Reading Mammy: The Subject of Relation in Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose
Author(s): Ashraf H. A. Rushdy
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Indiana State University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041929
Accessed: 04/01/2012 16:35

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Reading Mammy: The Subject of Relation in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*

She was looking in
my mouth and I knew
no matter what words
come to my mind the
song’d be her'n jes as
well as it be mine.
—Sherley Anne Williams

Discussing the “communicative interactions” amongst the black population of St. Vincent, Roger Abrahams concluded that the “given” in these interactions is that the “individual presence residing in the voice assumes . . . that a sense of community exists” (127). Literature, too, writes Sherley Anne Williams, “is about community and dialogue,” about how voices in communication construct a sense of community. Therefore, she notes, “theories or ways of reading ought actively to promote the enlargement of both” a sense of community and dialogue (“Some Implications” 74). In her first novel *Dessa Rose*, following her own prescription, Williams proposes conflicting “theories or ways of reading” which can lead either to dialogue and community or to dissonance and chaos. Reading, in this sense, is more than the perusing of texts; it is equally the ability to engage with people or to control them. There is a form of reading in which two individuals come to a mutual understanding of each other; this is reading as dialogue. There is also a form of reading in which an individual attempts to master another. As Dessa says at the end of the novel: “I never will forget Nemi trying to read me . . .” (236). Adam Nehemiah (Nemi), the Northern writer working on a book on how to prevent slave revolts, had attempted to master Dessa in his reading of her character and his writing of her history. In this case, reading is an act of control and has nothing to do with community or dialogue. It has to do solely with assuming mastery over others.

In *Dessa Rose*, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson notes, Williams presents Adam Nehemiah as a representative of that form of hegemony which attempts to re-enslave Dessa by inscribing her within a “discourse that suppresses her voice” (“Speaking” 25; cf. 31-32). In fact, the first section of *Dessa Rose* is essentially concerned with showing us the battle between Nehemiah and Dessa, which is fundamentally the battle between Nehemiah’s literacy attempting to master Dessa’s body and self and Dessa’s orality attempting to establish a community beyond the confines of imprisonment. By having Nehemiah write out Dessa’s character and her role in the revolt on the coffle, Williams shows us how, as

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy is Assistant Professor of English and Afro-American Studies at Wesleyan University and the author of essays on Octavia Butler, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, and others. The University of Pittsburgh Press recently published his book *The Empty Garden: The Subject of Late Milton*. Professor Rushdy would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for providing him with a Research Fellowship which enabled him to conduct the research for, and write, this essay.
she says in her "Author's Note," African Americans "remain at the mercy of literature and writing," which have often "betrayed" them. In the character of Dessa, though, Williams also demonstrates how African Americans "survived by word of mouth" (5). As a literal example of this kind of surviving by orality, Williams has Dessa talk with Nehemiah as if their conversation were a "game," and shows her "playing on words" with him, using misleading words which eventually lead him on a false search for fugitive slaves, thereby helping her escape (60). Likewise, Dessa communicates with those who rescue her after her escape by singing in a call-and-response rhythm from her jail cell. Unlike writing, which isolates and alienates its subject, Williams implies that oral performance is a form of authentic dialogue which actively promotes intersubjectivity—a feeling of being intimately at one with others. When Dessa sings, for instance, we are told that "her voice blended with" those of the others "in momentary communion" (64). At the end of the first section, Dessa defies Nehemiah's attempt to read her, and Williams dismisses his theory of reading as detrimental to the potential for dialogue and the formation of community.

In the first part, then, Williams deals with what Robert Stepto has noted to be the "primary generic myth for Afro-America"—the interrelated "quest for freedom and literacy" (xv)—by representing in this particular instance what Stepto terms "the culture's distrust of literacy" (196). In this cultural drama, the written word represents the processes used by racist white American institutions to proscribe and prescribe African American subjectivity. As Stepto shows in brilliant detail, in the nineteenth-century slave narratives, writing comes to represent primarily racist institutions against which the slave gains his or her subjectivity by assuming control over his or her "voice." In the classic slave narratives of the late eighteenth century, this process of discovering the black voice operated through what Henry Louis Gates calls the "tropes of the talking book," a trope whose modern counterpart in contemporary African American writing Gates terms the "speakerly text"; that is, a text that privileges "the representation of the speaking black voice" (Figures 249). In the first part of Dessa Rose, Williams represents the process by which Dessa struggles against Nehemiah's hegemonic writing and achieves what Gayl Jones calls the "freeing of the voice" (178); in other words, she represents the literal process by which Dessa uses her voice to achieve her liberation from the prescriptive pen of Nehemiah's written record.

The first part of Dessa Rose, then, is about the tension between an oppressive literacy and an emancipatory orality, which struggle clearly belongs to a topical tradition which many critics have discerned in much recent black fiction. The second part of Williams' novel is also about what Keith Byerman calls "the struggle for discursive power," in which "the fictions take the form of quests for voice, for authority over the narration itself." This conflict, as Byerman represents it, is between "those who use words to constrict, objectify, and dehumanize, and those who insist on the ambiguous, ironic, liberating aspects of language" (6). In this scenario, precisely as in the dramatic encounter between literacy and orality, the struggle is between one form of representation which historically has been used to generate and transmit African American culture and another form of representation which has been employed to traduce and control that culture. The difference between this
struggle and the earlier-noted model of the confrontation of literacy and orality is that the conflict here is waged within the same medium. As is the case in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, the quest is centered on the idea of gaining narrative control over one’s own story. The hegemonic presence in this case is an antagonistic person or an oppressive community whose intent is to control the individual’s narrative—especially, as in Hurston’s novel, when that tale exists as an oral production in a community whose basic communication operates in oral transmission. In the second section of Williams’ novel, on which I will focus in this study, Williams presents us with two less clearly opposed theories of reading than she had done in the first section, and she represents a much more complicated but also more informative confrontation between them.

After Dessa escapes the jail in which she had been interviewed by Nehemiah, she gives birth and ends up at the plantation owned by Ruth Elizabeth Sutton (née Carson, and known familiarly as Miz Rufel). There Dessa learns to “read” Miz Rufel in a way she hitherto not had the opportunity to exercise, and Miz Rufel learns to “read” Dessa in a way she had hitherto simply not exercised. In the course of their developing friendship, each learns to revise and expand her theory of how to read people as people. As Dessa watches Rufel nurse her (Dessa’s) baby, Dessa finds herself disoriented from the terms of her world as it had hitherto existed for her: “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” (117). Likewise, Rufel finds that her conversations with Dessa force her to alter the ways she too had been taught to think about African American women in terms of her own existence. As Michele Wallace insightfully points out, in this section of the novel “Sherley Anne Williams’ accomplishment is that she takes the reader to some place she’s not accustomed to going, some place historical scholarship may never take us—into the world that black and white women shared in the antebellum South” (145).

That world, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has recently suggested, is one which is fraught with romanticizations and self-delusions. For “slaveholding women, and in some measure for slave women too,” writes Fox-Genovese, “the most positive interpretation of the household lay in the metaphor ‘my family, white and black,’ which captured the important, if elusive, vision of an organic community” (100). It was an ideal, as Fox-Genovese and others have gone on to show, that was more than elusive; it was delusive. For instance, in commenting on an incident Harriet Jacobs reports in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl—of a white child playing with a black child who was both “her slave, and also her sister”—Hazel Carby notes that Jacobs was working within a tradition of a “recurring motif” in which slave narrators represented the “polarization between the lives of white sisters and black sisters.” Moreover, argues Carby, Jacobs presents the cruel actions of her own mistress “within a history of acts of betrayal toward three generations of women in her family: herself, her mother, and her grandmother. Each served as faithful servant, each trusted to the honor of her mistress, and each was betrayed” (52-53). The betrayal of generations of her own biological family by her putative social family led Jacobs to reconstruct in her own mind what sense of familial alliance was plausible and liberating. Regarding the other side of plantation culture,
after reading scores of diaries and private papers of slaveholders, Fox-Genovese sadly concludes that “the racism of the women was generally uglier and more meanly expressed than that of the men” (349). The antebellum South was a world whose history renders it virtually incapable of sustaining many romantic ideals about relations between black slave women and white slaveholding women.

