help of Ruf and another Black woman, Dessa manages to discredit him.

In “The Negress,” Dessa exhibits self-understanding and can sustain a coherent narrative as well, suggesting that she is indeed in the process of healing. She is also able to recognize implicit meaning as well, for example, she can retrospectively decode that Nemi, in cohort with other white men, thought she was not human: “This not exactly what he say, you understand; what none of them said. I can’t put my words together like they did. But I understood right on, now; wasn’t nothing wrong with my understanding. And this what Nemi meant” (Williams 1986b, 227). Even if she cannot rely on rhetoric to the same extent as these educated, white men—“I can’t put my words together like they did”—she, in a role reversal, becomes the one to interpret Nemi.

Indeed, the epilogue shows that her spoken word has triumphed over the white man’s version of her life: Dessa tells her own story, and encourages her children to remember it and keep it alive. She does so without the stylistic interventions from a narrator that abound in earlier chapters. Since the epilogue takes the form of a monologue in the vernacular, the reader gets the impression that this account is less mediated, if at all, by a third party. Both the prologue and epilogue take place outside of the bounds of the plot: one is the memory of an early dream, the other is set long after the main events and emphasizes that the story will live on even after Dessa’s death. Thus, the arc of the novel goes from hazy, semi-conscious dreaming in the prologue to constructing and keeping alive a ‘master’ narrative—an overall, organizing narrative that encapsulates all the episodes in Dessa’s life as well as what she has learned about the world. Her overt goal is to transmit knowledge—“I tell you, honey, slavery was ugly” (Ibid, 206)—and to counter the image Nemi was trying to convey of her, instead of her. The memories are “so sharp sometimes I can’t believe it’s all in my mind. And my mind wanders. This why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back” (Ibid, 236). Having

her story “wrote down” implies that she has dictated it at some point to an amanuensis and it might even have been published, but the fact that she still insists on *telling* it in person to her family suggests her wish to maintain personal narrative control and to privilege orality.

Asking the children to memorize the story also suggests that she is wary of written accounts and/or those who are in control of such accounts, for example, (white) writers, publishers, or editors—another nod toward Nemi and, by extension, toward such representatives of the white literary establishment as Styron, and even toward fictional white men such as Pudd’nhead Wilson or Quentin Compson. By keeping the narrative in the family, Dessa strives to ensure its stability, longevity, and immutability.^x

Apart from white-authored, mainstream representations of the South, (neo-)slave narratives can be considered as monocular as well in that they—understandably—only focus on the Black perspective as a political gesture against the long-standing erasure of Black stories, voices, and subjectivities. The polyvocal structure of *Dessa Rose*, however, makes the reader privy to three characters’ respective points of view, thereby allowing for showing a Black woman’s, a white woman’s, and a white man’s understanding of the same events and characters, making it one of the few neo-slave narratives that defy the monocular design of the genre. Each focalizer attempts to interpret the other, and each is driven by their own, mostly socially conditioned biases: their perspective is informed by their race and gender, which makes their respective set of experiences quite narrow. Due to the marked power imbalance inherent in the Southern white supremacist order, two of them have the capacity to inflict both epistemological and physical violence on the third one: Ruf and Nemi mostly dehumanize Dessa and question the legitimacy of her story and suffering. Dessa is silenced and discredited as a one-dimensional, inconsequential slave; she is viewed in fragments not only by Ruf and Nemi, but by other characters as well, Black and white alike, and for a long time, she herself is unable to put the fragments of her memory and self into a coherent, contextualized

narrative. By the novel's conclusion, however, it is clearly Dessa who, in spite of all her trauma, manages to end the partitioning of the different facets of her own self and story. Strikingly, she becomes capable of meaningful, deep self-reflection while also narrating and making sense of the other focalizers' versions of truth. In a reversal of being silenced and Othered, she Others Ruf and Nemi, subsuming their stories into hers and thus emerging as the principal storyteller. The satirical sections depicting Nemi's ignorance reverberate with the long history of Black people being the laughing stock, thereby handing Dessa epistemological power as well.

