Talking Friends? Interracial Friendship and Feminism in the Novel *Dessa Rose*

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In the novel *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Anne Williams uses fiction to entertain possibilities for interracial connection that went unrealized within the limited purview of history. After reading of two separate historical incidents, the first concerning a pregnant slave woman who led a rebellion on a coffle in Kentucky, and the second concerning a white woman who allowed runaway slaves to hide on her isolated North Carolina farm, Williams concluded, "How sad…that these two women never met" (ix). *Dessa Rose* reflects her desire to bring their stories together; the act of imagining interracial female friendship lies at the core of the novel, and the nameless women of the past become Dessa Rose and Rufel, the novel's main characters.

In the "Author's Note" that precedes her book, Williams describes her efforts to "apprehend [an] other history" in which "slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love [but] provided occasions for their expression" (x). She works within the "neo-slave novel" genre a contemporary work of historical fiction that explores slavery from the perspective of an enslaved protagonist, and incorporates to some extent the tropes of the original antebellum slave narrative. The neo-slave novel developed in the wake of the civil rights movement, which generated new impetus to recover black history and write a counternarrative to white-authored historiography and literature that excluded or trivialized black experiences. The production of neo-slave novels was also (and continues to be) a response to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1968), a book that was much reviled for its negative depiction of Turner, who in the wake of black power movement was being styled a heroic figure. Black critics saw Styron as offering an "emasculated" Turner who is psychologically unbalanced, haunted by a sense of racial inferiority, and pathologically obsessed with white women. This controversy galvanized a new effort among black writers to present a revisionist version of history in fiction—Williams, too, cites the novel as a negative inspiration in her author's note (5).

The revisionist possibilities of the neo-slave novel have proven especially appealing for African American women writers, who see the form as an opportunity to explore a woman-centered vision of history. Deborah McDowell stresses the significance of female subjectivity and agency in the neo-slave narrative genre, pointing out that the vast majority of published antebellum slave narratives were authored by men, prioritized male subjectivity, and tended to present female slaves only in relation to their sexual victimization; contemporary neo-slave novels, in contrast, center the perspectives of female slaves and "[dramatize] not what was *done* to slave women, but what they *did* with what was done to them" (146). McDowell's description certainly applies to Dessa Rose in that Williams's plot and characterization emphasize Dessa's strength and resourcefulness rather than her vulnerability and suffering.

Not only is the neo-slave novel excavating the distant past; it is also simultaneously oriented toward the more recent past. Ashraf Rushdy describes the "social logic" of the neo-slave novel, locating its "origins in the social, intellectual, and racial formations" of the late sixties and seventies (3). He reads the neo-slave novel as intervening in the debates over black identity, the viability of capitalism, and the necessity of violent resistance to effect social change that informed the Civil Rights Movement in its later stages and black nationalism.

I would argue that by the same "social logic," we can read Williams's novel as engaging in dialogue with another contemporary political discourse: second wave feminism. The process by which the novel came into being is significant; it began as a short story called "Meditations on History," which became the first third of the novel, and which Williams wrote in the late sixties. The influence of the new racial discourse is apparent: the story offers strong and coherent slave characters and centers their perspectives, critiques the distortion of black story and subjectivity when inscribed by white authors, and celebrates the community that the slaves themselves created. Williams revised her story into a novel over the next decade or so and published it as the novel *Dessa Rose* in 1986. Gathering strength as a cultural force over the decade that the novel was composed, the women's movement made its mark on Williams's text. The revised and extended version of Dessa's story continues to work with concepts of race and history, but integrates a new emphasis on gender and female experience, and particularly explores bonds between women by tracing Dessa and Rufel's efforts at interracial friendship.