It was a world, though, which did provide some rare instances of friendships between black and white women—friendships which might well have taken the metaphor of a communal, interracial “family” as a serious tenet instead of a mutual self-delusion. Wallace suggests that Williams’ novel provides us with a “definition of friendship as the collective struggle that ultimately transcends the stumbling-blocks of race and class” (145). If we attend to Williams’ own construction of her scene of inspiration—her description of what stories and events inspired her to write the tale she wrote—we find that her initial desire was to represent the meeting of two historical women who might well have genuinely formed such a friendship. Williams read about a pregnant black woman who helped lead an uprising on a coffee in Kentucky in 1829 and a white woman living on a plantation in North Carolina in 1830 who reportedly gave sanctuary to fugitive slaves. “How sad,” Williams remarks, “that these two women never met” (5). By “signifying” on history—that is, by recreating an historical episode so that it can be revised and rendered differently—Williams creates a fiction in which they do meet.2

More importantly, though, she creates a condition for their meeting that allows her to explore more than just a series of conversations between two brave women of distinct cultural and social backgrounds. She represents their meeting in terms of what we may call a “subject of relation.” The “subject,” in this case, is truly an absence in the novel—she is Dorcas, Rufel’s slave “Mammy.” She is an absence because she does not exist as a character in the present action of the novel, having passed away a few weeks before the action takes place. She exists only as a mental presence in Rufel’s mind. She is, then, a “relation” in two interrelated ways. She is a “subject of relation” because she is putatively related to Rufel under the terms of that delusional model of “my family, white and black,” and she is also “subject to relation” in that she exists only as a product of Rufel’s narrative imagination. Her subjectivity and her subjection are issues dependent on a model of kin relations, the model in which she is called “Mammy,” and Rufel’s capacity for narrative relation, a capacity through which her slavemistress narrates her as a “mammy.” At one point in the story, Rufel talks to herself about how she constructs her familial sense in her imagination: “There you go again, she told herself angrily, expecting all darkies to be like Mammy. Like family, a voice wailed silently within her” (127). The meeting with Dessa provides Rufel with a sense of how a simile of “family” is an oppressive structure under the conditions of plantation culture. The figure of the “Mammy,” then, and a “mammy” who is a virtual absence in the action of the novel, provides Williams with a way of exploring the meeting of two women working towards a definition of how to read other people in the hope of achieving dialogue and managing a sense of supportive community.

Part of Williams’ strategy in Dessa Rose is to demonstrate the forms of delusion operative in a slave system nominally structured along familial terms. In particular, she negotiates the
tension between the two major forms of fictive kin ties—between “adoptive” kinship and “quasi-filial” kinship—in order to demonstrate their differences and to suggest something about their shared ideas of oppression. The difference between the two fictive kinship systems, writes Orlando Patterson, is that in “adoptive” kinship the slave is welcomed into the slave community with the intent of “genuine assimilation” and is given “all the claims, privileges, powers, and obligations of the status he or she has been ascribed,” whereas in “quasi-filial” kinship the slave is welcomed only nominally and the “language of kinship” is used as a means of expressing, at the same time as it hides, “an authority relation between master and slave” (63). While Williams shows that in the end Rufel’s relationship with Dorcas was modeled on “adoptive kinship,” she takes pains to demonstrate the destructive processes at work in generating and maintaining that sense of adoption.

When Rufel first encounters Dessa, Dessa has just escaped from the prison and pen of Adam Nehemiah. Dessa would later recall that Nehemiah’s attempt to “read” her—which he does as he tries to write her story in his so-called “Work”—had endangered her sense of selfhood (236). He had attempted to make her life history a kind of empty signifier—a series of events culminating in a random act of slave rebellion which can be understood in isolation and then easily prevented in the future. When Dessa asks Nehemiah the reason he is writing about her, he replies: “ ‘I write what I do in the hope of helping others to be happy in the life that has been sent them to live.’ ” He repeats the orotund sentence to himself and glows in the warmth of self-satisfaction, finding himself “rather pleased with that response” (45). Dessa, though, questions how it is that her life, which is so oppressive in the living, can be the referent for that particular kind of message. “ ‘You think,’ she asked looking up at the white man, ‘you think what I say now going to help peoples be happy in the life they sent? If that be true,’ she said as he opened his mouth to speak, ‘why I not be happy when I live it’ “ (50). Part of the implicit reason that her life can represent so radically different a message to its readers than it does to its bearer is the medium into which it is reconstructed. As we have seen, Williams challenges “writing” as the most significant medium within a political system which has “betrayed” and endangered African American existence in the New World.

A more important reason for the disparity between Dessa’s lived experience and its significance in Nehemiah’s representation has to do with an appropriative gesture preceding the media transmission. Before he writes down Dessa’s story, Nehemiah transforms it by mishearing and misconstruing it. As he listens to Dessa reciting her story in her “unfamiliar idiom,” Nehemiah finds himself “losing the tale in the welter of names” which are meaningless to him. Having lost the thread of her tale, Nehemiah simply “reconstruct[s]” Dessa’s voice and story “as though he remember[s] it word for word” (18). What Williams is doing by showing how a journalist “reconstruct[s]” the authentic voice of a slave rebel is offering a critique of William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner, a book she claims “travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner” (5). Like Nat Turner, Dessa Rose does not get to tell her story herself. It becomes “reconstructed” in someone’s mind—and then becomes a printed record. What is crucially important, then, is to note that Nehemiah’s original act of appropriation is not in the recording of Dessa’s
tale, but in his willful, imaginary "reconstruction" of it.

For in the second section of the novel, although Dessa encounters another kind of control and a different motive for asserting that control, she nonetheless encounters precisely the same appropriative gesture. Rufel is not a writer; nor, for that matter, is she altogether intent on controlling Dessa's life for any explicitly racist agenda such as Nehemiah's. Nehemiah represents a form of politically motivated control when he uses Dessa's life-story in order to write a tract on how to prevent slave revolts. What Rufel does, rather, is represent the ways the politically motivated forms of control inhabit the "personal." Rufel would control Dessa's story—the narrative of her past adventures and social relations—just as firmly and imperiously as would Nehemiah; but, unlike Nehemiah whose desire to control Dessa's narrative is motivated by his desire to regulate the economic transfers of society, Rufel would control Dessa's story because it is the only meaningful way she knows of forming relationships with persons of African descent. In other words, whereas Nehemiah appropriates Dessa's story in order to incorporate it into a text containing an agenda for sustaining the present political program, Rufel appropriates Dessa's story because it is the only way she knows how to form social connections with African Americans within that political program. For her, making a slave woman part of her "family" means taking the slave woman's story and imbricating it into her family's narrative. It is a strategy, as I will demonstrate presently, which is her own family inheritance.

Rufel's struggle to gain control of Dessa's story is prefigured in Rufel's experiences with her slave "Mammy," Dorcas. Prior to her own death and Dessa's arrival, Dorcas had been the resistant subject of Rufel's narrative imagination. Rufel's desire to appropriate Dorcas's story takes on two interrelated strategies. First, she attempts to reconstruct Dorcas's voice so that it echoes her own, and, second, she wishes to restructure the most significant events in Dorcas's life so that the whole life becomes supplemental to her own. Rufel's relationship with Dorcas is revealed exclusively through Rufel's memories of her recently deceased slave. Within the subjective memory of her slaveholder, as we might expect, the figure of Dorcas takes on qualities of superhuman patience and maternal love. Yet, Rufel's remembering function seems invested with some degree of dialogic capacity, for she feels compelled to represent even the most subversive of Dorcas's actions and words. For instance, as she is reflecting on Dessa's age, Rufel begins to think that no slave ever knew his or her exact age or birthday. Even Dorcas, Rufel thinks, has no better way of determining her birthday than by vague seasonal signifiers—"planting time" or "picking time." Because "...Mammy hadn't known how old she was or even her own birthdate," Rufel took it upon herself imperiously to choose "Valentine's Day as Mammy's birthday" (90). In choosing arbitrarily what day will represent Dorcas's birth, Rufel affirms her control over the narration of Dorcas's life; it is she, Rufel the slaveholder, who can establish the dates and raw data of Dorcas's history. In giving Dorcas an arbitrary birthday, Rufel does not subvert, but rather confirms, the slaveholding system. As Williams is here offering us a nice take on a particularly important topos in the poetics of slave narratives, we might see how fugitive slaves invested their ignorance of their birthdays with meaning.
As Frederick Douglass had noted in his *Narrative*, there is a reason slaves do not have an “accurate knowledge of their ages.” Douglass found that a “want of information” concerning his birthday was a “source of unhappiness” throughout his childhood and after. He was unable to ask his master because his master “deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit.” In fact, he continues, “the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (47). Masters keep slaves ignorant of the facts of their own lives so that slaves do not form an historical sensibility. Chattel does not know its history, and part of the strategy of making chattel of humans is to make them ignorant of their histories, both collective and personal. The “sin of slavery,” writes James W. C. Pennington, “lies in the chattel principle, or relation” (iv). Part of the strategy of the slave system, notes Pennington, is to make humans consider themselves chattel by making them think they are ahistorical beings. The slave who wishes to know his or her birthday, to have some idea of “his family history,” will go to the plantation and discover that there is no “record of himself as a man. On looking at the family record of his old, kind, Christian master, there he finds his name on a catalogue with the horses, cows, hogs and dogs.” Only in these records will the slave discover what relationship he or she has to the master: “that is just the place, and the only place assigned to it by the chattel relation” (xii).  

Although Douglass had a good idea of the year and season of his birth, it was important for him to know what he thinks of as the “authentic” date (47) and what Booker T. Washington terms the “exact date” (1).