The epilogue invites affective immersion from the reader by emphasizing Dessa's relief after all her trauma, which constitutes a catharsis. After the trope of partitioning has been employed throughout the novel to such an extent that it has become its organizing principle, its eventual and full disruption—that is, the multifaceted upending of various partitions—is what enables this catharsis. Furthermore, Dessa's (re)appropriation of her own narrative is significant as it establishes a contrast with Styron's appropriation of Turner's rebellion, and while Turner's account has a palimpsestic, over-mediated quality to it, Dessa's is her own: she (or, rather, Williams) tells her story to her chosen audience, without any narratorial mediation and in her vernacular. In the ultimate act of de-partitioning—that is, making Dessa the narrator and the focalizer at the same time—the novel foregrounds Dessa's account of her own life, told in her own voice, thereby doing justice to women such as Ruth, Roxy, or Nancy. The polyvocality characterizing the overall structure of *Dessa Rose* might produce a complexly fragmented vision of the South, but this vision is concurrently unified by the main character's understanding of events. The narrative maneuver by which she becomes the one to interpret the white characters serves to inscribe the Black experience into the cultural fabric while also commenting on the politics of appropriation of Black voices in literary and cultural history. Williams claims that “‘History’ is often no more than who holds

the pen at a given point in time. I hold the pen now, and that is what authenticates me and my children” 1993, 258). Indeed, the fact that the novel eventually privileges Dessa’s voice reveals a political impetus that foregrounds a Black woman not because she is equipped to give a totalizing account of the South and the Other, but because finally holding the metaphorical pen is an act of rebellion in itself, a countervailing corrective to centuries of erasure.

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ⁱ A coffle is a group of slaves chained and worked or transported together. In this case, 90 men, women, and children were led for sale through Kentucky in 1829.

ⁱⁱ *Beloved* was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, who, in 1856 in Kentucky, killed her two-year-old daughter lest the child be returned to slavery after their escape.

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams wrote her Author's Note—which she calls a "disclaimer 'separating fact from fiction'"—reluctantly and at the urging of her editors, who had required her to clarify how historically (in)accurate the plot is (Williams 1993, 257–58). Williams suspects that her authority was questioned on account of her race and gender as well as of the implied criticism toward the novel's white characters: a white male author would not have been asked to demarcate where history ends and fiction begins (Ibid, 258).

^{iv} See *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), edited by John H. Clarke.

^v The features of the vernacular that might seem like irregularities in grammar, lexis, and punctuation are quoted as they appear in the source text in all cases.

^{vi} On how gender-specific controlling images differ from stereotypes, see Patricia Hill Collins: "Representations need not be stereotypical and stereotypes need not function as controlling images. Of the three [i.e. representations, stereotypes, and controlling images], controlling images are most closely tied to power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (2004, 350).

^{vii} I do not capitalize the word mammy when it refers to a character and not the stereotype.

^{viii} See chapter 2 of *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy* (2009) by Julia S. Jordan-Zachery for details.

^{ix} The song is bilingual, and the line quoted in the text is French: "Ma négresse, voulez-vous dansez avec moi?" Harker and Dessa briefly mention "some islands way out to sea" where French-speaking "black peoples had made themselves free" (PAGE). The French line's inclusion and the characters' exoticization of these islands gesture toward another aspect of partitioning: whereas Black voices are either absent or distorted in the American cultural imagination of the South, cajun culture is even more scarcely represented.

^x Cf. Williams's contention that "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us" (1986b, 5). On

the one hand, Williams hints at the conspicuous absence or distortion of the Black experience in mainstream American literature; on the other hand, she might allude to the 'betrayal' by the publishing industry insofar as it intervened into the integrity of the published slave narratives (see Sayre 2010, 189–90; Sekora 1987, 496–97).