

**EMBODYING THE BLACK BODY : THE DOMINION OF NEO-SLAVE  
NARRATIVES AND THE CORPOREAL PARADIGM IN DESSA ROSE (1986) BY  
SHIRLEY ANNE WILLIAMS**

**ALLÉGORIES DU CORPS NOIR : RÉCIT D'ESCLAVES ET PARADIGME  
CORPOREL DANS *DESSA ROSE* (1986) DE SHIRLEY ANNE WILLIAMS**

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**Abstract:** The present article examines Sherley Anne Williams's representation of the female black body through the lenses of the Euro-American ethos and psyche. Williams' reformulation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century female slave experience lies between literary representation and historical realism. Her literary and corporeal discourse matches impeccably the traumatic experience and bodily rampage of the female slave. Nurtured by the existing black feminist theories on the traumatic circumstances that surrender the sociological and racial representations of Black Body, our text assesses racial, literary and gender paradigms that structure Sherley Anne Williams's discourse. In her historical account, she decried the dehumanizing images of slave women bodies engraved into stereotypes that deconstruct vital concepts such as humanity, motherhood, love and sexuality. As such, the study investigates the female black body as the locus of racial and gender tribulations. Furthermore, this paper examines how the ideology of slavery downturns the natural functions of female slaves' sexuality and reproductive system putting at jeopardy their gender and maternal identity. It also shows to what extent the scars inscribed on Dessa Rose's body can be read as a counter narrative apt to authenticate the process of corporeal and diasporic recovery.

**Keywords:** Body, motherhood, gender, sexuality, slavery.

**Résumé :** Le présent article analyse la représentation de Sherley Anne Williams du corps noir féminin par le prisme de l'ethos et de la psyché de l'euro-américain. La reformulation par Williams de l'expérience de l'esclavage féminin au 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle se situe entre la représentation littéraire et le réalisme historique. Son discours littéraire et corporel reproduit précisément l'expérience traumatique et la profanation du corps de la femme esclave. Nourri par les théories féministes noires existantes sur les circonstances traumatiques qui restituent les représentations sociologiques et raciales du corps noir, notre texte évalue les paradigmes raciaux, littéraires et de genre qui structurent le discours de Sherley Anne Williams. Dans son récit historique, elle dénonce les images déshumanisantes du corps de la femme esclave gravé dans des stéréotypes qui déconstruisent les concepts tels que l'humanité, la maternité, l'amour et la sexualité. Dès lors, l'étude conçoit le corps de la femme esclave comme lieu d'expression de l'hégémonie masculine blanche. En outre, notre texte examine comment l'idéologie de l'esclavage bouleverse les fonctions naturelles de la sexualité et du système reproductif des femmes esclaves, mettant en péril leur identité sexuelle et maternelle. Dans la même veine, il démontre que les cicatrices inscrites sur le corps de Dessa Rose peuvent être lues comme un contre-récit capable d'authentifier les traumatismes puis de les transcender par un processus de guérison corporelle et d'affiliation communautaire.

**Mots-clés :** Corps, esclavage, genre, maternité, sexualité.

## Introduction

Slave accounts have always been the locus of atypical defiance for slave women as echoed and replicated in the literary works of women writers such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (*The Slave Mother*, American Poetry-1856), Harriet E Wilson (*Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*-1859), Harriet Ann Jacobs (*Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*, Boston: Edited by L. Maria Child -1861), Pauline Hopkins ("Talma Gordon" in *The Colored American Magazine* -1900 ), and many others. Those brilliant and gifted African American women writers voiced without racial and patriarchal shackles their artistic ingenuity the testimonies and interpretation of Black women's experience in North America. Wilson, Harper, Hopkins, and Jacobs, all conveyed the painful ordeal of slave women.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1970s were patented by the second renaissance of Black literature and the emergence of Black female prose writers (Dubey 1994: 1). They carved a pioneering discourse appropriate to recount and replicate the experiences of the heretofore subdued and silenced group of Black mothers. Along with the first wave of women writers after the innovative and ground-breaking work done by Zora Neale Hurston (fiction as well as nonfiction), twentieth century black women writers such as Gayl Jones (*Corregidora*-1975), Octavia Butler (*Kindred*-1979), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*-1982), Shirley Anne Williams (*Dessa Rose*-1986), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*-1987), and many others carry on exploring the legacy of slavery in relation to gender contingencies. They unceasingly retorted to the representation of Black womanhood and testify to the exclusive and excruciating experience of Black women in North America.