In *Dessa Rose*, when Rufel gives Dorcas an arbitrary date to represent her birth, she does not counter the slaveholder’s desire to keep slaves ignorant of their birthdates. In fact, we might say, she asserts that desire in an even more insidious way. Not only will Dorcas remain ignorant of her actual birthdate, but she will also be required to structure her life according to the terms chosen for her by her mistress. Dorcas, however, was resistant to the forms of control Rufel attempted to impose on her. Dorcas, as Rufel recollects, “had refused to accept a date—‘This way I don’t have to age, see,’ she had joked, ‘I just gets a little older.’” Recalling this instance of her “mammy’s” subtle insubordination, Rufel finds herself pained by the “wound of that memory” (90). The memory is painful partly because Dorcas has so recently passed away; but it is equally painful because it forces Rufel to confront an image of Dorcas as something other than her own alter ego. Rufel thinks of Dorcas as an extension of herself and is troubled when she recalls that Dorcas often held an opinion contrary to her own. When that happens, Rufel employs the second strategy of her appropriation of Dorcas’s life-story—she reconstructs her slave’s voice.

When Ada, a fugitive slave living on Rufel’s plantation, tells the story of how her cruel and lecherous master had “lusted with her and then planned the seduction of Ada’s daughter, Annabelle,” Rufel finds herself offended at “Ada’s story.” The first thing she does in attempting to feed her indignation is to reconstruct “Ada’s story” itself. “‘No white man would do that,’ she’d insisted; unless he tied a sack over her head first, she had continued maliciously to herself” (91). When she then tries to get Dorcas to support her version of Ada’s story (that is, that it is a lie), Dorcas responds with some heat: “‘Miz Rufell!’ Mammy had said
Sharply. ‘You keep a lady tongue in your mouth. Men,’ Mammy had continued with a quailing glance as Rufel opened her mouth, voice overriding Rufel’s attempt to speak, ‘men can do things a lady can’t even guess at’ ” (92). Dorcas’s emphasis on lady is worth attending to. For one thing, by telling Rufel to keep a “lady tongue” in her mouth, Dorcas is telling her not to pretend to be able to speak for a slave woman. A “lady tongue,” Dorcas implies, cannot say what “a lady can’t even guess at.” At the same time as she is delivering this verdict, Dorcas is also both speaking over Rufel’s attempted interruption and silencing Rufel with a stern look. Recovering from this treatment, Rufel responds insolently by noting that “‘everyone know men like em half white and whiter.’ . . . ‘Miz Rufel,’ Mammy had snapped, ‘Lawd know it must be some way for high yeller to git like that!’ ” (92). Having silenced Rufel both by look and by incisive speech, Dorcas appears to have had the final word in this exchange. Moreover, that final word testifies to a history of slaveholding abuse and oppression. By pointing out to Rufel that there is a reason for and a history to the spectrum of colors in African America, namely slaveholding masters’ rape of enslaved women, Dorcas insists on looking historically at an individual’s story of sexual abuse at the hands of her master.

However, because Dorcas exists in this relation relative to Rufel’s representative whimsy, she cannot have the final word. In much the same way as Rufel is able to appoint her slave’s birthdate, she is also able to reconstruct her slave’s voice. Recalling the scene, Rufel decides that

Although Rufel does not own the bodies of the fugitive slaves who work on her plantation, she maintains remarkable control over their narratives.

“Mammy had probably not believed Ada’s story herself” but did not wish “to antagonize Ada” for fear that Ada would leave and not help Rufel. In other words, Rufel takes what had apparently been Dorcas’s words and intent and reconstructs them so that they now replicate her own sentiments. In fact, as Rufel reconstructs what she wants to be Dorcas’s true meaning, it turns out that Dorcas had probably foreseen “her own death” and was “trying to secure the help Rufel would need” afterwards (93). By the time she is finished with the reconstructed memory of her slave’s birth, thoughts, and beliefs, Rufel has truly made Dorcas’s life-story the supplement to her own. Dorcas lived at Rufel’s behest (symbolized by Rufel’s assigning her a birthdate) and died with Rufel’s best interests occupying her final thoughts. Such is Rufel’s narrative imagination regarding her slaves; she owns them and she owns their stories.

When Rufel first sees Dessa, she is immediately reminded of Dorcas. As Dessa is coming out of her coma, following her escape and the birth of her son, her eyes sweep across the room she occupies. Looking at those eyes as they glance through and beyond her, “. . . Rufel thought she had imagined that momentary expression.” Rufel is made uneasy by having black eyes look at her without recognizing her; “. . . never, never had Rufel done anything to anyone to deserve such a look. But to see eyes so like Mammy’s, staring such hatred at her. It had given Rufel quite a turn. She wanted the girl to wake up, wanted to see that look banished from her face.”
(97-98). Part of what troubles Rufel as she sees “eyes so like Mammy’s” looking hatefully at her is that she is once again forced to encounter the memory of Dorcas’s subversive moments—those moments, for example, when she had stared Rufel into silence. Rufel, as we saw, had responded to those moments by reconstructing Dorcas’s actions within an interpretive framework which featured Rufel at the center. Whatever Dorcas did or said was made to be done and said for Rufel’s ultimate benefit. So here also, Rufel’s immediate reaction to Dessa’s (facial) expression is to control it, to banish from her face that look of hatred. Moreover, as she has done with Dorcas, Rufel first attempts to structure Dessa’s life story through her own desires. Finding the story she hears from the fugitive slaves on the plantation unacceptable, Rufel concludes that “… there was more to the girl’s story than the darkies were telling.” In other words, Rufel deals with Dessa’s story the same way she had dealt with “Ada’s story.” Her immediate and only assumption is that the narrative she receives from the “darkies” cannot possibly be complete or accurate. Completion, she seems to think, is the prerogative of a white voice, and accuracy the product of a white imagination. Unable yet to assume control of Dessa’s story, Rufel dismisses it: “Well,” she thought, “darkies did have their own way of doing things and whatever the real story was, it couldn’t … amount to much” (96).

Though Rufel pretends Dessa’s story does not amount to much, she clearly wishes to make it part of her repertoire of narratives. That is Rufel’s method of controlling the lives of those around her. Although Rufel does not own the bodies of the fugitive slaves who work on her plantation, she maintains remarkable control over their narratives. She even sends her son to the slave quarters because “… the darkies talked before him as they would not with her … .” Through her son, then, “… Rufel kept some kind of track of the comings and goings in the Quarters” (97). Rufel’s control, moreover, works in another way. She attempts to make her slaves, and now those fugitive slaves who have taken their place, part of the fabric of her life by talking them into it, literally.

Dorcas had become Rufel’s slave through an economic exchange. She is made Rufel’s Mammy through a narrative imbrication. Although Dorcas is, as Rufel says, her “ ‘weddin’ gir” —that is, an owned thing—she became part of her family by being knit into it just as Rufel knits her other memories “into the commonplace fabric” of her life (108). We have seen how Rufel imbricates Dorcas into her (Rufel’s) mental life by reconstructing Dorcas’s voice so that it expresses what Rufel wishes it to express, no matter what it actually says. The obverse side of that “relation”—based on familial ties (kin relation) and narrative interpellation (relations of histories)—involves constructing Dorcas as a willing auditor to those narratives. In other words, Dorcas becomes both the subject of Rufel’s narratives, and subject to them. There is an informative ambiguity to the sentence describing what Rufel misses most about the deceased Dorcas: “Nothing in the days and weeks since Mammy’s death had filled the silence where her voice used to live” (112). Whose voice, we wonder? Mammy’s or Rufel’s? At first glance, we might think that the voice belonged to Mammy—since she is departed, so is the voice. But, given what we know about how Rufel reconstructs Dorcas’s voice to suit her purposes and temperament, the sentence might well be describing how Rufel’s voice has no place to live since Dorcas’s death.
It is another, but related, ambiguity which creates the initial crisis in the relationship between Rufel and Dessa. Having seen that Dessa had "eyes so like Mammy's" (98), Rufel assumes that Dessa will respond to her strategy of narrative imbrication with the same patience Dorcas had apparently shown. Rufel simply assumes that Dessa would wish to hear all about Rufel's life. It is Rufel's prerogative not only to keep track of the lives of the black folk living on her plantation; it appears her special desire to have her voice live in some slave woman's presence. Dessa, however, is unwilling to make even the simplest gestures of courtesy when Rufel starts to tell her narratives about her relationship to Dorcas. Unlike the battle between Dessa and Nehemiah which had been premised on a contest of media (writing or orality), the battle between Dessa and Rufel is premised on a contest of narratives (whose story is it and who gets to tell it).

Narratives, as Kenneth Burke says, are constructions wrought out of symbolic words. In an essay entitled "What Are Signs of What?: A Theory of Entitlement," Burke makes the ingenious argument that,

in mediating between the social realm and the realm of nonverbal nature, words communicate to things the spirit that the society imposes upon the words which have come to be the names for them. The things are in effect the visible, tangible material embodiments of the spirit that infuses them through the medium of words. And in this sense, things become the signs of the genius that resides in words.

(362)

For Rufel and Dessa, the key word upon which they construct their conflicting narratives is Mammy—a signifier which both women feel entitled to use to describe their relationships to an earlier presence and a preceding generation. Their contest, we might say, is about the relative meaning of that term.

