Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka, University of Debrecen, Hungary

Surviving the Impossibility of Black Motherhood: Trauma and Healing in Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose

Abstract

The paper reads the novel Dessa Rose (1986) by African American author Sherley Anne Williams, and focuses on the duality of motherhood as compounding and healing trauma at the same time. After placing the novel is its socio-cultural and literary context, I argue, relying on Black feminist and Afro-pessimistic theory, that the subversive potential of Williams's novel lies in its claim that enslaved Black women are capable of healing through (re-)appropriating what is meant to dehumanize them: their stories, their bodies, their children, and their communities.

Keywords: contemporary African American literature, Black women's literature, slavery, motherhood studies

1. Introduction

The novel Dessa Rose (1986) by African American author Sherley Anne Williams interrogates the consequences of the extreme humiliation and almost total annihilation and torture of the Black female body. The eponymous protagonist, an enslaved woman, is denied agency and narrative authority, and is dehumanized by several people in her environment – B ack and white, men and women alike. The text demonstrates how the simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility of Black women compounds the different types of trauma caused by slavery, such as being kept in bondage, the denial of bodily autonomy, an almost fatal escape, and giving birth under traumatic circumstances. In the following text, after placing the novel in its socio-cultural and literary context, I will anchor my analysis in Black feminist and Afro-pessimistic theory, and argue that the

subversive potential of Williams's novel lies in its claim that Black women are capable of healing through (re-)appropriating what is meant to dehumanize them: their stories, their bodies, their children, and their communities. In this process of wake work (Sharpe 16-19), the protagonist and her community create a new Black discourse of self-representation in defiance of the dominant, white supremacist discourse in order to construct, in Christina Sharpe's words, "new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property" (18).

The story of Dessa, a pregnant slave and fugitive mother, is based on the amalgamation of two real-life incidents (Williams, "Author's Note" 5). As such, it is firmly anchored in the historical reality of North American slavery, when the abuses of the reproductive rights of the colonized Black female body reached their peak. Especially after the Slave Trade Act of 1807, "breeding" was used as a means to increase capital, enabled by the principle of partus sequitur ventrem, the legal doctrine establishing that a child born to an enslaved mother would also become a slave (Morgan 1). Black babies thus did not belong to their mothers and were often brutally separated from them shortly after birth. While being hyper-sexualized, routinely raped, and forced to bear children, the enslaved woman was "excluded from the mothering realm" (Patton xii) and was "both mother and mother-dispossessed" (Spillers 80). The systematic severance of the mother-child bond contributed to what Black feminist scholars refer to as Black mothers' "ungendering" (Spillers 68) or "degendering" (Patton xii). The resulting "natal alienation" became a constituent element of slavery (Patterson 6).

Apart from the trauma inherent in slave motherhood,[1] various reductive images of Black women ossified into stereotypes after the abolition of slavery, most of which inscribe Black women's inability to mother their own children (Jordan-Zachery 37-46). As a result, Black feminist scholars conclude that just as slave children belonged neither to the mother nor to the owner (Spillers 74), Black mothering is "an impossibility" in the afterlife of slavery[2] as well: due to the structural inequalities inherent in white supremacist societies, the Black mother's failure is inevitable and she "cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all" (Quashie 66).

However, literature could not reckon with these experiences for centuries either because these women lacked the discourse to write about it, or due to the limitations set by literary and social conventions (Morrison 101-24). Accordingly, the trope of first-time, early, biological motherhood[3]

reoccurs in fiction by Black women featuring Black female focalizers with startling force, especially since the 1970s, the decade which marked the second renaissance of Black literature and the emergence of Black female prose writers (Dubey 1). They formed a new discourse which could narrate the experiences of the previously muted group of Black mothers, and formed a corpus that lays emphasis not only on culturally embedded forms of mothering, such as "othermothering,"[4] but also on early and biological motherhood, spanning the period from conception to breastfeeding – the only phase available for most slave mothers.[5] The pervasive erasure of mothers' stories and subjectivities throughout history reverberates in the fiction of the past few decades not simply as a renewed interest but as a lack, a void at the same time: even though plots often heavily rely on pregnancy and childbirth, happy mothers are few and far between in this corpus. Black maternal suffering and the severing of the mother-child bond in (neo-)slave narratives seem inevitable. Nevertheless, these works lay emphasis on the trauma related to motherhood and on its healing potential as well.