Among writers who recounted the trials and tribulations of the slave women, Shirley Anne Williams (1944-1999) provided a unique legacy of slave women's experience. She was an American novelist, poet, professor, playwright and social critic. Her narratives and poems constantly probe Black experience in America. She wrote fiction (*Dessa Rose* 1986; *Working Cotton* 1992; *Letters from a New England Negro* 1992; *Girls Together* 1999;), nonfiction (*Meditations on History* 1980; *Two Words on Music: Black Community* 1992; *Cultural and Interpersonal Aspects of Black Male/Female Relationships: Comment on the Curb* 1979) as well as poetry (*The Peacock Poems* 1975; *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* 1982 ).

Shirley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, published in 1986, delineates the structure of our literary investigation. The intrigue is enthused by two accounts from the antebellum South. The first refers to an expecting slave woman who led an insurrection among a group of slaves being conveyed to market. She was wedged and penalized to death, but her hanging was deferred until after the birth of her child. The second account refers to a lone white woman pugnacious for survival on a remote and insulated North Carolina farm. She was said to have prearranged unlawful asylum to a perpetual cluster of fugitive slaves. Shirley Anne Williams fused these two unconnected experiences and remodeled them as the life experience of Odessa Rose (called Dessa) and that of Ruth Elizabeth (called Rufel), a wealthy Charleston bride.

Divided into three parts, the novel presents to the reader Dessa's corporeal valuation and how she envisions her own sexuality in racial paradigms. Adam Nehemiah, who exemplifies the slave master, was inept to admit Dessa's humanity and intellect. Consequently, he associates her body with inhuman and evil physiognomies: "Nehemiah still marveled at how wide and black her eyes had appeared in the half

light of the cellar...He had understood then something of what the slave dealer, Wilson might have meant when he talked of the darky's "devil eyes" , her "devil's stare." (Williams 1999: 20).

Williams then explores Dessa Rose's proprietorship of her body, mind, and identity. In doing so, she probes the imports of degradation and torment of the Black female body. Thus, Williams transformed the female body as a site for boundless challenges and the depository of the trials and tribulations of slave women. Williams offers a unique legacy of slavery and provides a rich and emotional chronicle of the black female body amidst racial and sociological inferences.

According to Venteria K. Patton, in *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*-2000.), an insightful book on race and gender, slave women are "dehumanized," "de-womanized" and "de-gendered" by white male domination. Very significantly, as a slave woman, Dessa Rose's condition defies her identity as both a woman and a mother. Her slave experience provides then multi-layered critical perspectives as it articulates slavery to the experience of womanhood and motherhood. As such, Sherley Ann Williams confronts the concepts of race and questions the notions of being a slave, a woman and a mother.

The prominence of the female body in literature prompted intense academic interest. According to Erica Reischer, independent scholar, Oakland, California and Kathryn S. Koo, Department of English, Saint Mary's College of California, the body is a "text" upon which social meanings are inscribed. (Reischer and Koo 2004: 297). Thus, overturning the naturalistic and biological perspective, the present study aims to investigate and redefine the black body as a sociocultural and historical construct. Following the anthropological conception of critic Elisabeth Grosz who contends that "if the body is written, that means it can be rewritten and re-inscribed in society with a new meaning," the present paper proposes a racial and sociological reading of female slaves. That literary and investigative scheme is designed within the precincts of corporeality and historiography.

Consequently, the following questions structure our investigation. Can the female slave body be conceived as a historical site? Is the corporeal entity a historically and politically constructed artifact? What are the inferences of racial creeds on the construction of Black womanhood? How do female slaves struggle for survival and turn the traumatic Black body into a site of healing?

In order to examine the multiform and multifaceted nature of slavery, the present work is divided in three sections. The first section examines the black feminist theoretical orientations regarding the Black body and gender issues. The second section inspects Williams' historiography and the estranging effects of slavery on the female body. It thoroughly encapsulates and investigates the emotional paradigms that carve a female slave's psyche and body entangled with racial and sociological undercurrents. As Black female slaves' bodies are the most desecrated institution, the last section evaluates motherhood in chains and the healing process it triggers when considered through communal lenses.

## 1. Theorizing the Black Body: Amidst Bondage and Gender Corollaries

The neo-slave narrative is often marked by a posture which directly calls into question the traditional historiography of "master" narratives. Elizabeth Grosz, Australian philosopher, feminist theorist, and professor at Duke University, "locates the body as the conceptual blind spot in both mainstream western philosophical thought and temporary black feminist theory." (Grosz 1994:3). Throughout centuries, black women's body has been considered as well as represented as an entity perfectly suitable for speculation, exploitation, and objectification. Inscribed in slavery era, black bodies were subjects of stereotypical and negative images. In her remarkable essay "Black women's intellectuals" Bell Hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), American author and social activist, asserts that in order to justify the sexual and labor exploitation of enslaved black women, the dominant white elites created an "iconography" of black female bodies as hypersexual, (representing) the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism. (Hooks 1991:153). In complement to the acts of physical torment, the black body has always been imperiled to destructive ideals and negotiation. According to Cornel West, American philosopher, political activist and social critic, "white supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them." (West 1993: 85). Thus, in his conception, Cornel West sees the Black Body as a racial and social construct. Molded by such paradigms, the body becomes a site of existential questions which endorse human rights abuses both as physical and metaphysical.

### 1.1. *Telling the Other Side of the Story*

The silhouette of the woman has long been portrayed as secretive, yearned for, and despised. Consequently, the female bodies have always been imperiled by white and male regulations. As such, Western and white supremacist discourses reflect black women's bodies as anomalous and obnoxious. As a retort, black women writers seek to reconstruct and revalue those bodies, rebutting and disparaging the stereotypes and misconceptions that unceasingly shattered black women's pride and self-reliance. Dorothy Roberts, an acclaimed scholar of race and social justice advocate, in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1998) confirms the peculiar bond between slavery and motherhood. For Robert Staples, in *The Black Scholar*, black women's child bearing in bondage was largely an expression of subjugation rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood. (Staples 1978: 23). Subsequently, African American women writers decried Black women's deleterious conditions and endeavored to convert black women's bodies into sites of restoration and resilience. Conceptualizing and reimagining the Black body is then a historical project for black feminist critics and novelists. Helene Cixous, French feminist, novelist, essayist, critic and playwright, in her essay "The laugh of the Medusa" (1976), urges women to carve their bodies in a feminine language capable to discard the phallogocentric tradition and repress the estranging past.

### 1.2. *Slaying the Female Slave Body*

The history of subjugation against black women during bondage is engraved in the bodies and souls of *Dessa Rose's* female characters. As mere property, black women's bodies belonged to a reproductive system as source of cost-effectiveness for

the slaveholding scheme. Patricia Hill Collins, sociology university professor and black feminist theorist (race, class and gender), stated in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*, a foundational contribution in Black Gender Studies, that:

Under chattel slavery, people of African descent occupied a particular place in class relation-their bodies and all that is contained in those bodies (labor, sexuality, and reproduction) are objectified and turn into commodities that are traded in the marketplace, especially Black women (Collins 2004 :55).

In line with Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Omolode, in *The Rising Songs of African American Women*, expands that slave owners define female slaves as mere commodity, disregarding their feelings and rights. (Omolode 1994:7)

Therefore, within slavery, any autonomous exercise of black women's sexuality could be understood as a transgression. Very meaningfully, Sherley Anne Williams provides the reader with a preamble in which Dessa reminiscences the enjoyment of being with her lover. Dessa Rose carries the scars of her chastisement on her private parts the very same locus she enacted sexual intercourse with Kaine. Purposefully, Williams conglomerates Dessa's consciousness of her slave status with that of her womanhood: "It was like an animal, whipped like one, in the dirt like one. I hadn't never known peoples could do peoples like this. And I had the marks of that on my privates. It wasn't uncommon to see negro with scars and most of us carried far more than we ever showed." (Williams 1986:151).

Clearly, the foremost traumatic events threaten Dessa's corporeal integrity and lacerate her psychologically as well. After her assaulting her masters, despite her pregnancy, Dessa is physically molested "about the hips and legs, branded ...along the insides of her thighs. (Williams 1986: 134), and confined in a damp case where she cries "from pain, from grief, from filth." (Williams 1986: 190).

After a brutal riot and escape, she is captured and sentenced to death. However, her execution is adjourned until after the birth of her child; she is kept in subhuman conditions in a basement where she is scrutinized and questioned by Adam Nehemiah. He is referred to as Nemi, a schoolteacher who aims to enter the ranks of the exclusive Southern society by writing a bestseller book about how to repress slave insurrections, "thinking himself qualified by virtue of his race and gender to record and interpret Dessa's story." (Mitchell 2002:75). Nemi's tentative to reformulate Dessa Rose's experience symbolizes the white master's narrative. That very enterprise Black women writers still contradict providing a counter-narrative recounted by black souls.

## **2. Textualizing the Black Body: De-sexualization and Counter-Narrative**

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins contends that notwithstanding the twofold burden of racial and gender discrimination, African American women have carved a rich intellectual tradition. She explores the words and ideas of Black feminist intellectuals and writers, and affirms that: "sexuality in the individual, interpersonal domain of power becomes annexed by intersecting oppressions in the structural domain of power in order to ensure the smooth operation of domination." (Collins 1990: 185). In that perspective, Williams inscribes Dessa's sexual activity as the very

expression of the character's struggle for corporeal and spiritual deliverance. Subsequently, the narrative structure of *Dessa Rose* consents the possibility for resilience. Another form of resilience is the counter narrative, genuine evolving instrument to upsurge African American storytelling in order to "reclaim and rejoice the body" (Cleary 2016:1) as an instrument of subversion of repressing discourses and site of emancipation. The idea of "counter" itself infers a site of resistance against white male ascendancy.

### 2.1. *De-gendered and De-sexualized Female Bodies*

Within slavery, any autonomous exercise of black women's sexuality could be assumed as an act of transgression. This transgressive assertiveness is the contextual story for *Dessa Rose*. More precisely, Williams provides the readers with a preamble in which Dessa recalls the pleasures of being with her lover. Written in italics, Dessa's recollections are filled with desire, sexual delight, and fulfillment:

Talks as beautiful as his touch. Shivering she pulled at his shirt. This was love, her hand at his back, his mouth. Sho you want? Sho she asked him, Sho you want this old? His hips were on hers, nibbling, nipping. Dessa a groan in his throat. Her sentence ended in a moan. Thighs spread for him, his moving for him. Land, this man sho know how to love. (Williams 1986:14)

Throughout the novel, Dessa is penalized for her endeavors to retaliate and secure herself. Written in italics Dessa's recollections are filled with yearning, sexual enchantment and contentment. This sexual and transgressive assertiveness constitutes the core punishment of the protagonist. She dares to express her sexual longing and ability to love in a way that does not endorse any benefits to her master, neither sexual nor pecuniary. Notwithstanding being a pregnant runaway enslaved black woman, Dessa Rose is constricted in an Alabama confinement chamber, charged with the assault of her masters.

To reclaim the erotic as a foundational act for resilience is of vital significance for slave women. By her focus on black female sexuality, Williams returns to the site of the most violent aspect violent for black women as slaves. Shirley Anne Williams depicts the repossession of black female bodies through various sexual, maternal and spiritual acts. For Williams, sex is a fundamental component of black female resistance to subjugation. She situates her character in the historical context of American slavery with vitriolic mythical images. In her focus on slavery, Williams goes back to the source of many of the discursive constructs that continue to circumscribe black women's lives and the experiences of their own bodies. Through acts of intimacy with other bodies, slave women long to usher into a future divergent from the present. This scheme for the future triggers female slaves to counterattack energetically any exertions that would refute the realization of their strategies. Precisely, Williams' literary strategy is to counter narrate the persistent desecration of Black women.

### 2.2. *A Counter Narrative of the Female Slave Experience*

In the process of counter narrative, *Dessa Rose* and her community create a new Black discourse of self-representation in defiance to the prevailing white supremacist discourse. In her analysis performed in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) Helene Cixous confirms and asserts the necessity for women to write in a space she calls "l'écriture féminine":

Woman must write herself: must write about woman and bring woman to writing from which they have driven away so violently as from their bodies for the same reasons by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement. (Cixous 1976: 875)

Bell Hooks too underscores the need to debate about the Black body. She asserts that "one of the things we are in great need of is a discourse that deals with the representation of black bodies." (Hooks 1991: 197). Exactly, Williams' discourse enunciates a personified poetic discourse of resilience, reclaiming the black body from the long-lasting effects of trauma, detention, and motherhood. As a counter-narrative to the dehumanization of the female black body, Dessa's resilience denotes the commanding and sagacious voice of a black woman who carries in her own flesh the scars of abuse. Precisely, the most important denial of humanity refers to female slave who have been deprived of the "joys of motherhood".

### 3. Motherhood and the Reproduction of Slavery

The representation of black bodies is deeply rooted and anchored in the historiography of North America. Slavery was the site of physical, emotional and psychological brutalities. Subsequently, the Black body is an appropriate cultural scheme to explore the acquaintances between slavery and white male expressions of power. As the body reads as a physical text in society, it incorporates social significance. Considered as chattels, black women's bodies are the possessions and assets of white males. Their reproductive systems were a sturdy and substantial source of wealth for the slaveholding system.

Accordingly, white supremacy perceives Dessa as a mere container, only worthy so long as she is apt to contribute to the white master's economic production providing potentially valuable property, becoming, in Quashie's words, a "(de)valued commodity" (Quashie 2004: 66). The systematic obliteration of the mother-child bond contributed to what Black feminist scholars refer to as Black mothers' "ungendering" (Spillers 1987: 68) or "degendering" (Patton 2000: 79). The resulting "natal alienation" (Patterson 1982: 6) became a constituent element of slavery.

#### 3.1. *Black Motherhood in Shackles*

In the white masters' psyche, black babies did not belong to slave mothers. As such, they were often pitilessly separated shortly after birth (see Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poem *The Slave Mother*-1856). While being hyper-sexualized, recurrently raped, and forced to bear children, the enslaved woman was "excluded from the mothering realm" (Patton 2000: 111) and was "both mother and mother-dispossessed." (Spillers 1987: 80). Very interestingly, Dessa comments "we have paid for our children's place in the world again, and again." (Williams 1986: 236), summarizing abuses endured by generations of Black women. She adds her own grief to female slaves' tribulations: "I have been spared death till I could birth a baby white folks would keep slaved." (Williams 1986: 143).

Black feminist scholars contend that as slave children belonged neither to the mother nor to the owner, Black mothering is "an impossibility" (Spillers 1987: 74). The Black

mother's tragedy is inescapable and she "cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all." (Quashie 2004: 66).

As a literary riposte, the issue of biological motherhood resurfaces in fiction by Black women writers in the 1970s. According to Shirley Anne Williams' maternal theory, the polarity of motherhood as both traumatic and therapeutic is representative of *Dessa Rose*. Dessa heals from her traumas through two dissimilar communal experiences: a narrative that honors her point of view and an entwined inter-corporeal bond in a community organized around "horizontal relatedness." (Spillers 1987:75). Healing stratagems are concomitant to motherhood as Dessa's child allows her existence and facilitate her repossession through body and discourse, providing then restorative post traumatic effects.

### 3.2. *Reading the Scars and Healing the Body*

The contributions of Roberta Culbertson ("Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self"-1995), Lisa Woolfork (*Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*-2008), Hortense Spillers ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" -1987.), and Mae Henderson (*Speaking in Tongues and Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*-2014) are valuable elements in assessing and understanding the Black body amidst the experience of slavery and *Dessa Rose*'s physical trials. Primarily, for *Dessa Rose*, the body is a perfect site of remembering traumatizing or agreeable events. Once *Dessa* is scourged and thrashed, the trauma is traceable and "known" by her body and the "semiotics of her skin". (Culbertson 1995: 170). According to Woolfork this corporeal interpretation substantiates slave narrators focus on bodily epistemology, the idea that the traumatic slave past can be referenced in the body after the event itself (Woolfork 2008: 45).

Indeed, through its scars, *Dessa*'s body itself becomes a decipherable legacy to her past, prone to be misinterpreted since "these undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come the hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color." (Spillers 1987: 67). *Dessa*'s scars then function as a narrative of grief. Hortense Spillers, through a thoughtful examination of the black body, suggests:

The markings of the slave body may well transfer symbolically from one generation to the next, in ways that repeat the initiating moments. To the extents that these hieroglyphics scars remain written on black bodies and black consciousness even to the present day, our racial and national survival may depend ultimately on our learning to read that scarring. (Spillers 1987:70)

The detrimental side of slavery and its traumatic disorders questions the cultural forces capable of reintegrating disheartened and outcast female slaves into the community of black women.

As *Dessa* is not allowed by external circumstances to construct and control her sexuality according to her terms, and as motherhood is a social construction, *Dessa* becomes alienated from her gender identity. The notion of healing, for both individual and collective level, is concomitant with a holistic approach to the integrity and wholeness of *Dessa Rose*.

The female slave body offers a story that substitutes the narrative and verbal memory with scars functioning " as inscriptions (that) produce the meaning of Black female

subjectivity in the discursive domain of slavery"(Henderson 1987: 67). For instance, the very act of subsequent "readings" of the scars by Ruf, Harker, and Aunt Chole substantiate and validate Dessa's scars (Williams 1986:154), thus certifying her prominence as an escapee at the request of Nemi and the Sheriff.

Harker, Dessa's partner, kisses the "altered human tissue"(Spillers 1987: 67) on her thigh and asserts that her scars, far from biasing her "value", actually upturn it (Williams 1986: 191). In doing so, Harker transforms Dessa's flesh into a corporeal body. According to Jennifer Griffiths, in *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writings and Performance* (2009), Aunt Chole disrupts "the primacy of the visual field" and subverts the expectation of the white gaze when she denies the existence of the scars. (Griffiths 2009:32)

The inter-corporeal connection with the female community and family affiliations is a key constituent of the protagonist's healing process. Braiding hair, due to its maternal undertones, is a coping mechanism for Dessa. It evokes pleasant childhood memories (Williams 1986: 234). Thus, braiding the hair, through its function of care, merges the communal and maternal aspects of healing. The importance of bonding through touch, then, is manifold and reveals Williams' ethos of "privileging touch and other senses" which destabilizes Rufel and "the dominant discourse's obsession with the visual Black body"(Griffin 2009: 39). Dealing with the Black Body, African American female writers provided an authoritative instrument in measuring the experience of slave women and their identity development.

## Conclusion

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a fictional autobiographical account, Harriet Ann Jacobs, under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, reports the trials and tribulations of a slave mother to redeem herself and her children. She then provides a commanding assertion that "slavery is terrible for men but it is far more terrible for women." (Jacobs: 1861: 405).

Toni Morrison confirmed Jacobs' statement in *Beloved*. Challenging her maternal condition, Sethe tries painfully to adjust in a world which disregards her humanity. She finally acknowledges the importance of the community in her journey to fulfillment and recognizes that "nobody could make it alone...You could be lost forever, if there wasn't nobody to show you the way." (Morrison 1987: 159). The healing process requires then the bonds of womanhood and the support of the community. Baby Suggs becomes then the symbol of the "mater familias" and the "Alma Mater" of the community.

Similarly, in *Dessa Rose*, Chole, whose name from American and German origin means "the victory or achievement of the people", acts as the spiritual nurturer of the community and the curer of Dessa's traumas.

Ultimately, Sherley Anne Williams followed the footsteps of her literary foremothers and, as such, her renowned neo-slave narrative integrates numerous aspects of traditional slave narratives. Very astutely, she uses historical incidences to question race, gender, motherhood and the representations of the Black female body in a world designed by white males.

Referring to the black body, Hobson recalls the example of Sarah Baartman, the African enslaved woman born in South Africa in Khoikhoi, a nomadic community and forced into France where her body was exposed in freak-shows as "grotesque", "strange", "lascivious" and "obscene" (Hobson 2003: 87).

As such, finding and applying theoretical constructs that are appropriate for explaining and understanding the experiences of African American women have been a rejoinder to that racist and imaginary representation of the Black body. Feminist and postcolonial critics see the construction of history as gender biased and Williams' merit is to unveil an untold psychological dimension of history by re-assessing black slave motherhood in American antebellum society. In *Dessa Rose*, Shirley Anne Williams provided a historical version that contributes to the understanding of the ideology and historiography that incarcerate black women's bodies into subaltern inferior or dysfunctional schemes. Racially exploited, bodily assailed, and emotionally damaged, Black women often cope with coexistence with visible and invisible scars. By redirecting violence, *Dessa Rose* redefines herself as enthrallingly the pilot of her existence.

Accordingly, Williams emerges, thanks to her literary commitment, as one of the most significant and instructive voices in contemporary debates on the binary system of race and gender. According to Alice Walker, novelist, short story writer, poet and social activist, *Dessa Rosa* is "a deep, rich, compelling work...I am astonished, moved, and delighted with the language, the thought, the obvious collaboration of the ancestors and the love I read on these pages."

In broad terms, by designing pioneering politics of the black body, contemporary black women writers of the African American diaspora have especially contributed to destabilizing the hegemonic gaze by providing novels standing for black bodies and reclaiming their rights to sexual yearning and transcendence. Indeed, drawing from African-based philosophies, they have been able to reconstitute and dwell those black bodies as sites for self-affirmation and empowerment. Echoing the declaration by Janie's grandmother that "de nigger woman is de mule of the world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston 1937:17) from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Dessa* replies with a great deal of philosophy "Oh, we was mules all right" (Williams 1986:183), referring to her condition as the archetype of the enslaved woman and that of the black man embodied by Kaine whose name Cain, in the Book of Genesis, has been labeled in Abrahamic religions as the detainee of the curse or the mark that some theologians interpret as a physical mark. (Charlesworth 2010: 61).

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