The relationship between Dessa and Rufel reaches a crisis when Dessa resists Rufel's narrative about Dorcas. What is at stake in the competing narratives is the symbolic signifier around which each of the women constructs a narrative of her own life:

Against her will Dessa listened. "... night of the Saint Cecilia dinner and of course Mammy had to dress mother for that."

No white woman like this had ever figured in mammy’s conversations, Dessa thought drowsily. And this would have been something to talk about: dinners and gowns—not just plain dresses.

"... all by myself. And scared, too—the Winstons was related to royalty or maybe it was only just a knight.” The white woman paused a moment. "Now, often as Daphne told it, you’d think I’d know it by heart.” She shook her head and laughed softly. "Mammy would know it.”

Maybe, Dessa thought, with a sudden pang, Mammy hadn't "known" about Kaine, about Master selling Jeeter...

"... Mammy doubted that, when it all happened so long ago wasn’t no one alive now who witnessed it.”

I seen it, Dessa started to say. Master sold Jeeter to the trader same as Mistress sold me. But the white woman continued without pause.

"... the pretty clothes.” Well, I know Mammy didn't know a thing about history, but I knew she was right about the clothes. She used to dress me so pretty. Even the "Reynolds girls—and their daddy owned the bank; everyone said they wore drawers made out of French silk. 'They used to admire my clothes."

Dessa stared at the white woman. She was crazy, making up this whole thing, like, like—

"... pretend their clothes came from a fashionable modiste, but I always said, 'Oh, this a little something Mammy ran up for me.’ So when I walked into the great hall at Winston, I had on a dress that Mammy made and it was Mammy's—"

"Wasn't no 'mammy' to it.” The words burst from Dessa. (117-18)

The first and most obvious difference between the two narratives is that one is spoken aloud and the other narrated internally. It is worth noting because, again, it alerts us to the issue constantly attended to in this novel—the prob-
lem of having no voice with which to tell one’s own tale.

Rufel’s narrative offers us a succinct revelation of the symptoms and causes of that problem. It is significant, for example, that she defers her story about attending the Winstons’ dinner to describe in rather unnecessary detail Dorcas’s talent as a seamstress. While it might appear to Rufel that she is simply testifying to the skills of her slave as a way of praising her, it is equally obvious that Rufel’s praise is also a testament of Dorcas’s status as a commodity. As Rufel attests to Dorcas’s talents in handiwork, she also and emphatically asserts Dorcas’s ignorance of the significant features of social life. Dorcas may have a fine sartorial sensibility, according to Rufel, but, as she maintains, “Mammy didn’t know a thing about history.” It is worth noting that, at the same time that Rufel is describing Dorcas’s skills at dressmaking and her ignorance of history, Dessa is recalling her own history and her own commodification—she and her brother were sold away from their mother. Likewise, at the same time that as she argues that Dorcas was ignorant of “history,” Rufel represents Dorcas as a repository of information about Rufel’s own life. When Rufel cannot recall the precise details about an event that, after all, did happen to her, she thinks that “Mammy would know it.” Dorcas would know the details, apparently, because she has been subjected to the narrative of the experience so many times. While Rufel is treating Dorcas’s narrative gifts as a supplement to her own—that is, Dorcas can fill in what Rufel is unable to remember—Dessa is also thinking about her own mother’s narrative capacities. Dessa thinks of her mother’s conversations as something worth hearing because they offer new and interesting stories. She tries to recall which of her mother’s narratives had included a white woman such as Rufel. In the end, she decides that no such white woman had “figured in mammy’s conversations,” but what is important is that she treats her mother’s conversations as something worth recalling. Her mother represents a repertoire of narratives which help Dessa form her sense of self.

Whereas Rufel thinks of Dorcas as a supplement to selfhood, Dessa thinks of her mother as a source of selfhood.

In the end, this dialogue is more than just an example of association of details or words (such as know or witness) from one story to the other, but a shared narrative about two sides of the same tale. Williams takes pains to stress that neither Dessa nor Rufel is confused; each realizes that the other is talking about a different person. Even as Dessa erupts in the middle of Rufel’s story, she nonetheless “knew . . . what the white woman meant. ‘Mammy’ was a servant, a slave (Dorcas?) who had nursed the white woman . . . .” (118). Rufel, too, “knew they were talking about two different people” (121). Even though they both realize that they are talking about distinct people, each continues to think of the other’s presence as a disruption in her narrative and her life. In response to Rufel’s claims about her ‘Mammy,’ Dessa asserts to herself that “no white girl could ever have taken her place in mammy’s bosom; no one” (118). Rufel, also cognizant of their misunderstanding, nonetheless wonders “how that crazy gal could think she could know anyone I would know—forgetting that she herself had half-hoped the same thing” (121).

The confrontation between Dessa and Rufel leaves each of them in a state of crisis. Dessa had taunted Rufel by asking her whether or not she knew her “mammy’s” name.

“‘Mammy’ ain’t nobody name, not they real one,” Dessa asserts, “You don’t even not know ‘mammy’s’
name. Mammy have a name, have children.” (119). Too upset to think for the moment, Rufel realizes that she cannot immediately recall Dorcas’s name. Likewise, her response to the idea that Dorcas may have had children is unthinking. Although she will later meditate on the possibility that Dorcas had children Rufel might not know about (129), she now responds heatedly: “She didn’t... She just had me! I was like her child” (119). While Rufel stalks off, Dessa, fearing that her place had been usurped by a white child, goes into a trance-like state and offers a litany of her mother’s children:

Remembering 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…. Even buried under years of silence, Dessa could not forget. She had started on the names of the dead before she realized that the white woman had gone. (119-20)

While Dessa returns to memory in order to establish her connections to her mother, Rufel goes into a crisis of identity. She feels more poignantly what had intermittently troubled her before—that Dorcas might not have willingly loved her, that Dorcas’s disagreements with her might have been manifestations of that sort of hatred she saw in Dessa’s “eyes [which were] so like Mammy’s.”

Dessa can return to her memory and feel connected to her mother because she grants her mother’s voice a living presence in her mind. In fact, Dessa’s present memory of her family members’ names follows the contours her mother had already established; she calls them out to herself “the way mammy used to tell them” to her.

Rufel, on the other hand, cannot return to her memory easily because she can find only her own voice there. Here, we learn, is the cost of reconstructing other’s voices in our minds; eventually, our own voices are the only ones which inhabit our mental life. And that, essentially, means that we have lost, in Williams’ words, a sense of both “community and dialogue.”

To employ Mikhail Bakhtin’s useful term, we can say that Rufel’s mind takes on the qualities of a “monological steadfastness” (286). She denies the dialogue of voices in her imagination and thereby loses the opportunity for communal connection. What she needs to do is develop a dialogical attitude towards the language of others. Such an attitude, writes Bakhtin, is based on communicative norms in which the discourse of our mental lives “is half-ours and half-someone else’s” (345). Rather than treating Dorcas as an alter ego, rather than reconstructing Dorcas’s voice so that it resembles her own, Rufel must allow Dorcas’s voice the play of its own pitch; and she can do that only when she begins to think of Dorcas as an autonomous person. That, however, cannot happen so long as Rufel thinks of Dorcas as her slave, or considers Dorcas ignorant of history, or thinks it her right to impose a false birthdate on Dorcas’s life. In other words, Dorcas’s voice cannot reside in Rufel’s mental life until Rufel learns to acknowledge that it is a living presence of someone other than herself. She has to stop controlling her mental representations of Dorcas so that Dorcas becomes for her “almost an extension of herself” (146).

Rufel’s way of thinking about Dorcas, as I intimated earlier, is part of the legacy of her family, which in turn is a form of thinking encouraged by basic political legislation. Slave law, writes Patricia Williams, is both “fragmenting and fragmented.” It divides the world into a white slavemaster possessing “pure will” over a black slave denied any will, in a relationship falsely designated as one of “total interdependence.” Slave law, that is, includes the code for constructing social beings as “partial” entities. What Williams calls
"truly total relationships," which are premised on the basic belief that
others are parts of ourselves, require
"images of whole people dependent
on whole people" (221). Part of the
reason that America has not achieved a "unified social vision," Patricia Wil-
liams continues, is because we are not
taught by society to look at others as
parts of ourselves (62). Under the
terms of slave law, people were taught
to abide by commercial "claims that
make property of others beyond the
self" (11). Rather than establishing in
her mind that Dorcas is a part of her-
self in a noncommodified way—that
is, as a "whole person" who occupies a
place in her own psychic makeup—
Rufel thinks of Dorcas as "an exten-
sion of herself." In this image, Dorcas
is not "part" of Rufel, but rather her
tool, a mechanistic item beyond her.
And when Rufel does incorporate Dor-
cas into her mental life, as we have
seen, she alters Dorcas so that the "ex-
tension" becomes a replica of her own
opinions.