The duality of motherhood as compounding and healing trauma at the same time is characteristic of Dessa Rose. Dessa heals from her traumas through two different kinds of communal experience: by sharing and thus keeping alive a narrative that privileges her point of view, and by establishing intercorporeal bonds in a community organized around "horizontal relatedness" (Spillers 75, emphasis in the original) and, insofar as white supremacy permits, around familial bonds.[6] Both healing strategies are linked to motherhood since it is her children (and later her extended family) who enable Dessa's survival and later facilitate her recovery through body and discourse as well: they provide her with an outlet to narrativize her past traumas, while also providing restorative somatic experiences.

2. Trauma through Body and Discourse

Before reaching an optimistic conclusion, all major events in the novel threaten Dessa's bodily integrity and traumatize her psychically as well. After the master murders Kaine (Dessa's lover and father of her child), she attacks the master and the mistress. As a consequence, the already pregnant Dessa is whipped "about the hips and legs, branded … along the insides of her thighs" (134), and confined in a sweat box where she cries "from pain, from grief, from filth" (190), feeling

degraded and like an animal. Later, she is sold and has to march in a slave trader's coffle. After a brutal riot and escape, she is captured and sentenced to death. However, her execution is postponed until after the birth of her child; she is kept in subhuman conditions in a cellar where she is interrogated by Adam Nehemiah, referred to as Nemi by Dessa, a schoolteacher aspiring to enter the ranks of elite Southern society by writing a bestseller about how to quell slave uprisings, "thinking himself qualified by virtue of his race and gender to record and interpret Dessa's story" (Mitchell 75). Dessa is, however, rescued by fugitive slave men and taken to a small plantation owned by a white woman, Ruth Elizabeth, called Rufel or Ruf by Dessa;[7] who harbors runaway slaves in exchange for labor. During the agonies of being on the run, Dessa gives birth to Mony: "something, in her womb, she guessed, somewhere deep inside her, the baby pinched its lining in its fist" (88). She experiences giving birth as "the core of her body being uprooted" and remembers "the pain, the blood" (88). After spending weeks in a delirium-like state, she recuperates, and the group of runaways devises a plan to free themselves: they convince Ruf to sell them during the day, then pick them back up at night. The income from this perilous scam ultimately enables Dessa and the other ex-slaves to flee west.

A discursively traumatizing aspect of enslavement is universal mistrust: whether she speaks or not, Dessa is denied credence. Her mistress is adamant in her belief that Dessa is pregnant with the master's child and slaps her in the face when Dessa says otherwise (41). Nemi's interest in Dessa is certainly piqued by her reputation (20), but he is unable and unwilling to believe her. He distorts her experience while recording it, thus marginalizing her voice; in fact, "as the master anticipates using the child to be born from Dessa's womb, so the scholar expects to appropriate the words issuing from her mouth for his own profit" (Goldman 323). Ruf's first reaction is also disbelief even before ever talking to Dessa. Although she thinks "the girl would wake and tell her story" (96, emphasis mine), Ruf already doubts her (96) and continues to mistrust her until she has proof of her suffering.

During the course of the plot, Dessa is offered a variety of subject positions. As far as her personhood is concerned, she goes from being considered property to being seen as a friend by a white woman. With regards to her womanhood, while being denigrated, she has a reputation of mythic proportions among slaveholders: she is rumored to be a threatening "devil woman" (21),

white men animalize and hyper-sexualize her at the same time, and a Black man also calls her a mule. As a mother, the way others regard her oscillates between two extremes. Kaine, on one end of the spectrum, is at first ambivalent but then encourages Dessa to abort the fetus since, as he says, echoing Spillers, slaves "just only belongs to white folks and that be's all. They don't be belonging to they mammas and daddies; not they sister, not they brother" (37). In order to protect his and Dessa's sanity, Kaine negates the subjectivity of the fetus and prioritizes his and Dessa's relationship. At the other end of the spectrum, white supremacy sees Dessa as a mere container, only worthy so long as she is able to contribute to economic production and give birth to potentially valuable property, becoming, in Quashie's words, a "(de)valued commodity" (66). The beneficiaries of slavery, while similarly disregarding the subjectivity of Dessa's child, are oblivious to her(s) as well. Meanwhile, Ruf occupies seemingly neutral territory and offers her solidarity and material help as a fellow mother. None of these points of view, however, consider Dessa as a whole person, and there are but a few indications as to how she perceives her own self, illustrating the limitations of the repository of subject positions (Barker 40) that preclude Dessa from telling "an intelligible story" about herself.

3. Healing through Discourse

The fact that Dessa acquires an authoritative, self-defining voice only by the end of the novel seemingly decenters her and suggests that she is merely an object. While it is true that she is visible to the white majority only as property and not as a person, there are several indications in the narrative fabric that suggest she is a self-conscious subject and possesses some level of agency. These indications counter the substantial tradition of slave narratives in which agency is achieved only by the end of the narrative, and they also undermine those frequent readings of Dessa Rose that claim that Dessa is but a mere victim with a complete lack of agential potential until the end of the plot. Ceron L. Bryant asserts that "Dessa Rose arrives at a place where she's able to destabilize the hierarchical white structure by cleverly usurping the written form" (Bryant 2, emphasis mine). However, I argue that instead of "arriving," Dessa is depicted as already being there: even when her account of events is dismissed by, among others, Nemi, she is able to assert her selfhood and exercise discursive control with the limited means available to her.

The text's focus on Dessa as a speaking subject while enslaved also signifies upon[8] the classic tradition of slave narratives, adopted by Black fiction writers, in which the starting point features an individual lacking a firm voice. Apart from the open defiance evident in her escapes, she displays several forms of subtle resistance and signifies with Nemi: she communicates with him in a roundabout way, evades several of his questions, or sometimes deliberately mumbles. Deborah E. McDowell reads these acts as active subversion and claims that Dessa's "refusal to 'confess' anything to Nehemiah that would facilitate yet another misrepresentation is an act of resistance against the adverse power of literacy and codification" (26). Thus, Dessa uses as a cover the stereotype of the simple-minded slave by displaying her apparent stupidity and docility so that Nemi will constitute her as a non-subject, while asserting herself at the same time. Indeed, even though Nemi registers her "loquacious, roundabout" strategies of communication, he fails to arrive at the conclusion that she is in fact intelligently evasive (Williams, Dessa Rose 23).

This resistance signals that despite being physically confined, Dessa still exhibits some control of the situation since the deliberately misleading reproduction of the norms expected from a slave is in itself indicative of her agency. Furthermore, she exhibits self-awareness and can use the point of view of the other, which is evident in her being embarrassed because of her smell (Williams, Dessa Rose 56). Also, directly or indirectly, she contributes to several white characters' lives; Nemi's obsession with hunting down Dessa and his ultimate madness as well as the complete turnaround in Ruf's views regarding slavery attest to Dessa's significance.[9]

Even though Dessa is able to evade questions and signify, a key element of healing is missing during the weeks spent with Nemi: she is incapable of narrativizing her experiences for a long time. While in the cellar, she "had no words to describe much of what she had experienced, or what those experiences had forced her to see" (Williams, Dessa Rose 55) since slavery systematically denies her access to education and language. She acknowledges that she needs effort to conceptualize as well as communicate the world around her (Williams, Dessa Rose 174) even before Kaine's murder. When trauma intervenes and stops language completely, she shuts herself off from the emotional impact of the moment upon learning about Kaine's death: "Dessa came back to that moment again and again, recognizing it as dead, knowing there was no way to change it, arriving at it from various directions, refusing to move beyond it" (Williams, Dessa Rose 58). It

was then that “memory stopped” (Williams, Dessa Rose 58) and “lost its fluidity, its ability to change with Dessa as she continues to move through time” (Griffiths 15). The proximity of the first traumatic event precludes the possibility of narrativizing her suffering (Williams, Dessa Rose 59-60) since she is unable, in Cathy Caruth’s words, to “claim” it (4) and to process it through language. Then, just as she is recuperating physically and is learning how to fight for narrative authority with Nemi through signifyin(g) and with other slaves through singing, her escape and childbirth amount to an almost fatal experience, yet again precluding the verbalization of trauma.

The novel suggests that to be able to heal from trauma, Dessa needs a permanent, intimate community to counter what Patterson refers to as the social death (38) engendered by enslavement. In the third chapter and the prologue, her tone and the intimate terms such as “honey” (234) or “darling” (236) she uses to address her audience suggest a strong bond between the mostly female friends and relatives. These women and children act as empathetic witnesses and, unlike Nemi, “can be trusted not to appropriate her discourse for [their] own objectifying and annihilating purposes” (Sniader Lanser 199). It is to them that she recollects her childhood memories (171) and describes, in visceral detail, her time in the torture box (191), thus exhibiting narrative self-understanding. As she acquires some distance from her trauma and finds a permanent, predominantly female community of trustworthy listeners, she gradually reaches the stage when “memory emerges and reunites a body and a voice severed in trauma” (Griffiths 2).

The memory work that this close-knit community assists her with might not have been possible during the time spent with either Nemi or Ruf. Nemi, the first person to whom Dessa relates fragments of her memories, is obsessed with writing yet refuses to be “inscribed” with Dessa’s trauma (Laub 57). Even though she is wary of him, there are slippages in the interviews that suggest that she does want to share some of what happened in order to locate the events temporally and find closure, both crucial to recovery (Laub 69). However, her efforts to “transmit” and “re-externalize” the trauma (Laub 69) fail. Even though he encourages her to talk, he “refuses to recognize survivor testimony, mirroring the original violation threatening to annihilate the survivor’s voice” (Griffiths 16).

Similarly, in the case of Ruf, Dessa’s status and the spectacle of her racialized and scarred flesh impede the transmission of her testimony. Until they forge an alliance through participating in the

scheme together, Dessa continues to be the Other for Ruf. Consequently, as Debra Walker King argues regarding the racial dynamics of perceiving the Other in pain, the subject experiencing pain becomes abstract for the white observer (7). Dessa remains for Ruf what Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls a "silent display" (40), that is, another voiceless body of a person of color. After warming up to Ruf, Dessa still withholds her memories about Kaine partly because it "was still a wound to me and remembrance of that coffle only hurt a little bit less," and partly because she keeps reminding herself that a white woman can never be a real, sympathetic ally (Williams, Dessa Rose 216). Her family, however, can enable her testimony due to familial bonds and a shared understanding of gendered and racial violences[10] —just as Dessa can be a witness to the various accounts of Black women in a shared context of rape and reproductive rights abuses (Sanmartín n.pag.), that is, due to the commonalities in their suffering (Williams, Dessa Rose 183).

4. Healing through the Body

Apart from positing her family as witnesses who listen to her oral testimony, Dessa heals through recuperative bodily experiences as well. For her, the body is a privileged site of remembering: she keeps score of people, events, and even places, traumatizing or pleasant, through memories anchored in the body. Once she is whipped, the trauma is "known" in the body (Culbertson 170) and the semiotics of her skin bears testament to her suffering and subordination, reminiscent of how former slaves, in their abolitionist efforts, displayed their bodies as evidence of their suffering, and it also reflects on the emphasis that written slave narratives place on bodily epistemology – the idea that the traumatic slave past can be referenced in the body after the event itself (Woolfork 45). Indeed, through its scars, Dessa's body itself becomes a legible testament to her past, prone also to being misread since "these undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (Spillers 67). The body, thus, offers a story that replaces or complements narrative and verbal memory, with scars functioning as "inscriptions [that] produce the meaning of Black female subjectivity in the discursive domain of slavery" (M. Henderson 67).

The body, however, contributes to survival and the healing process in various ways since the recovery process has to involve healing through the body due to the corporeal manifestations of

the trauma (van der Kolk n.pag.). An indirect way this takes place in the text is the very act of subsequent "readings" of the scars by Ruf, Harker, and Aunt Chole, an old Black woman tasked with authenticating Dessa's scars and thus confirming her status as a fugitive at the behest of Nemi and the sheriff. Ruf, in an effort to confirm her bias about the cunning of slaves, looks for proof that Dessa is lying; however, when she sees the "mutilated cat face" on her loins (Williams, Dessa Rose 154), she starts to empathize with her. Harker, Dessa's partner, also reclaims the language used by slave owners and traders, as well as resemioticizes Dessa's suffering in kissing the "altered human tissue" (Spillers 67) on her thigh and saying that her scars, far from impairing her "value," actually increase it (Williams, Dessa Rose 191). In doing so, he reconstitutes Dessa's flesh as body. Similarly, Aunt Chole "disrupts the primacy of the visual field" (Griffiths 32) and subverts the expectation of the white gaze when she denies the existence of the scars. She corroborates Dessa's story at her own peril, thus saving her life instead of pandering to white male interests.

In addition to the restorative effects of reappropriation and resemioticization, a more direct way of healing through the body is present in the novel: healing through – often maternal – touch. The intersubjective, intercorporeal connection with other women and family members is a key component of the protagonist's healing process. Braiding hair, due to its maternal undertones, is a coping mechanism for Dessa, whether she is the recipient or the one who engages in it. It evokes pleasant childhood memories (Williams, Dessa Rose 234), and its monotonous nature makes it especially suitable as a soothing, cognitively not necessarily demanding yet emotionally meaningful activity that accompanies female and familial bonding and story-telling (Williams, Dessa Rose 235). Furthermore, it creates a safe space: it establishes and enhances intimate, exclusively female connections that at the same time strengthen cultural and communal ties, to the extent that Ruf feels like an intruder when she inadvertently sees it (Williams, Dessa Rose 148). Braiding hair, through its element of care, unites the communal and maternal aspects of healing. The importance of bonding through touch, then, is manifold and reveals Williams's ethos of "privileg[ing] touch and other senses" which destabilizes Ruf's and "the dominant discourse's obsession with the visual Black body" (Griffin 39). Dessa first finds the whiteness and proximity of the body of Ruf, her "constitutive other" (Hall 4), repugnant, while the corporeal connection with

other Black women and her family alleviates her pain and helps fade memories of somatic suffering through gentle touch.

Other types of maternal attachment and care are posited as sources of (often bodily) comfort as well. As Steinberg argues, the novel "explor[es] the absolute necessity for a female slave to form female communities in order to transcend her subjugation" (252), which is, however, clearly supplemented and even superseded by the need to establish familial connections. In the cellar, shut off from any other stimuli, Dessa enjoys the vigorous movement of the fetus; she even begins crooning to it (Williams, Dessa Rose 60). The baby continues to be a major source of pleasure for her: after the first sharp pains of breastfeeding, she smiles and closes her eyes (Williams, Dessa Rose 89-90). Breastfeeding takes on communal significance as well since Ada, a Black mother on Ruf's plantation, explains how to nurse and even helps Dessa position herself and the baby. Moreover, she acknowledges and encourages Dessa as a mother: "See? See? He know his mama. See, he just want to eat" (Williams, Dessa Rose 89), strengthening the bond between herself and Dessa as well as between Dessa and the baby, thereby suturing the maternal and the communal.

Maternal care enables Dessa to unite all the different aspects of remembering and healing. Having children provides her with an outlet to tell her story again and again, helping her to get a better grasp on her own narrative of the self. Her mammy would recite the names of all her children, including those who have died or were sold by the master, "lest they forget" and "die to living memory as they had in her world" (Williams, Dessa Rose 119). Consequently, Dessa insists on keeping her memories alive as well and functioning, in Paula Sanmartín's words, as a "custodian of history"[11] (n.pag.): "my mind wanders. This why I have [my story] wrote down, why I has the child say it back" (Williams, Dessa Rose 236). Narrative memory and her emphasis on remembrance of and by children constitute forms of resistance (Seliger 320). Also, she has a profound corporeal connection with her children and family, while maternal and familial touch also enables her to keep remembering and putting into words her most traumatic experiences. Dessa, Kaine, and Harker all cite the next generation as a driving force for wanting to keep fighting for freedom. The threat to sell Dessa and her son south to "worser slavery than they ever thought of" (Williams, Dessa Rose 43) motivates Kaine to escape to a "place without no whites" (Williams, Dessa Rose 50), where

they can finally have children. When Ruf asks Dessa why she ran away, Dessa replies: “cause, cause I didn’t want my baby to be slaved” (Williams, Dessa Rose 139). Harker is ready to take responsibility for Dessa and Mony and have more children once free, adding that this is impossible for slaves (Williams, Dessa Rose 192). Dessa remarks that “we have paid for our children’s place in the world again, and again” (Williams, Dessa Rose 236), summarizing the abuse endured by generations of Black women, but also implying that they struggled not only for their own benefit but for the survival and freedom of their descendants.

Apart from remembering and narration as prerequisites of healing, Dessa employs linguistic resemioticization at a pivotal moment as well: she reappropriates the word mule, an insult meant to undermine her worth, by connecting it to motherhood. Thereby, she “sounds a new language” (Sharpe 19), which, according to Sharpe, is a key element of wake work. Dessa cites all the different kinds of abuse slave mothers endure: they are regularly raped, mistreated if they are unable to conceive or separated from their babies if they are, or forced into becoming wet nurses (Williams, Dessa Rose 183). After witnessing the testimonies of these women, she adds her own grief to the list in a gesture of solidarity: “I had been spared death till I could birth a baby white folks would keep slaved” (Williams, Dessa Rose 143). Echoing the statement by Janie’s grandmother that “de nigger woman is de mule of de world so fur as Ah can see” (17) from Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Dessa declares in an appropriative act, “Oh, we was mules all right” (Williams, Dessa Rose 183), referring to her condition as an enslaved woman. She also reclaims motherhood by rewriting the restrictive categories imposed on her by the slaveholding power, which underlines that Black motherhood is only traumatizing when it happens on white supremacist terms. The kaleidoscope of the aspects of the maternal described in the novel points toward the argument that motherhood, when lived on Black women’s terms, is far from being an impossibility; it can become the very instrument of healing.

5. Conclusion

In (the afterlife of) slavery, writers like Williams have been performing wake work by offering counter-narratives of Black women. Dessa Rose claims that even though “Black life is … is lived underground, in outer space” (Sexton par. 24), in social death (Patterson 38), it is still capable of

engendering new possibilities of healing. Dessa, albeit with limited means, keeps narrativizing her self, however, this (re)articulation of the self leads to healing only when two conditions align: it has to be enabled by an empathetic community the members of which also provide her with somatic experiences that make the rendering of physical and emotional trauma possible. Within the community, she can use her story as a "countertext" and "site of resistance" (C. Henderson 68), thus, motherhood is a site from which selfhood emerges and solidifies since it is the thought of the next generation that drives these women toward claiming freedom. It is only motherhood and community that can counter the effects of the "immi/a/nent death" (Sharpe 132) characterizing slavery. Motherhood lived in "the social life of social death" (Sexton par. 14), in the wake of chronic, individual, transgenerational, communal trauma is both a result of and the foundation for a Black discourse that makes women like Dessa truly speaking subjects. As the corpus that has been emerging since 1970s suggests, the white majority might consider Black mothering "an impossibility" (Quashie 66) in slavery and its afterlife; still, motherhood becomes the starting point of and a solution to the struggle against Black death as well.

Works Cited

Baker, Houston. "Scene … Not Heard." Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising, edited by Robert Gooding-Williams, Routledge, 1993, pp. 37–49.

Barker, Chris. Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis: A Dialogue on Language and Identity. Sage, 2001.

Bryant, Ceron L. "(Re)Locating the 'Debil Woman:': Using Orality for Transcendence and a Free 'In-Between' Space in Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose." Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–10.

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. 1990. Routledge, 2000.

Culbertson, Roberta. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self." New Literary History, vol. 26, no. 1, 1995, pp. 169–95.

Dubey, Madhu. Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic. Indiana UP, 1994.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. Oxford UP, 1988.

Goldman, Anne E. "'I Made the Ink': (Literary) Production and Reproduction in Dessa Rose and Beloved." Feminist Studies, vol. 16, no. 2, 1990, pp. 313–30.

Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery." Callaloo, vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, pp. 519–36.

Griffiths, Jennifer L. Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance. U of Virginia P, 2009.

Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs Identity?" Questions of Cultural Identity, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, Sage, 1996, pp. 1–17.

Hartman, Saidiya. Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Henderson, Carol E. Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature. U of Missouri P, 2002.

Henderson, Mae. Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing. Oxford UP, 2014.

Hurston, Zora Neale. Their Eyes Were Watching God. Harper Collins, 2004.

Jordan-Zachery, Julia S. Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy. Routledge, 2009.

Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening." Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History, by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, Routledge, 1992, pp. 57–74.

McDowell, Deborah E. "Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom – Dessa Rose." Slavery and the Literary Imagination: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1987, edited by Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, Johns Hopkins UP, 1989, pp. 144–63.

McPherson, Tara. Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South. Duke UP, 2003.

Mitchell, Angelyn. The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction. Rutgers UP, 2002.

Morgan, Jennifer L. Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery. U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.

Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, edited by William Zinsser, Houghton Mifflin, 1987, pp. 101–24.

Patterson, Orlando. Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study. Harvard UP, 1982.

Patton, Venetria K. Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction. State U of New York, 2000.

Quashie, Kevin Everod. Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject. Rutgers, 2004.

Sanmartín, Paula. Black Women as Custodians of History: Unsung Rebel (M)Others in African American and Afro-Cuban Women's Writing. Cambria Press, 2014.

Seliger, Mary A. "Dessa's Blues: Reimagining the Master's Narrative in Sherley Anne Williams's Dessa Rose." Western Journal of Black Studies, vol. 36, no. 4, Winter 2012, pp. 314–24.

Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." InTensions Journal, vol. 5, 2011, pp. 1–47.

Sharpe, Christina. In the Wake: On Blackness and Being. Duke UP, 2016.

Sniader Lanser, Susan. Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice. Cornell UP, 1992.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64–81.

Steinberg, Marc. "Dessa Rose: Putting the 'Story' Back into History." Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History: African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's

Literature in the Twentieth Century, edited by Verena Theile and Marie Drews, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

Van der Kolk, Bessel. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. Penguin Books, 2014.

Walker King, Debra. African Americans and the Culture of Pain. U of Virginia P, 2008.

Wilderson, Frank B., III. Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms. Duke UP, 2010.

Williams, Sherley Anne. “Author’s Note.” Dessa Rose, Harper Collins, 1986, pp. 5–6.

Williams, Sherley Anne. Dessa Rose. Harper Collins, 1986.

Woolfork, Lisa. Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture. U of Illinois P, 2008.

[1] According to Spillers, the term is itself paradoxical because of the severance of mother-child bonds (76). On the discord between seemingly ordinary terms and Black experience, see also Sharpe's contention regarding "blackness's signifying surplus: the ways that meaning slides, signification slips, when words like child, girl, mother, and boy abut blackness" (80, emphases in the original).

[2] The term the afterlife of slavery, as introduced by Saidiya Hartman, refers to an environment in which "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (6).

[3] I use the term biological mother to denote a person who is a birth mother and a genetic mother at the same time, excluding surrogates, egg donors, adoptive mothers, and those who provide maternal care to children they have not carried and given birth to. This term is analogous to what Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins calls "bloodmother" (178).

[4] For a definition and historical overview of the institution of othermothering, see Collins (129).

[5] I identify the following texts as being parts of this corpus: "Survivor" (1972) by Toni Cade Bambara, Corregidora (1975) by Gayl Jones, "The Abortion" (1982) by Alice Walker, Push (1996) by Sapphire, "Harvest" (2010) by Daneielle Evans, and Salvage the Bones (2011) by Jesmyn Ward.

[6] On the different configurations of the word "family" under enslavement, see Spillers (75); on the limitations of social ties under enslavement see Patterson (6).

[7] Naming is of central concern in the novel; Dessa is often misnamed as Odessa, while another Black female character is renamed altogether by white people who allegedly care for her. In referring to the principal white characters by the (nick)names given to them by Dessa, I intend to subvert these dehumanizing (mis)naming practices.

[8] I use the concept of signifyin(g) (the intertextual relationship between the texts of generations of Black authors) based on the theory of African American verbal and literary expression set forth by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (1988).

[9] This structure is unique in that it accomplishes the simultaneous presentation of both Dessa's and Ruf's accounts of the same events, challenging the typical lenticular logic of racial visibility in the South: defined as "a monocular logic, a schema by which histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time" (McPherson 7), also evoking Wilderson's claim that white discourse "does not 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" (52). The copresentation of the two interpretations, and especially the fact that Dessa's version is the one that is bound to have an afterlife, thus illustrate her significance.

[10] Violences is a term used by Sharpe (14).

[11] Note the irony in not having custodial power (Patterson 6) under white discourse yet at least being the custodian of a written record of event, made possible by Black discourse.

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License