The fraught dynamic between the protagonists as they attempt to overcome initial estrangement and hostility presents an illuminating comment on the aspirations of second-wave feminists to build lasting coalitions with women of color and the reasons these aspirations largely failed. Williams has her characters re-enact (or perhaps I should say pre-enact) central tensions between black and white women activists, which developed within the context of the Civil Rights Movement and then followed them as they attempted to forge an inclusive feminist movement. The particular sticking points at issue are, first of all, white privilege, the many advantages, including social, economic and educational, that many white women had/have access to—which led some African American women to question whole notion of white women as oppressed. For instance, mainstream feminism's central complaint that women were infantilized as a result of being sequestered in the home and excluded from work force did not resonate with African American women, who had of course worked in large numbers historically. Also, black feminists were suspicious of the recruitment efforts of white women, reasoning that the material privilege white women enjoyed was conferred by association with the white male power structure, and that despite protestations of independence, white women's loyalties lay where their bread was buttered. Most importantly, a key source of tension for black women was that white women seemed to be oblivious to all this; part of white privilege is, of course, the ability to *ignore* race, to factor it out in order to make an argument for the shared concerns of women generally, and to envision a universal womanhood. For their part, white feminists were often less-than-responsive to the criticism that they failed to account for cultural differences between black and white women, interpreting such critiques as disruptive and counterproductive. Black women argued that white women could attempt to liberate selves from white men and identify as women, but that they themselves could never abandon their blackness and connection to black men. Such concerns were reinforced by the black press's critical depiction of the feminist movement as an attempt to undermine black men and black community by creating division. Assata Shakur conveys the deep ambivalence that many black women shared when confronted with the possibility of organizing with white women:

> Most of us rejected the white women's movement. Miss ann was still Miss ann to us whether she burned her bras or not. We could not muster sympathy for the fact that she was trapped in her mansion and oppressed by her husband. We were, and still are, in a much more terrible jail. We knew that our experiences as black women were completely different from those of our sisters in the white women's movement. And we had no desire to sit in some consciousness raising group with white women and bare our souls. (14)

Shakur's mention of the "Miss Ann" stereotype is especially interesting here for the way it references the oppositional roles for black and white women that developed in context of slavery, and the way such roles continue to resonate in the second wave of feminism—In *Dessa Rose*, Williams similarly identifies a continuity between the plantation past and the contemporary women's movement.

Williams is also addressing the tension that sexual relationships between black men and white women generated; such relationships were a sore subject for African American women during the Civil Rights Movement, especially as the integrationist phase of the movement gave way to black nationalism. Such relationships were a double whammy for many black women, interpreted on the one hand as a rejection of and betrayal of black women by black men, and as a betrayal of sisterhood by white women on the other. Interracial dating continued to trouble feminists, stirring lingering feelings of envy and resentment among black and white women alike. As one activist remarked, one reason for black women's apprehension about women's lib was "many black women associate the women's movement with white women's ability to steal our men" (Eleanor Holmes Norton qtd. in Breines 143).

And finally, Williams tries to capture the genuine sense of *anger* that characterized these efforts at interracial feminist coalition, an emotion which is well documented in historical accounts of second-wave feminism. Winifred Breines comments, "Separation among feminists, differences among feminists, seem to have created, if anything, as deep or even deeper feelings of rage and betrayal than distance from men and, in the case of black women, their communities" (176). The theme of the anger that emerges when women fail to understand one another is a significant theme in *Dessa Rose*.

But despite using her novel to outline the tensions that divided black and white women historically and in the contemporary women's movement, Williams is ultimately optimistic that such obstacles are not insurmountable. While black and white women essentially went their separate ways after the integrationist phase of the Civil Rights Movement dissolved—white women into the new left and women's liberation, black women into the black power movement and then into more localized black feminist movements—Williams suggests that these women can reconnect and discover common ground. But in order for this to happen racial inequalities must be examined together rather than ignored, hence my use of a phrase from the novel, “talking friends,” as a title. Williams makes it clear that black and white women have quite a bit more to say to one another.