Even though she longer trafficks
in slaves, Rufel has not yet learned the
protocols of thinking of (dark) others
as whole people; she continues to traf-
 fick in their stories and to reduce them
and their narratives to a fragmentary
status. Because she does that, she does
not learn the art of reading others as a
way of enlarging dialogue and com-
munity. What Abrahams says in the
passage I quoted earlier is equally true
in its reversed form. Not only does the
"individual presence residing in the
voice assume . . . that a sense of com-
munity exists," but "a sense of com-
munity exists" because there is the as-
sumption of the "individual presence
residing in the voice." Dialogue and
community, as Sherley Anne Williams
asserts, are interrelated phenomena;
neither is possible without the other.

A biding by the basic assump-
tions of slave law, Rufel's fami-
ly has also influenced the way she
thinks of Dorcas. She wants to think
of Dorcas as a maternal figure because
that is how her family taught her to
palliate the harshness of a slave-
master relationship. When the Carson
family purchased Dorcas for eleven
hundred dollars, they immediately
"called her Mammy because Mrs. Car-
son thought the title made her seem as
if she had been with the family for a
long time." Taking away Dorcas’s his-
tory and name in an act of intentional
amnesia, Mrs. Carson teaches her
daughter how others become incor-
porated into the Carson family history
through a shared delusion. At first,
Rufel surrenders to the self-delusion of
the fictive kinship ties. She wanted,
desperately, to know that Dorcas
"loved her. It was Rufel Mammy
loved" (123). The confrontation with
Dessa, however, forces Rufel to con-
sider how the fictive ties on which she
has based her most intimate bond-
ing relationship are "fictive" in the
worst possible sense—they are
delusions. The best response Rufel
can manage to Dessa’s challenge is
that she (Rufel) "was like her child."

The slave system allowed Rufel
to begin to understand is that the relation
between slaves and masters—in either
a system of adoptive kinship or of
quasi-filial kinship—is never premised
on love, and certainly never love freely
given. What Rufel goes through in her
struggles with Dessa is akin to what
Eugene Genovese has called the "ter-
rible moment of truth" in the South,
the moment when the "slaveholders'
understanding of themselves and their
world suffered a severe shock during
and immediately after the war, when their black families appeared in a new light.” Expecting filial “obedience internalized as duty, respect, and love” from their former slaves, the slaveholders were traumatized to discover, like Rufel, that the fiction was over (97).

The essential issue for Rufel is love, as it also is for Dessa. Dessa, we recall, recoiled at the idea of someone like Rufel taking “her place in mammy’s bosom.” Her fear is that her mother’s love can be taken from her as easily as Dorcas’s body was taken from her. In a slave system based on what Pennington called the “chattel principle,” love was a liability; as Harriet Jacobs succinctly put it, “Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?” (37).

Many contemporary fictional treatments of slavery are now exploring the ways that slavery transformed the idea of love for the slaves. In Oxherding Tale, for instance, Charles Johnson’s narrator notes that “the view from the quarters changes the character of everything, even love—especially love . . .” (101). And in Beloved, Toni Morrison develops that thesis through an examination of ex-slaves who think love, in Ella’s words, “a serious disability” (256). A slave, according to Ella, should live by the rule: “ ’ ’ ’Don’t love nothing’ ’ ’” (92). A slave, according to Paul D, should “love just a little bit” (45). When he discovers that Sethe killed Beloved because she claims to have loved her too much to permit her to be returned to slavery, Paul D tells her that her love was “ ‘too thick.’ ” Sethe knew, though, that “thin love ain’t love at all” (164). She knew, as Paul D would come to know, that liberty meant getting “to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need per-

mission for desire—well, now, that was freedom” (162). Dessa’s immersion into a memory her mother has supplied her with gives her a way of reanimating her familial love. Part of Williams’ intention in Dessa Rose, as she says in her “Author’s Note,” is to demonstrate that “. . . slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love . . .” (6). On the other hand, Williams’ intention concerning Rufel seems to be a bit more complicated. While she does not deny that love may have existed between slaves and masters, she also insists on demonstrating the full extent of the pain undergone by one master who begins to confront the actual basis of her relationship with her “Mammy.”

The confrontation with Dessa creates a crisis in Rufel’s already troubled memory. Whereas before she was able to recall her conversations with Dorcas and then alter them so that they reflected what she wished to see—herself loved—she now finds her memories even more painful and somehow even more unstable. When she finally remembers Dorcas’s name, she finds herself unable “to recall the familiar face.” Struggling through her tears, eventually she discerns a face but then finds it “subtly altered so the face seemed that of a stranger” (125). Even after she composes herself and is able to mouth the name and see “Mammy’s face” clearly at the same time, she discovers finally “no comfort in the familiar image. It was as if the wench had taken her beloved Mammy and put a stranger in her place.” Rufel is unable to comfort herself in her image of Dorcas because Dessa has made Rufel realize the possibility that Dorcas has a history Rufel knows nothing about. “. . . Mammy might have had children and it bothered Rufel that she did not know” (128). A few weeks after the death of a woman with whom she had spent almost her whole lifetime, Rufel realizes she knows noth-
ing about Dorcas’s past or her feelings about things. In sum, she realizes that as she has been deluding herself about many things, she might finally have been deluded about the most substantial love she had felt in her life. It was only on Dorcas’s deathbed, eleven years into their relationship, that Rufel first touched Dorcas’s hair: “eleven years and only then to know the feel of a loved one’s hair under a loving hand. Truly, such ignorance was worse than grief” (129). How loving was that hand? And, more importantly, did the hair belong truly to a “loved one,” and one who reciprocated that love?

Rufel, we recall, had chosen Valentine’s Day, the day traditionally associated with love, as the fictive birthdate for Dorcas. When she remembers how Dorcas became part of the Carson family, she recalls how Dorcas fell in love with her from the first—“It was Rufel Mammy had loved, Rufel whose heart she had stolen from the moment she smiled” (122). Again, remembering her relationship with Dorcas, Rufel thinks of how Dorcas had taken her name, Ruth Elizabeth, and shortened it to “Rufel.” At first, Rufel uses this knowledge to convince herself that Dorcas loved her: “. . . she had been taken to that cushiony bosom, been named there ‘Fel, Rufel. To hear the names on Mammy’s lips was to hear, to know, herself loved” (124). But, as she begins to think more seriously about how her family has treated Dorcas, it dawns on her that this interpretation might be part of that general delusion she feels she has been under her whole life: “Had Mammy minded when the family no longer called her name? Was that why she changed mine? Rufel thought fearfully. Was what she had always thought loving and cute only revenge, a small reprisal for all they’d taken from her?” (129)

Inasmuch as Dessa’s was the voice which initiated Rufel’s crisis, it is apt that Rufel incorporates Dessa into her dramatic rehearsal of her relationship with Dorcas. Knowing full well that Dessa is not related to Dorcas, Rufel nonetheless feels compelled to play on the possibility: “Rufel herself had seen Mammy’s eyes in the wench’s face. The wench was from Charleston. Mammy had returned to Charleston all those long years ago” (130). Finally, in conversation with Nathan, one of the slaves on the coffle with Dessa, Rufel learns definitively that Dessa was not related to Dorcas. Rufel leaps on the knowledge: “I knew that little hellion couldn’t be no kin to Mammy.” In that same conversation, Nathan also tells Rufel about Dessa’s brutal whipping, about how the insides of her thighs and her genitalia had been savagely torn and permanently scarred by white slavemasters. Responding as she did to Ada’s story, Rufel denies the completeness of Nathan’s version of events: “I know it’s more to this than you telling . . . And I’m going to get to the bottom of it” (137). Even as she starts to deny Nathan’s version with a rather cruel pun, Rufel is forced to confront her own place in Dorcas’s life. Rufel is beginning to see the connections amongst herself, Dorcas, and Dessa in a new light:

. . . just because [Dessa’s] mammy had loved her don’t mean that Mammy didn’t love me, Rufel thought, wanting desperately to believe that Mammy had loved her not only fully, but freely as well. Almost she felt personally responsible for Mammy’s pain, personally connected to it, not as the soother of hurt as Mammy had always been for her, but as the source of that pain. (138)

Having just heard about Dessa’s pain, Rufel finally confronts the fact that she may be inflicting pain on the blacks on her plantation in her relentless desire to control their stories. Like the narrator in James Alan McPherson’s
wonderful short story “Elbow Room,” Rufel comes to understand and proclaim: “It was from the beginning not my story. I lack the insight to narrate its complexities. But it may still be told” (Elbow Room 241). Rufel, that is, unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe in Ishmael Reed’s representation of her in Flight to Canada, discovers in time that, as the narrator in Reed’s novel notes, “When you take . . . a story that doesn’t belong to you, that story will get you” (9). She must now discover the means by which she can tell a story that she now realizes doesn’t belong to her.

Rufel rushes to where Dessa is resting and addresses her. She does not talk through her, as she had been doing when she told stories about Dorcas; nor does she attempt to gain knowledge about her life-story through her son or through others who would tell her. For the first time, she talks directly to Dessa.

“What’s your name, gal?” Rufel asked sharply.

“Dessa. Dessa Rose, ma’am,” she said in a raspy voice.

Rufel was slightly taken aback; she had not expected the wench to answer so readily. “Why’d you run away?”

