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The Self’s Own Kind: Literary Resistance in Sherley Anne Williams’ Dessa Rose

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I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming of evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light;
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like this is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor,
where your flames still bit my thigh,
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

Anne Sexton, "Her Kind"

Why is it instructive to begin a discussion of a piece of resistance literature written by an African-American woman author with excerpts from a poem written by a European-American woman poet? It is instructive because such a citation gives one a concrete example of the tradition against which Sherley Anne Williams, the African-American woman writer in question, is rebelling. Sexton’s poem owes much of its brilliance to the fact that it deftly captures the characterizations and fates which many male-dominated cultures—and certainly Western culture—assign to the strong women. A strong woman, Sexton is writing, is seen as a destructive—as an otherworldly—force. A strong woman’s life is marred not only by undue suffering, but also by madness: like Charlotte Bronte’s Mrs. Rochester, the “madwoman in the attic” in Jane Eyre, women whom Western power structures deem noisy, troublesome, or disobedient are mad. And this tradition gains an even more ominous power when it is combined with the larger, gender-blind Western literary tradition, which dictates that madness is an ideal form of closure—the final, longed-for stage in a character’s development.

It is this double-yoke of literary expectations—that is, the expectations for literature written by or about women and the expectations for literature written in the West—that Black women writers of the African diaspora are staggering beneath as they struggle to produce works that speak to and about the experiences of the diasporan Black woman. Sherley Anne Williams is one such author, and Dessa Rose is one such work. The novel’s spirit of resistance flows from Williams’s refusal to allow her protagonist, the African-American slave woman who gives the novel its title, to bow to the literary tradition in which strong women are evil or otherworldly and in which madness is the reward for a character’s development or a woman’s strength.

Williams’s resistance to the literary link between woman’s strength and woman’s otherworldliness is finely crafted. From the instant that she introduces us to Dessa, Williams encourages us to challenge others’ perceptions of her strength and daring. When the novel opens, we find Dessa imprisoned for her role in a slave-coffle revolt that has left several white men dead; the authorities are staying her execution until she has given birth to the child she is carrying. White outsiders construct her not as a condemned prisoner, not as an expectant mother, but as an aberration, a freak of nature. By staging a slave revolt and killing white men, Dessa has shattered the dominant societal images of both the passive woman and the passive slave.

Because Dessa can no longer be placed into any of the categories that whites have built for her, they are forced to search the world outside of earthly experience for terms with which to describe her. Wilson, the coffle leader whom the slaves’ rebellion has reduced to madness, talks of Dessa’s “devil eyes” and “devil stare” (20). Another white man describes her as the "virago," the "she-devil" who still haunts Wilson’s nightmares" (22). She is also widely spoken of as the “devil woman,” as Jemima, the jailhouse slave who brings her food, explains to her:

...[Jemima] told how the people in the neighborhood had coined the name from the slave trader Wilson’s description of the uprising. It expressed their derision of slave dealers, whose only god was money, and their delight that a “devil” had been the agency of one’s undoing. Dessa had not liked the idea of such notoriety, but she was pleased to know that others knew [of the revolt]... (54)
The "they" of this passage are the slaves of the district; it is "they" who have named Dessa the "Devil woman." The slaves understand that white society will attempt to place a Black woman of threatening strength and courage in an area as far as possible outside the realm of human experience, and the name with which they christen Dessa mocks the whites' actions. Further, they take the language of the whites and infuse it with the pride they feel for Dessa and the contempt they reserve for slavery, thus reappropriating the insult of the whites and transforming it into something positive. This is an act of resistance, and the slaves pass the power of this reappropriation onto Dessa, encouraging her to take the whites' construction of her as a strong Black woman and reinvent it so that it becomes her own.

This spirit of resistance also runs throughout the story's historical motif and empowers Dessa in the face of the madness that being without control of one's history induces. Dessa's—and the novel's—primary struggle is resistance to slavery, and in the process of giving Dessa a voice with which to tell her story, Williams gives Dessa the power to evade the madness which will overtake her if she remains voiceless. In the "Author's Note," Williams explains her own resistance strategy where the empowering voice is concerned. In writing Dessa Rose, Williams says, she seeks to tell the untold story of slavery and to prove that, no matter what the "histories" of slavery have led us to believe, "slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expression" (5). Williams also explains why Dessa adopts the struggle for the voice as her primary resistance strategy, saying:

I admit also to being outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner. Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process of high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us. . . . (5)

Thus, we know even before we begin to read Dessa Rose that madness, for Dessa, is having another tell her story. Her struggle is for the full control of those things that any author must master in order to produce works: a voice, a story, and an audience.

When the novel opens, Dessa is exercising her voice by telling her story to Adam Nehemiah, an up-and-coming author who is so enamored of the South's planter aristocracy that he writes books that help them manage their slaves. Dessa tells her story to Nehemiah because she is forced to, not because she wants him to be her audience. Nehemiah is, in truth, unfit for such a role—not only because of his obvious distaste for "recalcitrant negroes" (24) and other "darkies," but also because of his desire to make her voiceless. Nehemiah does not want to tell Dessa's story; he wants to make Dessa's story his own. We see this when Nehemiah recalls a conversation that he has had with his publishers:

A book on slave uprisings, touching as it must upon the secret fears of non-slaveholder and slaveholder alike, should be an immediate success, easily surpassing the heart- (and pocket-) warming sales [of Nehemiah's first book]. The books would establish Nehemiah as an important Southern author.... [He] had allowed himself to be persuaded. (25)

Nehemiah claims that he is writing the book on slave revolts in "as much of . . . Dessa's] own words as he can make out" (23), and therein lies the problem: his experience is so far removed from hers that the portion of Dessa's words that he can "make out" is severely limited at best and colored by his own perceptions at worst. Thus, we are apprehensive about Dessa's fate when we read this passage, as Nehemiah's success—not Dessa's—will be secured by the success of the book. Dessa is being deprived of her claim to her own story, and Nehemiah has everything to gain from her loss.

But Dessa is fully aware of Nehemiah's designs on her voice, and she acts to reappropriate it an to secure her sanity in the process. She does this through an explosion of the voice—singing. As Hughes, her jailer, tells Nehemiah, Dessa has been singing "some kind of dirge" (29) to herself each day of her imprisonment. It is the memory of her dead lover Kaine, whom the voicelessness of being deprived of his musical voice made mad, that prompts her to use her song as her salvation instead of as a means of passing the time. Dessa wonders why, when her master destroyed Kaine's banjo, Kaine attacked the master although he knew that such action would bring about his own death. "Kaine could have made another banjo... Why...?..." (64), she muses. But Kaine did not choose death with a rational mind; he acted in the manner of a madman because he had been made mad by the destruction of his banjo, which constituted the destruction of his voice.

Although Dessa does not fully understand Kaine's motivation, reflecting upon his death becomes a moment of epiphany for her, and she acts to save her voice and evade madness:

On impulse, she moved to the window, her chain rattling behind her, and standing on tiptoe looked out. She could see nothing except the dusty yard that sloped away from the cellar, but she sang anyway, her raspy contralto gathering strength as her call unfolded:

Tell me, sister; tell me, brother,
How long will it be?
She had never sung a call of her own aloud and she repeated it, wondering if any of . . . [the other imprisoned slaves] would hear her;
Tell me, brother; tell me, sister,
How long will it be
That a poor sinner got to suffer, suffer here?
There was a momentary silence, then the tenor answered, gliding into a dark falsetto:
Tell me, sister; tell me, brother,
When my soul be free?
Other voices joined in, some taking up the refrain, 
"How long will it be?," others continuing to call; 
her voice blended with theirs in momentary
communion:
Tell me, oh. please, tell me,
When I be free? (64)

By starting a call and response that she knows the slaves in the
adjoining cells will recognize as a dialogue about planning an
escape, Dessa is telling a story. Beneath the song's surface
lies a world teeming with information about Dessa's status as
a slave an as a condemned prisoner; she is singing a mini-
autobiography. Although she doubts her story's power when
she wonders whether or not her neighbors will be able to hear
her song, her song is worthwhile enough for the others to feel
compelled to help her sing it, and her voice is so clear that one
of her neighbors hears her hidden question and answers it
with:

Soul's going to heaven,
Soul's going to ride that heavenly train
Cause the Law have called you home. (65)

Now that Dessa's power as author is restored and her sanity is
no longer in jeopardy, she is "jubilant" (67). In the chapter
which follows, the story that the novel relates is told in a voice
that is increasingly recognizable as Dessa's; by the end of
the novel, the story is completely hers. She has not gone mad, and
she is able to take pride in the fact that she is so completely in
control of her own voice that she is able to pass her personal
history down intact, thus giving her offspring and her people
an inoculation against the madness of voicelessness:

I hopes I live for my peoples like they do for me,
so sharp sometime I can't believe it's all in my
mind. And my mind wanders. This why I have
to write it down, why I has the child say it back. I
never will forget... [Nehemiah] trying to read me,
knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, this
the childrens have heard from my own lips. I hope
they never have to pay what it cost us to our
ownselves. (236)

But, if Dessa manages to regain the authorship of her
own story and resist the literary trope of madness, then what of
Nehemiah, who has been deprived of the voice he tried to
make his own? Left without a voice, Nehemiah has gone mad.
In the ultimate act of resistance, Dessa has reclaimed her own
voice and has transferred the madness of voicelessness to
Nehemiah. "Self-taught beyond grammar school" (25),
Nehemiah had fought hard to obtain his own voice, but had
subverted it to his desire to be a part of the planter aristocracy,
thinking that "education [and] schooling" (25) as evidenced by
writing was "the key to [the wealthy planters'] world" (25).
Thus, when Dessa escapes from prison and in the process
deprees him of his book and of the fame he had hoped it
might bring, Nehemiah is left with no voice at all and
descends into madness, as Dessa discovers when she sees him
again at the end of the novel. Nehemiah's madness has made
him fetishize Dessa; he is obsessed with finding her and taking
her back to the prison to be executed. But, when he tries to
read from his interview notes in order to prove to the police
that Dessa is an escaped slave, he reveals both his
voicelessness and his insanity, as Dessa relates:

"I kill Mistress," Nemi say, reading, walking up
on me, "cause I can!" That's what she say, 
pointing at me. "Here's some more"—he was
flicking through the book. "Here," he say, shaking
it in my face. The pages wasn't bound in the cover
and they fell out, scattering about the floor. Nemi
starting grabbing the papers...

"Nemi, ain't nothing but some scribbling on
here," sheriff say. "Can't no one read this."
... And these is blank, sheriff... .

"What?," Nemi say, still on his knees. "Naw, it's
all here." He lurch to his feet and the sheriff
grabbed him. "... I know this darkly, I tell you; I
know her very well. ... I know her. ... You
understand. Science. Research. The mind of the
darky." And he tap his temple. (231-232)

All evidence that Nehemiah has written a book has been
erased. When he quotes Dessa as saying, "I kill Mistress
cause I can," we know that he is misquoting a statement that
Dessa made during the interviews: "I kill white mens cause
the same reason Massa kill Kaine. Cause I can" (20).
Nehemiah has lost his voice and now has no story to tell. He
is now called "Nemi," and is thus doomed to be "called out his
name" perpetually; everyone has the power to misread him.

Thus, Williams makes Dessa's resistance complete;
Dessa vanquishes whites in order to keep slavery from holding
and "reading" (236) the text that is her body, and she wrenches
her voice from Nehemiah in order to keep madness from
holding the textmaker that is her mind. Further, in another
subversive stroke, Williams reinvents the conventions of
closure: she gives us the mental dissolution we expect, but
surprises us by making the character who goes mad at book's
dead the character we least expected. Nemi has considerable
power, and history and literary tradition tell us that he should
be the victor. But Dessa defeats Nemi using his own tactics,
and the end of the novel finds him—not her—voiceless and
insane.

Williams's novel is a true work of resistance. It
successfully presents themes of African-American slave
resistance while, at the same time, it resists the literary trope
of the strong woman's otherworldliness and the conventional
use of madness as closure. In the process of reconstructing
history and literary convention, Williams is also reconstructing
the Black female self. Although the literary tradition of the
West has conditioned us to expect death to close out novels,
Williams' text ends with Dessa regenerating herself through
the telling of her story. Anne Sexton's poem and the Western
literary tradition tell us that a "woman like that"—that is, a
strong woman—"is not ashamed to die," and this is true of
Dessa. But Williams’ is telling us that there are other options for characters, options outside literary tradition. Dessa escaped death over and over again, and she does not covet a place among the women of Western literary tradition because she does not need inclusion in the cult of "her kind."

Dessa prefers to reinvent herself perpetually, defying categorization in a true act of resistance. Instead of being one of "her kind," Dessa becomes her own kind, and flourishes in the resistance that is the creation of the self.