When she meets Rufel, Dessa’s experiences with whites have been shaped by violence. While Dessa is pregnant, her child’s father, Kaine, is killed by their master, Terrell Vaugham after the two men argue. Grief-stricken, Dessa attacks Vaugham and fatally wounds him, which prompts her mistress to have her whipped and sold to a trader. But, hoping to spare her unborn child the fate of slavery, Dessa plots to flee the trader with the help of two men, fellow slaves she meets on the coffle, Harker and Nathan. The desperate slaves kill the whites guarding them and escape. However, Dessa is recaptured and sentenced to die, although she is temporarily spared to give birth to the baby, who will be valuable property. While awaiting her execution, Dessa must spend the days prior to her execution describing her attempted escape to an odious scholar named Adam Nehemiah, who is writing a how-to manual for planters about preventing slave rebellions (this is an allusion to proslavery author Nehemiah Adams, author of *A South-side View of Slavery*). But, once again with the help of Harker and Nathan, Dessa is able to escape her captors by outwitting Nehemiah. The fugitives flee to an encampment of runaway slaves at a plantation called Sutton’s Glen, which is owned by Rufel Sutton, who, because she is dire straits after being abandoned by her husband, allows the runaways to stay and work her land for her. On the way to the sanctuary of Sutton’s Glen Dessa gives birth to her baby, and arrives there in bad shape, half-conscious and in pain; Rufel orders the mother and child to be placed in her own bedroom while they recover.

When Rufel and Dessa first meet, they can only see one another through a screen of racist fantasies, and the novel traces the process by which the women dismantle the cultural framework that distances them in order to establish a clear vision of each other as individuals. Dessa's initial glimpses of Rufel reflect her perception of whiteness—and white women—as something alien and dangerous. Dessa, drifting in and out of consciousness, awakens to find herself in Rufel's bedroom. In this passage, whiteness is presented as literally overwhelming; the physical space of the bedroom is saturated with a disorienting brightness:

> The raftered ceiling had been whitewashed and recently the walls, too, and where the sunlight struck them, they gave off a sharp light that hurt her eyes. She closed them, but even behind her lowered lids, she could still see the light striking the white walls and it filled her with terror. Where was this place? And the white face *white*? Eyes as gray as glass under arching red brows and lashes (82)

Williams's language mirrors Dessa's disjointed, confused response to her surroundings. Dessa initially sees Rufel as a series of disconnected images, a metaphor for her inability to view Rufel as whole person, beyond the framework of stereotypes that her past leads her to superimpose on the present. Dessa reads Rufel's gaze as empty of human feeling, issued through eyes like glass, hard and imperceptive. Whiteness is figured as ubiquitous and overpowering, terrifying in its inevitability. Dessa shuts her eyes to block it out, yet still "the image fill[s] her mind" (83). The details of Rufel's description imply Dessa's own fear and pain; the red in Rufel's coloring makes Dessa think of destruction and open wounds:

"Her hair was the color of fire; it fell about the shoulders in lank wisps. Her face was very white and seemed to radiate a milky glow; her mouth was like a bloody gash across it" (88).

In Dessa's view, Rufel is the inexplicable "other," an emblem of difference and even horror, completely unlike herself. Thus Dessa does not trust Rufel not to betray the runaway slaves she harbors by revealing their presence to the authorities. More importantly, Rufel threatens Dessa's sense of her own identity. For instance, Dessa's injuries leave her unable to nurse her own child. Rufel, who has a nursing infant of her own, decides to feed the starving baby. When Dessa learns of Rufel's intervention, she is appalled, for not only does she feel that her own lack of milk signals inadequacy, but she sees Rufel's breastfeeding as an act of appropriation, an unsurprising response in the context of a slave system that construes slave children as property and denies slave mothers a claim to their own maternity. Dessa screams the first time she discovers Rufel feeding the baby, and even when she comes to accept the arrangement as necessary, each time she thinks of it "her breathing quickened and her heart seemed to pound in her ears" (122). Moreover, she is troubled not only by Rufel's usurpation of her own maternal role, but also by the broader implications of a white woman's generous act:

> Dessa knew the white woman nursed her baby; she had seen her do it. 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. That the white woman had let them stay—Even that was almost too big to think about. Sometimes it seemed to Dessa that she was drowning in milky skin, ensnared by red hair. (123)

Rufel's kindness undermines Dessa's beliefs about the harshness of whites, beliefs that have helped Dessa to make sense of her world and thus endure it. White people have heretofore presented a clear enemy, a threat to her very selfhood and survival, and the stability of her identity is challenged by a gesture that contradicts what she knows. This threat to her identity is once again pictured as engulfment by whiteness; Rufel's milky skin and slippery hair, which suggest her racial difference, threaten to smother Dessa.