The darky kept her eyes downcast and plucked nervously at the coverlet. “Cause, cause I didn’t want my baby to be slaved,” she said finally in a rush and still without looking at Rufel.

Rufel looked at the baby, seeing in him the pickaninnies at Mobile. And that’s what he’ll look like, too, if I put you all out of here, she thought pettishly. “I mean, why your mistress use you so?”

“Cause she can,” the wench said on a long shuddering breath as she turned her face away.

Rufel was stunned for a moment by the ring of utter truth in the statement, yet, almost of its own volition, her hand reached to draw back the covers from the darky’s body. (139)

Dorcas provides Rufel with an opportunity to recreate a voice given no play or freedom, and Dessa with an opportunity to recreate her past life.

Even as she comes to a fuller understanding of what slavery means, even as she begins to glean how absolute was a slavemaster’s or slavemistress’s power over the body of the slave, Rufel still finds herself unable to believe Dessa’s story without wishing for confirmation in seeing the physical wounds testifying to her history of abuse. Earlier, she had sympathized almost physically with Dessa’s pain—“She could almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench’s thighs”—before recalling herself to her usual skepticism about black narratives: “That’s if it happened, she told herself” (135). As Dessa says later, “. . . Miz Lady had to see the goods before she would buy the story” (189). Rufel’s desire for control becomes somewhat less urgent, as is demonstrated by her willingness to address Dessa directly instead of constructing her narrative from various scraps of information she gathers, but it is by no means dissipated, as is evidenced by her desire to examine the body before she purchases the narrative.

The conversation with Dessa, this second one, does teach Rufel that, while Dessa may not be kin to Dorcas, they both lived their lives on the same continuum. “Rufel sensed somewhere in the general outline of the wench’s tale a deeper story and one not entirely unrelated to her concern for Mammy, though she could not say just how” (141). This sentiment marks the midway point of Rufel’s crisis of identity. She has learned now that as a slavemistress she had absolute power over Dorcas; and that absolute power, even when not exercised to its absolute limits, is a condition in which human relationships are inevitably cor-
ruptured. Dessa’s perfectly simple reply is astonishingly apt: Her slave mistress did what she did because she could. This is precisely the same answer Dessa had given to Nehemiah when he inquired into her motives: “I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine [her lover]. Cause I can’” (20). Rufel, hearing the “ring of utter truth in the statement,” realizes that what her family did to Dorcas—take her name, her history, her body, her birthday, her voice—was done because they could do it.

It is only after Rufel undergoes a traumatic discovery of the powers she wielded over Dorcas that she can begin to renegotiate the terms of their relationship. In the end, Dessa provides Rufel with both the crisis and the terms of reconciliation. For Rufel to restructure her mental narrative of her relationship with Dorcas, she has to incorporate Dessa into her life. Because she has lived life in the same condition as Dorcas, Dessa can provide Rufel with a voice which she can install into her mental representations of Dorcas. Dessa’s voice serves Rufel’s memory, in the state of psychic crisis, by forcing Rufel to hear again what Dorcas may actually have been saying in her covert way. After the crisis, Dessa’s voice serves Rufel by aiding her in establishing the terms of dialogue and, therefore, community.

Interestingly, it is not Dessa who finally aids Rufel in her task of hearing anew Dorcas’s words. It is Nathan, one of the other slaves who escaped from the coffle with Dessa. When she asks Nathan why he escaped from his master, and implies (somewhat sardonically) that the master must have physically beat him, Nathan mocks her sardonic question and tells her that he fled his master’s plantation because he felt psychically abused: “...sometime I get to wondering why Master can take his ease while I be the one that sweat, why the harder I work the more he gets.” He then casts his eyes at her and asks in the same tone she used, “But I guess you wouldn’t know nothing about that?” Immediately, Rufel is again cast into that confusion she suffers every time she senses a black voice taunting her: “His lightly mocking tone recalled her earlier anguish over Mammy—Had she felt this way?” Rufel’s most poignant thought again concerns the possibility that Dorcas did not love her: “How could you love someone who used you so?” (143). Once she has made the association between Nathan and Dorcas, as she had done with Dessa, Rufel is able to accommodate another voice into her mental representation of Dorcas. With Nathan, Rufel is able to replay the same topos she had rehearsed in her identity crisis—such as the issue of naming.

In introducing herself to Nathan, for instance, she uses the name Dorcas had given her (Rufel), although she immediately regrets having done so. When Nathan calls her “Mistress ‘Fel,” though, she feels “oddly moved by his use of the diminutive” (145). Rufel begins to rehearse the issue which had earlier confirmed and then troubled her in her attempt to understand whether or not Dorcas loved her. What did it mean for Dorcas to rename her: Was it love or revenge?

In conversation with Nathan, Rufel begins to feel that the use of a “pet name” can be a sign of affection. Later, when it comes time to name Dessa’s baby boy, Rufel plays an important part in mediating between the various names offered. Rufel suggests that “the baby be named for all of them, or at least [be given] a name that represented them all, and, on impulse, offered ‘Desmond’ as a pretty compromise. ‘Des’ for Odessa, ‘mond’ to represent the men, Nathan, Cully, and Harker, who were responsible for his
free birth.” Having offered her advice on the name, which eventually was adopted and then shortened to “Mony” because Dessa “felt him to be as good as gold,” Rufel comes to a final understanding of what Dorcas’s renaming of her had signified.

“Maybe this was what Mammy had felt when she had changed Ruth Elizabeth’s name, that somehow she had snuck a little piece of the child for herself, had marked at least some part of him with something of her own making” (148). Rufel’s final understanding is significant because it plays on the borders of certainty. Having learned not to reconstruct another’s voice so that it replicates her own opinion, Rufel grants that her thought is only conjecture: “Maybe this was what Mammy had felt . . . .” Likewise, Rufel knows what it feels like to be part of a dialogue; she contributed her suggestion amongst those made by others. Moreover, her suggestion for the baby’s name was indeed based on the very idea of community, for “Desmond,” as she explains its significance, refers to a composite set of people.

As she spends more time with Nathan, Rufel comes to grant him the same space she had granted Dorcas.

“His company came, in large measure, to replace the companionship Rufel had shared with Mammy.” There is a difference, however, in that Rufel “could not see him as she had seen Mammy, almost as an extension of herself” (146). The reason Rufel is unable or unwilling to reduce Nathan to the same status that she had reduced Dorcas has to do with her new-found capacity for listening to him, instead of desiring to speak through him (as, for instance, she had done with Dessa in her stories about Dorcas and the Winstons’ dinner party). Although “now and then, she might speak of some incident she had seen or heard of in Charleston or Mobile,” Rufel “felt little need to talk about herself. Mostly she was content to listen” (147).

Listening, as I have suggested elsewhere, is the supreme act of sympathy in the training of the “blues mind”; in learning to listen with attention and empathy, the subject gains the “ability to allow the other to be sufficient unto itself and also a part of the self’s life” (“Fraternal” 342). By listening to Nathan, by giving him the space to tell her things and teach her how others live in the world, Rufel gains the capacity to tell anew Dorcas’s story in a less hegemonic way. The grandmother in N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn says that “the simple act of listening is . . . crucial to human history” (qtd. in Jones 178). It is also crucial to the rehearsing of individual human histories. As Robert Stepto notes, “telling grows out of listening” (211); and by listening to Nathan, Rufel learns to tell her narrative of Dorcas in a new and fundamentally different way.

What Nathan tells Rufel has little (in fact, almost nothing) to do directly with Dorcas. Rather, he tells her stories she has already had access to through her son and through Dorcas herself:

Through talking with Nathan, Rufel came to know something of the people who lived in her Quarters: Ned, a young rascal given to playing pranks; Red, who longed after a “wife” down around his homestead; Castor and Janet and the others—and once again became aware of the daily routine of the farm. She used him much as she had Mammy, as a means through which she participated in the life beyond the yard. These were not Sutton darkies, of course, so she was mindful of what she said. Nathan could shut his face just as tight and quick as Ada or that wench, but he was far friendlier.” (147)

When Dorcas or her son told her stories of the black people on the plantation, Rufel used that knowledge to keep “some kind of track of the comings and goings in the Quarters” (97).
She used her knowledge to control the people whose stories she heard about; in fact, she did not even “recognize them” when she saw them. They were anonymous people doing trivial things. When Nathan tells her about the people in the quarters, though, they become actual people with names and meaningful lives. Rufel learns not so much to control these stories as to enjoy them as expressions of human endeavors; she treats them less as a way of keeping records of events than as a way of participating in the lives of others. She begins to realize the forms of community that exist in the yard. And, she realizes that sense of community because she is now in a genuine dialogue. She is attuned to Nathan’s possible silent response to her possible mean-minded comment. Unlike her conversations with Dorcas, in which she had always attempted to utter the final and binding word on any event, here she gains a sense of decorum about allowing someone else to maintain control of the story he is telling.

Immediately after this passage, Williams informs us that these stories about the people on the plantation quarters effect a transformation of Rufel’s own narrative about Dorcas. She stops romanticizing Dorcas’s personality and grants it an ambivalence, an open-endedness, a human instability she had earlier been unwilling to construe or ascribe to Dorcas. Thinking about how “hateful and spiteful” Dessa had been to her, Rufel thinks that “even if Mammy herself had been spiteful, bitter, secretly rebellious, Mammy, through caring and concern, had made Rufel hers, had lain claim to her affections. Rufel knew this as love” (147).

Rufel does two important things here. First, she rephrases the terms of love so that it is Dorcas whose agency is important. Dorcas, we are told, “had made Rufel hers.” By granting Dorcas the agency to possess Rufel in love, Rufel might be deluding herself—but there is, I think, sincerity in her sentiment. One measure of that sincerity is the second thing Rufel does here. She allows part of Dessa’s character to help her recreate Dorcas’s personality so that it is multifaceted and not simply a romanticized extension of her own. She realizes that Dorcas, like Dessa, was a slave; and she understands that the only way she can reform her understanding of what sentiments Dorcas may have felt as a slave or what thoughts might have gone through her mind is by granting someone who has experienced what Dorcas had experienced the authority to speak for that station. As the fugitive slave Mary Prince says in claiming precisely that authority: “I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me” (23). Rufel learns to listen to fugitive slaves as a way of understanding her deceased one.

Finally, in further conversation with Nathan, Rufel learns what has happened to her own past because she denied herself the capacity for listening to Dorcas. After four years of marriage, Rufel finally learns that her husband is a gambler who is now in debt.

“Why didn’t Mammy tell me?” Rufel wailed, feeling more betrayed by Mammy’s silence than by Bertie’s deception. Had they conspired against her, plotted together to keep her in the dark?
“It wasn’t her place.”
“She should have told me anyway,” Rufel insisted.
“I spect she tried,” Nathan said drily. (153)

Rufel finally realizes that, by reconstructing Dorcas’s voice in her mind so that it reflected her own thoughts, she denied herself much information she might have found useful in determining the course her life would take. In the end, Rufel discovers that, by not listening to others, she is able only to maintain the status
human beings. The reason she does it, perhaps, is because she can. It also marks her final act of penance for what she and her family had done to Dorcas. The other significant material action she undertakes towards that end is to talk to Dessa.

Feeling urgently the need to speak to Dessa, Rufel bursts in on her in her bedroom, only to discover her naked.

Barely managing to suppress her quick gasp of sympathy surprised from her by that glimpse of the dark body, and acutely embarrassed, Rufel closed the door. 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. Rufel leaned weakly against the door, regretting what she had seen. The wench had a right to hide her scars, her pain, Rufel thought, almost in tears herself. Impulsively, she opened the bedroom door.

"Odessa—“ and stopped, unsure of what to say. The wench had snatched up a dress and stood stiffly with it clutched in front of her bare chest. Rufel sensed the smoldering hostility beneath the girl’s obvious embarrassment and flushed painfully, recalling how she’d tried to argue the girl down about Mammy. “That other day”—she stopped and cleared her throat—“that other day, we wasn’t talking about the same person. Your mammy bithed you, and mines, mines just helped to raise me. But she loved me,“ she couldn’t help adding, “she loved me, just like yours loved you.”

The wench watched her narrowly for a moment; slowly her tensely held shoulders relaxed. “I know that, Mis’ess,” she sighed. “I know that,” she said without anger or regret. Rufel, suddenly conscious again of the wench’s half-nakedness, started. “I’ll pull this door to so you can have some privacy while you dress.” (155)

Clearly, Rufel concludes that she needs Dessa’s voice to confirm what she intuits about Dorcas’s sentiments. It is an interesting reversal of the values with which she had begun her relationship with Dessa, the same set of values she had used to maintain her relationship with Dorcas for eleven years. Seeing Dessa’s scarred body, she realizes that there is indeed a

quo. For her to make a significant change, for her to assume control of her own life, she has to allow the others who speak to her an authority she had hitherto not granted them. She cannot assume, as she does with Ada, that the story Ada tells is a lie. She cannot immediately conclude, as she does with Dessa, that the story she is told about Dessa is incomplete and misleading. She cannot, as she has done with Dorcas, assume that others’ voices are extensions of herself. Others’ voices, when they are heard, are what allow the self to confront itself. As Mae Henderson notes, Williams belongs to that tradition of writing in which one discovers "a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an intrasubjective engagement with the intersubjective aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self (the other[s] in ourselves)” ("Speaking" 36-37).

After finally listening to the stories Nathan tells her about her wastrel husband, Rufel begins to refigure her own life. She decides, with the others, to play a confidence game on slaveholders in neighboring counties by selling Nathan, Harker, and the others to buyers from whom they will escape and rejoin the group to be resold further down the line. This course of events does not mark Rufel’s tendencies as a criminal, because the act would be criminal only if she believed that the economic exchange in human bodies were legal; rather, this marks her revolutionary tendency, her understanding that any act which decimates the system is a worthy one. What makes slaveholders capable of holding absolute power over slaves is their ownership of the slaves. By draining their financial resources, she makes it impossible for them to purchase more slaves. And without slaves, she must think, they cannot exercise absolute power over other
"deeper story" behind Dessa's "tale"; and, moreover, she is right to sense that it is a story "not entirely unrelated to her concern for Mammy" (141). Equally clear, though, is the fact that Dessa's reply is undeniably ambiguous. After all, she does not declare that she "knows" that Dorcas loved Rufel; she could well have been commenting on only the first of Rufel's observations—that they were not talking about the same person—instead of also agreeing with Rufel's other claim that Dorcas did indeed love Rufel. It is likely that Dessa is commenting on both observations, but the ambiguity in her reply, I think, is part of Williams' consummate artistry in concluding her representation of Dorcas.

This ambiguity should not be downplayed; Dessa's final word on Dorcas is hardly definitive. What should also not be glossed over is that the final word is Dessa's. Dessa, let us recall, has not only not spent enough time with Rufel and Dorcas to enable her to determine whether there existed a love between them or not, but she has never met Dorcas. Yet hers is the final word on the relationship between Dorcas and Rufel, and an apparently ambiguous final word at that. And that, surely, marks one of Williams' most significant contributions to the reconstruction of the mythology of the "Mammy." She begins that reconstructive impetus by showing how "Mammy" figures are recreations of romantic memories; that is, how, historically, the iconic figure had been renovated and received. The figure of the "Mammy," wrote even the brilliantly incisive W. E. B. Du Bois in his contribution to that myth, is "one of the most pitiful of the world's Christs." She was, he continued, little more than "an embodied Sorrow, an anomaly crucified on the cross of her own neglected children for the sake of the children of masters who bought and sold her as they bought and sold cattle" (qtd. in Genovese 356). The life of the typical "Mammy," notes Eugene Genovese in one of the signal contributions to the dismantling of the myth, is tragic but her "tragedy lay, not in her abandonment of her own people, but in her inability to offer her individual power and beauty to black people on terms they could accept without themselves sliding further into a system of paternalistic dependency" (361). While noting that Genovese's groundbreaking study "did much to reshape the image of Mammy," Deborah Gray White feels nonetheless that "there is still something about Mammy that is enigmatic" (55). Tracing the creation of the "Mammy legend" to the pro-slavery writings of thirty or so years prior to the Civil War, White discerns how the figure of "Mammy" was constructed to personify "the ideal slave, and the ideal woman... As part of the benign slave tradition, and as part of the cult of domesticity, Mammy was the centerpiece in the antebellum Southerner's perception of the perfectly organized society" (58). Williams' contribution, much like White's, is to highlight the imaginative structures used to develop and transmit the myth of the "Mammy" and also to dwell on the irreducible enigma of the silent and deferred "Mammy."

In the end, there is only one African American slave in Dessa Rose—and that is Dorcas. The rest are all fugitive slaves—Dessa, Harker, Nathan, Ada, Annabelle—all of them. It is worth noting, then, that Williams places only one voice beyond the realm of freedom and, coincidentally, represents only that voice as always a reconstruction of someone else's imagining. Perhaps Williams' most astonishing accomplishment is her implicit representation of the proper respect due the enigma and the am-
bigness of the slave's voice. The fact that Williams ensures we never directly hear Dorcas's voice or immediately encounter her words except through others' representations suggests something about the limitations on our ability to hear the slave voice. Beyond "written history and outside of printed law," wrote Du Bois in another context, "there has been going on for a generation as deep a storm and stress of human souls, as intense a ferment of feeling, as intricate a writhing of spirit, as ever a people experienced" (487). This experience, he continued, comes to us in "the voice of exile" (539) which is full of "eloquent omissions and silences" (542) and conveyed in the "naturally veiled and half articulate" manner employed whenever "the slave spoke to the world" (541).

Williams employs two interrelated strategies to represent that "voice of exile" in Dessa Rose. First, she defers the representation so that Dorcas's voice appears as always the recreative supplement of Rufel's narrative imagination. Second, she insists that the only humane way to recreate that voice is to supplement it by placing it amidst a chorus of voices of people who have lived the same life and experienced the same condition as Dorcas.