Williams introduces Rufel's point of view into the novel to reveal that Rufel is indeed an individual, complex and flawed, a far cry from the objectified "other" that Dessa imagines her to be. Rufel is a sympathetic figure, depicted as lonely and eager for company after being abandoned by her husband in a half-built house in an isolated part of Alabama. She is also in mourning over the death of a beloved slave, her childhood caretaker and sole confidant, whom she called Mammy. Her motives for harboring fugitive slaves are not purely altruistic; her husband's slaves have fled in his absence and she needs help working the plantation. But neither is Rufel wholly self-serving; her instinctive compassion for Dessa and her baby lead her to help them simply because she can, although in assessing her own deviation from "normal" behavior, Rufel believes herself to be "a little crazy." Rufel transcends the stereotype of the southern lady; she is not fragile and retiring, not a statue-like beauty, and given her eventual affair with one of the fugitives, Nathan, not especially pure.

But despite being a fully drawn, well-developed character, Rufel retains one of the definitive traits of southern ladyhood, a willful naiveté. Despite her outsider status as an abandoned wife fallen from grace in the eyes of the aristocracy from which she hails, Rufel is indeed a product of her upbringing. She consumes without questioning the narratives of slavery and race that structure the culture of the antebellum South. She uncritically accepts the rhetoric of slavery as a benign, paternalistic fabric of "family" relationships.

The cultural narrative in which Rufel is most invested is in the myth of the Mammy's endless love for the white children in her care. Rufel's nearly lifelong relationship with the slave she calls "Mammy" has been her most profound emotional connection. Mammy offers the only companionship Rufel enjoys during the long, empty years of her marriage, and Rufel is inconsolable when she dies suddenly, for "Nothing in the days and weeks since Mammy's death [could] fill the silence where her voice used to live." While Rufel seems to share a genuine emotional bond with her slave, their relationship is still largely scripted. For instance, Mammy arrives at Rufel's family's home as "Dorcas," a sophisticated, skilled "lady's maid extraordinaire" trained in Paris, but she is quickly rechristened "Mammy" in deference to sentiment and tradition, to convey the appearance that she is an old family retainer.

Isolated and lonely, Rufel wishes to insert Dessa into the Mammy's role and to integrate her into a familiar pattern of black female companionship. Rufel imagines that Dessa resembles Mammy, clearly a projection of her own desire as no one else appears to notice this resemblance (100). She watches the recovering Dessa sleep, even occasionally crawling into bed with her, and longs for Dessa to awaken and tell her story—although she also reserves the right not to believe it, since she has absorbed the stereotype that all slaves lie (99).

Yet much to Rufel's consternation, Dessa resists Rufel's attempts to incorporate her into a scripted role of loving companion and confidant. Instead, Dessa challenges the assumptions that undergird such a role and reveals that they are imaginary, a revelation that pushes Rufel toward a reassessment of her relationships with African American women. When Dessa finally regains full consciousness, she awakens to find Rufel in the bedroom reminiscing aloud about a splendid dinner party she once attended (123). Dessa misinterprets Rufel's casual discussion of someone named "Mammy" as a reference to Dessa's own mother; even though she quickly realizes that Rufel is referring to a servant, Dessa is outraged by Rufel's tone of entitlement and hurt by her own memories of sharing her mother with white children. Dessa tells Rufel "You ain't got no 'mammy,'" and goes on to point out the narrow epistemology that prevented Rufel from really knowing the slave whom she professes to have loved: "All you know is about this kinda sleeve and that kinda bonnet; some party here—Didn't you have no peoples where you lived? 'Mammy' ain't nobody name, not they real one" (125). When Rufel protests with yet another mention of "Mammy," Dessa taunts her: "See! See! You don't even not know 'Mammy''s name. Mammy have a name, have children" (155). Dessa then starts on her own train of reminiscences, recounting that her mother's name was Rose and reciting the names of Rose's ten children as Rufel storms out of the room (125).

Despite Rufel's haughty exit, Dessa's comments get under her skin. Although her initial impulse is to force Dessa's words from her mind, she is not able to do so. Rufel's first response to Dessa's criticism is to defensively invoke the "rules" prohibiting interracial familiarity and scold herself for breaking them; she reflects that she has "forgotten her place" and "acted no better than the wench…fall[ing] into reminiscing with a strange darky" (129). Yet the accusation that she had not truly known Mammy resonates painfully. Rufel is ashamed of her inability to recall Mammy's name, even after she remembers that it was "Dorcas." Combing over her minimal knowledge of Dorcas's life, Rufel begins to shift from overidentification, treating Dorcas as a mere extension of her own desire, to an empathy which permits her deeper insight into Dorcas's feelings: "Had Mammy had children, Rufel wondered, suckled a child at her breast as she did the wench's, as she did with her own? And how had Mammy borne it when they were taken away [?]" (136). Rufel cannot answer for herself these basic questions; she can only remember such inconsequentials as Dorcas's love of blackberries, oak trees, and silk and her hatred of wearing a thimble. Rufel reflects, "Truly, such ignorance was worse than grief" (137). In the face of her uncertainty, Rufel loses the "comfort" derived from Dorcas's "familiar image": "It was as if the wench had taken her beloved Mammy and put a stranger in her place" (136). Thus Dessa interjects the counternarrative of an(other)'s experience into Rufel's cherished plantation myth of Mammy, forcing Rufel to see beyond her own perspective for the first time.

In addition to the pivotal role it plays in moving Dessa and Rufel past their mutual silence and incomprehension, this scene is also significant for the way it picks up two sources of tension between black and white feminists as they attempted to negotiate an integrated women's movement. Rufel's material privilege and her obliviousness to the exploitative origins of that privilege suggest the critique that women of color leveled at white feminists. Dessa assails Rufel's preoccupation with clothes and parties, and her willfully maintained blindness to the fact that her lifestyle is maintained through the labor of the slaves she claims are "just like family." Moreover, Rufel's claim to narrative authority, her unblinking confidence that the story she tells about her life is *the* story, is reminiscent of white feminists' insistence on a "universal" narrative of womanhood based on the same experiences.

Dessa's outburst serves as an intervention in Rufel's masterplot, then. Mae Henderson describes the confrontational, "disruptive" tenor we see in Dessa's challenge as essential to the production of a black, female speech that "delegitimizes" and "displaces" hegemonic cultural narratives (35). The anger that she vents, so characteristic of the debates between black and white feminists, is figured here as productive. Williams presents the airing of grievances as the necessary prelude to creating a dialogue; the strength of Dessa's anger motivates her to speak despite her sense of endangerment and serves to shock Rufel out of her complacency. Such forceful emotion is clearly necessary to overcome the defensiveness of both women and the barriers to communication that their incongruous worldviews impose.

As a result of this confrontation, a dialogue literally emerges; Williams's inclusion of long passages of dialogue maps the process through which her characters learn to speak to one another, to move beyond their reticence and begin to hear one another more clearly. Early on in the novel, when Rufel remembers her conversations with Mammy, it is apparent to the reader that Rufel, true to the character of the southern lady, hears only what she chooses to hear and excludes any discomfiting information. Dessa's challenges rupture this solipsism, forcing Rufel to respond and engage with uncomfortable issues. Significantly, Dessa's private act of intervention echoes black feminists' acts of public intervention intended to correct the unconscious racism of white feminists, as when the women-of-color contributors to the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* read selections of their writing aloud onstage at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference in Storrs, CT. Chela Sandoval observes that confronted by the readers' sometimes harshly worded critiques of racism within the women's movement, the white women in the audience "became listeners, shocked into stunned silence by what they finally heard, changing them" (qtd. in Breines 188).

Yet even as Dessa and Rufel take a step forward, Williams throws another stumbling block into their path, one that served as a particular source of division for black and white female activists: sexual relationships between black men and white women. Rufel begins an affair with Nathan, one of the fugitives on her property, whom Dessa sees as a brother. Rufel's relationship with Nathan is part of her growth away from dependence and naiveté. However, for Dessa, Nathan's attraction to a white woman represents a stinging rejection. Walking into the bedroom without knocking, Dessa discovers Rufel and Nathan making love; Williams chooses this point to introduce first-person point of view for the first time in the novel, allowing Dessa to narrate her own indignation: “I never *seed* such a thing! Nathan—laying cross that white woman—Black as night and so—so *sat*isfied. It was like seeing her nurse Mony for the first time all over again” (175). Once again, Rufel inhabits a role central to Dessa’s sense of her own identity. Although she isn’t sexually attracted to Nathan, she nonetheless feels reduced by any black man’s attraction to a white woman, which seems to affirm the culture’s equation of whiteness with beauty at the expense of black women. She asks herself: “Had he really wanted me to be like Mistress, I wondered…[with] that doughy skin and slippery hair? Was *that* what they wanted?” (199). As Nathan hustles her from the room, Dessa cries to herself, “Can’t I have nothing? Can’t I have nothing?” and lashes out at Rufel, calling her “Miz Ruint.” to signify her reduced status. Clearly Dessa takes Nathan’s choice of a white lover personally, and the anger aroused by her feelings of rejection and betrayal resonates for a contemporary audience of black female readers. Dessa and Rufel, furious at one another, are again reduced to a hostile silence.

Yet the twists and turns of Williams’s plot bring her protagonists back toward alignment with one another. Everyone on Rufel’s plantation needs money. The fugitives decide that they want to travel west in search of a less tenuous freedom; Rufel for her part is nearly bankrupt and cannot continue farming her own land. So the fugitives decide to work a scam: They’ll all travel to Southern towns, with Rufel posing as their mistress, a widow desperately in need of money and forced to sell her slaves in order to raise some cash. At the first opportunity, the newly sold slaves will escape and rendezvous with Rufel to receive their cut of the profits. The scam is successful, and the journey it entails is essential to moving Dessa and Rufel beyond latest impasse. Leaving Rufel's plantation places them in a liminal situation, free of the actual restrictions of slave society while having to act out the roles of mistress and slave girl, a performance that unsettles each woman's assumptions about the other's place in the system.

A particularly enlightening moment occurs when Rufel is nearly raped by a plantation owner who puts them up for the night. Together Dessa and Rufel fend off the attacker, but Dessa is shaken by her discovery of Rufel's sexual vulnerability, the knowledge that "Miz Lady…was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselves and each other" (220). Dessa declines to tell the male fugitives about the near-rape, noting, "it seemed like it would've been almost like telling on myself," a comment that reveals a closer identification with Rufel as a woman. (In the novel as in the second wave of the feminist movement, sexual violence against women represents an important point of mutual interest for black and white women). Dessa's coldness toward Rufel begins to thaw a bit after this and their lines of communication are re-opened; she says: "You can't do something like this with someone and not develop some closeness, some trust. And we couldn't help but talk, much time as we spent together" (225).

Yet Dessa, whose experiences with white women have taught her that racial affiliation always takes precedence over any spirit of female camaraderie, is reluctant to trust Rufel. When Rufel expresses the desire to head west with the fugitives once the scam is complete, Dessa tells her "I think it scandalous, white woman chasing all round the country after some red-eyed negro"—clearly Rufel's sexual relationship with Nathan still rankles. After insulting Rufel, Dessa backpedals by claiming it isn't "my place to speak," paradoxically reasserting the boundaries of status against the intimacy Rufel proposes; (239). Rufel persists:

> "Place," she say, "place," but not like she was talking to me. "That's how they answer everything…Ain't my place, Missy, mocking us, you know…Well I ain't talking no place," she was yelling now, "no mistress"…I'm talking friends" she scream.

Dessa is hard pressed to imagine Rufel inhabiting a role that has been reserved for the black women in her life: "That was what the white woman was talking about, being Martha, being like Carrie to me; and I was shaken" (240). Yet Dessa is moved by Rufel's appeal, even though she can't permit herself to trust it: "I wanted to believe I'd heard the white woman ask me to friend with her. I wouldn't put no dependence on her holding to it, I told myself…. 'Friend' to her might be like 'promise' to white folks. Something to break if it would do them some good" (240-41). Given Dessa's negative history with white women, part of the wider experience of "broken promises" familiar to most slave women, the onus for proving the sincerity of her intentions rests on Rufel.

Fittingly, Dessa and Rufel's friendship is finally solidified through a climactic confrontation with the southern patriarchy, in which Rufel's realigned loyalty is tested. The scholar Nehemiah reappears and recognizes Dessa, and insists that the local sheriff haul her into jail. Rufel, who has known only that

Dessa ran away from cruel treatment, is told by Nehemiah that Dessa is a "scaped criminal with a price on her head" (249). In reporting Dessa's background to Rufel, Nehemiah plays on Rufel's putative racial anxieties, describing Dessa as an evil "darky" murderess who can "sing and laugh, and all the time plotting" (250). Dessa is anxious as she listens to his sensational account, fearing that her relationship with Rufel is too fragile to support the challenge posed by this "evidence," since "we just barely knowed how to read each other's eyes, each other's smile" and the information Nehemiah relates "was what she'd thought about me at first, what she'd thought about all of us" (252, 251). Rufel's surprise is evident, but she refuses to betray Dessa. Instead, Rufel works with Dessa, once again putting on the role of the helpless lady to convince the sheriff of Dessa's innocence; Dessa notes the irony of each seamlessly performing the roles that they have outgrown: "Friend or not, best she could do for me then was to prove I wasn't nothing but her slave" (252). When the two women outwit Nehemiah and turn the tables on him, exposing the emptiness of his claims to Dessa, his impotent disgust confirms the threat that women's transracial cooperation poses to white-male dominance: "You-all in this together—womanhood" (255).

While the separate movements developed by black and white feminists essentially ran parallel to one another through the late sixties and much of the seventies, Breines identifies the late 70s and early 80s, the period when Williams was immersed in revising "Meditations on History," as a moment of new promise for an interracial women's movement. She contends that the critiques of white racism and the lack of a class analysis that women of color leveled at white feminists had begun to sink in. In particular, such concerns were taken up with a new vigor by academic feminists as they began fledgling programs in women's studies and assisted in the building of multicultural studies programs. The ending of Williams's novel seems to reflect this new spirit of earnestness. Although Williams has acknowledged feminism's "potential for divisiveness" ("Some Implications of Womanist Theory" 515), the optimism that she displays regarding white women's capacity for change suggests that she does not foreclose the possibility for interracial alliances between women. Instead, perhaps the historical reconstruction that Williams offers in *Dessa Rose* might be read as a blueprint of what must happen in the present if women are to form politically meaningful relationships across race. In Rufel, Williams presents a white character who renounces the solipsism of white privilege by entering a black community and is "othered" by this process. For Rufel, the process of seeing herself from an(other) perspective facilitates her growth from a childish dependence on her Mammy and other slaves to womanhood. Through learning respect for Dessa's claim to selfhood and agency, Rufel locates her own claim to these values and rejects the prerogative of the slave mistress to fashion her identity in *opposition* to the other woman, learning how to identify *with* her instead. And significantly, this process of self-discovery does not position Dessa as an ancillary, serving as Rufel's patient moral guide to issues of race; instead Dessa must wrestle with her own painful process of overcoming her own biases and anxieties about white women. By depicting this mutual model by which

Dessa and Rufel reconstruct their images of the other, Williams enacts the idea that black and white women still have much to teach one another.

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