The reader, writes Harriet Jacobs, cannot know "what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another" (55). To understand the condition of the slave, wrote Frederick Douglass, "one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances" (144). Immediately thereafter, though, Douglass notes the impossibility of anyone's imagining the condition of a slave without experiencing it. There is, however, one means by which slavery and the condition of the slave can be partially understood, notes Douglass, and that is to hear the slave songs. "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of these songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do" (57). "In these songs," echoed Du Bois, "the slave spoke to the world" (541).

Because Rufel cannot experience slavery and thereby understand Dorcas's words, she learns to listen to the voices of the fugitive slaves on her plantation. In them she hears the blues choruses which provide her with a means of more generously recreating Dorcas's enigmatic voice. The blues, as Williams says elsewhere, is a form of communication in which there is "a very close and personal relationship among singer, song, and the group tradition on which all depended for the act of creation, and which the act of creation affirms and extends" ("Blues" 124). The blues, that is, provides the conditions for understanding those ancestral voices which are recreated with every song—and whose recreation allows the singer and the audience to constitute and reconstitute their own selves. Moreover, the very ethic of the blues is premised on its ability, in Williams' words, to negotiate that which is enigmatic: "Unlike sacred music, the blues deals with a world where the inability to solve a problem does not necessarily mean that one can, or ought to, transcend it. The internal strategy of the blues is action, rather than contemplation" ("Blues" 125).

In the end, Williams posits the blues as her theory of reading as a way of making possible both dialogue and community. Williams represents the ways that several voices contribute to what Gayl Jones calls the "collective blues dialogue" (38), and demonstrates how communal narratives about the absent ancestors are wrought of that dialogue. Rufel listens
to the voices of those fugitive slaves
whose stories she had earlier tried to
control in order to give herself the
space and capacity to recreate Dorcas’s
voice. By listening to the “collective
blues dialogue,” instead of attempting
to reconstruct the individual voices or
control the various stories, Rufel per-
mits herself to participate in the com-
community to which Dorcas also
belonged. She is not the only one to
benefit from that dialogue, though.
Dessa also gains a form of communica-
tion by which she can reconstitute
that selfhood Nehemiah threatened.

In conversation with Nehemiah,
Dessa had felt “she saw the past as she
talked, not as she had lived it but as
she had come to understand it” (58).
Her understanding of her past, in this
case, however, is mediated through
Nehemiah’s “reconstruction.” Just as
Dorcas had been subjected to Rufel’s
narrations of her own life, so was
Dessa subjected to the questions
Nehemiah directed at her. We have to
remember that Nehemiah had
recorded Dessa’s life to signify some-
thing entirely foreign to its lived ex-
perience. The figure of Dorcas, how-
ever, provides Dessa with that dialogic
space in which she can repudiate
Nehemiah’s attempt to reconstruct her
history so that it does not resemble her
life. The figure of Dorcas also
provides Dessa with a theory of read-
ing which is countereffective to the
one Dessa had internalized by being
subject to Nehemiah’s relations.

By being made a corporate part of
a collective voice, Dessa regains her
past “as she had lived it,” or at least
she regains a sense of the past with an
understanding no longer so oppress-
ively mediated by Nehemiah’s
reconstructions. We should recall that
whatever ambiguity Dessa’s final
words on Dorcas’s relationship with
Rufel contain, these words are also a
testament to her own, intimate
knowledge: “I know that, Mis’ess,’ she
sighed. ‘I know that.’ ” As a fig-
ure of an unacceptable absence, Dor-
cas provides Rufel with an oppor-
tunity to recreate a voice given no play
or freedom, and Dessa with an oppor-
tunity to recreate her past life. As
such, Dorcas becomes the “subject of
relation” in Dessa Rose.

1. Stepto, of course, is also intent on showing how this basic “distrust” is always tempered by an
equally “abiding faith” in literacy as a means of recording the black experience (196). As Henry
Louis Gates has shown, African American writers in the Enlightenment could become speaking sub-
jects only by inscribing their voices in the written word” (Signifying 130). Likewise, while Williams
notes that “Afro-American literature is thus created within the framework of multiple relationships,
and the tension between the white literary and the black oral traditions” (“Blues Roots” 123), she
equally maintains that, when writing is reconstructed through the incorporated black voice, it as-
sumes a different value. Then, writes Williams, we have “the beginning of a new tradition built on a
synthesis of black oral traditions and Western literate forms” (135). For a fuller discussion of the al-
tering conditions by which literacy becomes positively significant for Dessa, see Deborah
McDowell’s excellent essay on the novel (esp. 156-57).

2. What I call “signifying on history” is a strategy I discuss elsewhere (“Daughters”). There I dis-
cuss how Toni Morrison also constructs a scene of inspiration based on her reading of history and
how she too, in Beloved, resurrects historical women in order to revise their personal histories as
well as to criticize the historiographical methods and ideologies (particularly those of the Elkins’
school) which are responsible for propagating the characterization of the slave as an individual
without community or agency. Dessa Rose is also a novel, as I suggest below, which implicitly of-
fers a severe critique of this historiographical tradition—implicitly because Williams’ main object of
critique is William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner, which is, of course, a fictional repre-
sentation of many of the Elkins’ school’s tenets about the so-called “slave personality.” It is a novel
which Williams says “outraged” her (5). She remonstrates by having the slaves she represents form
close communities and display agential liberty (“... all had stood free, by their own doing...” [54]).
3. For a suggestive discussion of the methods by which Williams situates the first part of Dessa Rose as a critique of Styron's Confessions, see Mae Henderson's informative study of how Williams "engages Styron as a kind of literary interlocutor" in Williams's short story "Meditations on History" ("Writing").

4. Both Pennington, who, incidentally, performed the marriage ceremony for Anna and Frederick Douglass, and Douglass himself spent their lives attempting to compensate for their ignorance about their recorded histories. Douglass spent the last months of the last year of his life searching for his correct birthdate. His last entry in his Diary records that his search for the exact date of his origin was something that seriously troubled him. It apparently troubled him so much that Douglass returned to Baltimore in March, 1894, to visit Thomas Edward Sears, the last surviving descendent of Douglass's former master, in his search for this information. As Henry Louis Gates notes in his essay on Douglass's search, Douglass wished to recuperate himself by recouping what slavery had deprived him of possessing: that sense of self based on ideas of time. "In antebellum America," notes Gates, "it was the deprivation of time in the life of the slave that first signaled his or her status as a piece of property" (Figures 100). Douglass's desire to know his birthdate, his biological origin in terms of cultural standards of time, was part of Douglass's lifelong attempt to buy himself back.

Pennington, too, was concerned with finding or constructing what he called a "record of himself as a man." Like Douglass, he knew that if he wished to declassify himself from the catalog of chattel he had to discover those pieces of data which marked him as an historical being. Like many fugitive slave narratives, Pennington's contains a statement of motive; and like that of many slave narrators, Pennington's motive was to show to the world the abhorrent system of slave rule in the South and the need for abolitionist mobilization in the North (58). But there is another reason Pennington writes the document to which he gives the subtitle "Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington"—and that is his knowledge, as he says in a different context, that "I must begin the world somewhere" (51). Douglass noted that he did not know his birthday because he never saw "any authentic record containing it" (Narrative 47). The Narrative, in the end, does not contain that date either; but it is a record which articulates every other form of self-authentication. Like Douglass, Pennington writes a narrative (expressly his own "history") in order to document the beginning of his world and his beginning in the world. Neither Pennington nor Douglass could remain satisfied with Booker T. Washington's apparent comfort with the ignorance of his birthday: "I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth, but at any rate I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at some time" (1). Ignorance of the date of a slave's birth was not something regarding which Douglass or Pennington found they could entertain a humorous attitude. For knowledge of that date was often a way of initiating a renewed relationship with a new world. In terms of slavery and the sense of time, McDowell's comment regarding the process by which narration negotiates the continuity of time in Dessa Rose is useful: "In telling the story of a woman's passage from slavery to freedom, the novel negotiates between past and present to reveal, not surprisingly, that they are not at all discrete" (147).

Works Cited


Pennington, James W. C. The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington. 2nd ed. London, 1849.
—. "Some Implications of Womanist Theory." Gates, Reading 68-75.

Pending funding, 2 one-year replacement positions:

1. American Studies/English. Assistant Professor level. A joint appointment in the American Studies Program and the English Dept. Specialization in Afro-American literature and culture. Areas of secondary interest can include American popular culture, folklore and folk cultures, gender studies, literature of the city. Candidates should have a strong commitment to interdisciplinary teaching.

2. American Literature. Assistant Professor level. Appointee expected to teach two terms of introductory American literature and one or two intermediate or advanced American literature courses, and to participate in American Studies Program. Women and members of minority groups are especially welcome. Send letters of application, cv, support documents (samples of course descriptions and syllabi, scholarship), and the names and addresses of three references to: Ronald R. Thomas, Chairman, Dept. of English, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 06106. Candidates interested in both positions should so indicate in cover letter. Trinity College is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer.