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Black women writers: a comparative study of the nineteenth century's *Our Nig* and the twentieth century's *Dessa Rose*

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Black women writers:
A comparative study of the nineteenth century's *Our Nig*
and the twentieth century's *Dessa Rose*

by

Petrina Deneen Jackson

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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INTRODUCTION

Historical and Societal Background

My comparative study of *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet Wilson and *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams cannot begin without first examining the historical reality of America's societal views and perceptions of the black woman in slavery and servitude during the nineteenth-century; her actual history must precede her literary story. To be a black woman in nineteenth-century America was to be plagued with the label of belonging to a stigmatized race and gender. But devaluing of the black woman is not limited to the nineteenth-century; in fact its legacy persists in today's culture. I believe that one of the biggest dilemmas facing black women, slave and free, is that they have constantly had to define themselves in the face of a society that systematically debased and maligned black womanhood.

The black woman's condition became problematic as soon as she arrived on the American shore; for she was forced to do hard field/outdoor labor and endure sexual improprieties from a slave master. These forced conditions of servitude completely alienated her from white women, "real women," who subscribed to the confining, Victorian-rooted cult of true womanhood, which I will discuss further in the chapter entitled "Black Woman as She-devil." Working side by side with men in the fields, performing traditionally male tasks as described by American values, and living under unsanitary and inhumane conditions marked black women as non women, preventing them from ever attaining "lady" status. Being a lady meant that one

could be of frail body and do work only in the home. In contrast, according to Dorothy Sterling in *We Are Your Sisters*, "By the time she was ten years old, a slave girl was classified as a half-hand. At puberty she was doing the work of a [slave] woman, and woman's work was scarcely distinguishable from man's" (13 [my emphasis]). A former slave woman states this situation exactly in her description of work on the plantation:

....You could, any day see a woman, a whole lot of 'em making on a road. Could look up and see ten women up over dar on the hill plowing and look ober the other way and see ten more. I have done ever thing on a farm what a men done 'cept cut wheat.
(Sterling 13)

Doing outdoor work directly opposed the social norms of what was acceptable for a woman; thus it was behavior which proved to be detrimental in the black woman's reception into American society.

Thus far, I have spoken, specifically, only of the slave woman's plight of being forced to work outside, as well as inside of the household, but she was not the only one suffering from this fate.

Many of her sisters in the North, free black women, were entangled in a servant-mistress relationship with Northern whites in the nineteenth-century. Usually because of poor socioeconomic class, "free" black women worked relentlessly as servants, performing tasks inside and outside of the home, with their age and status preventing their escape. Unlike most other work, in this labor arrangement both the employer and employee were usually female. And even more noteworthy in this arrangement is the interaction between the three

ism's of American society: racism, sexism, and classism. As Zillah Eisenstein, states in *Between Women: Domesticity and Their Employers*:

Women share an oppression with each other; but what they share as sexual oppression is differentiated along class and racial lines in the same way that patriarchal history has always differentiated humanity according to class and race. (7)

So for the free black woman of the North, her work condition reflected her poor status in society. The relationship between the domestic worker and her employer is an entirely unequal one which resembles that of the mistress-servant relationship of Southern slavery. Despite liberal thinking and the abolitionist movements in the Northern states, especially the Northeast, black women were still subjected to ill treatment and conditions of servitude in the private quarters of Northern homes. Harriet Wilson says of her mistress and her life of indentured servitude, in the Preface of *Our Nig*:

I would not ...even palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North. My mistress was wholly imbued with *southern* principles. I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home. (Preface)

By using words like "mistress," "southern principles," and stating further that she conceals a great deal of her story so as not to offend her abolitionist audience, Wilson hints at the severity of Northern servitude. Therefore, I believe it is safe to say that because of her status and society's insistence on judging her by standards that mocked her very existence, the free Northern black woman was scorned and

abused in her work condition in some ways comparable to her sisters of the South.

Not only were black women in the nineteenth-century devalued because of their forced labor, but also because of sexual exploitation. This sexual exploitation was rooted in slavery, where rape and assault of the female slave were common, and protected by law. Rape was a form of institutionalized terrorism that was used to perpetuate fear and power over defenseless "property." Those who passively accepted the sexual advances of their masters were sometimes given gifts or some type of payment for their submission. Those who resisted rape were directly challenging the masters' power and the existing social order; therefore they were severely punished (hooks 27). In *Ain't I A Woman*, bell hooks states, "The political aim of this categorical rape of black women by white males was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order" (27). Because of the sheer brutality of slavery, black men did not readily attempt to protect black women from sexual abuse unless they were members of their families; the black male slave knew that if the master was capable of brutalizing defenseless women, he would be more than capable of destroying them.

Black women were further alienated from society when nineteenth-century America began to move away from the Old Testament idea of woman as an evil, sexual temptress to that of woman as an innocent, pure angel. When the ingrained societal misogyny was concealed and white women were placed on a divine pedestal, they lost

all traces of their previous lower status, but they also lost their place as a sexual being. Only by forfeiting the sinful nature of sexuality could white women be considered worthy of esteem, love, and respect (hooks 31). This new image of purity imposed upon white women by white men came into play at the same time that black women were being sexually exploited by white men, serving to further degrade black women, whose societal status and condition prevented them from ever attaining an elevated status.

The enslaved black woman could not look to any group of men, white or black, for protection against rape; and when she turned to white women she was often met with open hostility and scorn. In Harriet Jacobs' account of her mistress's response to her master's sexual advances, she says:

Mrs. Flint might have used [her] knowledge to counsel and to screen the young and innocent among her slaves; but for them she had no sympathy....every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint. (Sterling 21)

Many mistresses even went as far as physically abusing their female slaves when they discovered that they (the slaves) were being misused by their husbands. White women had been indoctrinated by society and religion to view women as sexual temptresses; therefore they often blamed black women for sexual assaults inflicted upon them.

But rape was not the only outrage slave women suffered. Victorian morality required women to completely cover their bodies. The black woman's inability to fully clothe herself, due to being publicly stripped and beaten or displayed, as well as never being

supplied with proper clothing, clashed with the Victorian view of white women, further widening an already enormous gap between the two.

One slave woman reports:

We was all chained and dey strips all our clothes off and de folks what gwine buys us comes round and feels us all over. Iffen any de niggers don't want to take dere clothes off, de man gets a long, black whip and cuts dem up hard. (Sterling 20)

Harshly judged and defined by rigid societal standards for women, yet never acknowledged as a viable representative of her race, the black woman was caught in a double bind, and never quite accepted into the social circle of either white women or black men. A perfect example of her inability to completely access or identify with the two groups is her displacement in the white women's and black men's suffrage movements of the nineteenth-century and then again in the women's and Black Nationalist movements of the 1960's.

In American history, there has been an impulse to claim that white women did not participate or have a major stake in perpetuating racism in this culture because of the sexist oppression dealt them by white men. But in order to see clearly white women's part in white imperialism, the fact stands that they did have a hand in the continuous racism against people of color in this country. The United States was built on the foundations of colonialism, which deems it necessary to institutionalize and indoctrinate racism in order to control displaced groups. Sexism has stopped white women from being the dominant force of imposed racism, but it has not altogether eliminated their role in supporting white supremacist thinking and

subjugation in their own personal or organizational realms of American society. For instance, "Every women's movement in America from its earliest origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation-- a fact which in no way invalidates feminism as a political ideology" (hooks 124).

The women's movement of the nineteenth-century was created specifically for white women and was very resistant to including black men or women in any way. The individuals within these organizations represented the sentiments of most white Americans; they did not wish to create social equality between the races, including all non-white races. A commonly accepted belief that conflicts with women's rights advocates as supporters of the American racial caste system is that they were anti-racist, supportive of the cause of ending slavery, and supportive of social equality. While it is true that many women's rights advocates were involved in the abolitionist movement, they were largely inspired by religious sentiment and the need to free their consciences. They never challenged the existing order that placed them in a higher social standing than blacks, especially black women, but in fact wanted to preserve this social order. One example of resistance to changing the social order or to establishing political unity with black people was the conflict over the vote. When it seemed that white men were going to allow black men to vote, while excluding white women from this privilege, white women suffragists did not demand that both groups deserved the right to vote (hooks 127). Instead, they were appalled that white men would extend the vote first

to outsiders from an inferior class of people, rather than to those belonging to the same superior class. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a white women's rights advocate, disputed:

If Saxon men have legislated thus for their own mothers, wives and daughters, what can we hope for at the hands of Chinese, Indians, and Africans?...I protest against the enfranchisement of another man of any race or clime until the daughters of Jefferson, Hancock, and Adams are crowned with their rights.
(hooks 127)

White women's rights advocates felt that dismissing their right to vote, while giving black men the right, was a major slight and insult to their womanhood. They did not advocate that blacks should be slaves, but they did not want them to gain status over white women.

Racial discrimination was a prevailing element in women's rights groups, not just a reaction to the vote. Historian Rosalyn Terborg-Penn states, "Discrimination against Afro-American women reformers was the rule rather than the exception with the woman's rights movement from the 1830's to 1920...antebellum reformers...actively discriminated against black women" (hooks 128). Much of this discrimination was rooted in racist-sexist stereotypes of black women as morally impure and depraved. Many white women believed that allowing these "immoral" women into their suffrage organizations would destroy their own cause and their status as idealized, virtuous, and elevated women. Black men, such as Frederick Douglass, did not have such a stigma placed on them and were occasionally welcomed into white social circles.

Of the two sexes, black men were to a small degree more accepted into the white social arena in the nineteenth-century and were more privileged in general because of their gender. Black male sexism, encouraged and accepted by patriarchal American social structure, existed before, throughout, and after slavery. Indeed during slavery black men were brutalized, but white patriarchal slave owners privileged male slaves' masculinity over female slaves' femininity. Also because of the masters' adherence to patriarchal values, sex-based differentiation of the division of labor distributed by white slave masters showed a bias in the favor of the male slave. Female slaves were given customarily male tasks as well as female tasks, while male slaves were never made to perform typically female tasks, such as child care (hooks 88). Though the black male slave's maleness was privileged over the female slave's femaleness, this doesn't mean that he received better treatment; it simply shows that masculinity was acknowledged in the sex role differentiation.

Sexism permeated all phases of American culture and society in the nineteenth-century, especially in the work force and in higher education. Many leaders emerged from these two areas of society, so it is not surprising that out of these, those black Americans most likely or acceptable for leadership were black men. As black men started emerging into leadership roles, they developed black liberation and black male suffrage movements that reflected patriarchal values. Most of these leaders wanted to emulate the same patriarchal sex roles held by white America and felt that the fight against racism was purely a

struggle between black and white men. Frederick Douglass expressed this sentiment in his essay, "What the Black Man Wants" (1865). He tries to ally with white men, stating that it is fitting and proper for a *man* to have the right to vote.

Shall we at this moment justify the deprivation of the Negro of the right to vote, because some one else is deprived of that privilege? I hold that women, as well as men, have the right to vote, and my heart and my voice go with the movement to extend suffrage to women; but the question rests on another basis than that on which our rights rest. We may be asked, I say, why we want it. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our right, first of all. No class of men can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any deprivation of their rights. (hooks 90)

Douglass is sympathetic to the cause of the white women suffragists to a degree, but he is clear on his point that he believes that the vote is a man's natural right and much more important than the rights of women. He makes no references to the black woman's place in the suffrage movement; she is literally made invisible. When Douglass speaks of the Negro, he speaks of the black man. He and other black leaders try to ally themselves with white males, on the basis of maleness and shared sexism (hooks 90), as Stanton and her counterparts did on the basis of race and shared racism. Locked out of both realms was the black women, who was marginalized by both movements, both groups, and by the ultimate representative of power, the white male.

Also, in the black man's quest for equality with the white man was the prevalent idea of the emasculated black man, whose role as protector and provider for the black woman was taken away because

of the conditions of slavery. The emasculation theory also was stimulated by the fact that many black women had to work outside of the home, which interfered with the black man's role as breadwinner. The idea of black men feeling emasculated is rooted in the acceptance of patriarchal values which deem it necessary for men to exert control over their wives by way of financial, emotional, and physical power.

Benefited by the path forged by the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement and the Black Nationalist movement of the 1960's were slightly more inclusive of black women, but their agendas still upheld racist and sexist principles reminiscent of the nineteenth-century. The feminist movement was formed by, and therefore privileged white middle- and upper-class, college educated women. The women who have been most affected by sexist oppression, mainly black women and other women of color, were never placed at the forefront of feminism; therefore, their needs were never considered or met. In fact, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, declared by many as the forerunner to the modern feminist movement, addressed the struggle of those like herself as that of all American women. She states that white, upper-class, college educated housewives are the women most victimized by sexist conditioning. Friedan explains:

It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or "I" without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive. For women of ability, in America today, I am

convinced that there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. (*Feminist Theory* 2)

Friedan's statement, though limited in focus, was a main target of the feminist movement. This perspective represents only a small portion of American women and reflects race and class bias. I do not believe that these biases are intentional, but are the results of being indoctrinated by a white racist society, which often mutes other racial and class groups. Because of the racism within the feminist movement many black women resisted joining and some, instead, joined the Black Nationalist movement, but not without problems.

Twentieth-century black male leaders, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, felt it important to exert their power as men to let the white race know that they would not "tolerate denial of masculine privilege" (hooks 94). These men, including Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Amiri Baraka, embraced patriarchy and felt it necessary to control and subordinate the black woman in politics and the home (hooks 94). For instance, Amiri Baraka promotes and romanticizes the establishment of a male dominated household in an essay in the July 1970 issue of *Black World*. He says:

...We must erase the separateness by providing ourselves with healthy African identities. By embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only of the divine complement the black woman is for her man. For instance we do not believe in the "equality" of men and women. We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals...nature has not provided thus. (hooks 95)

In Baraka's ideal world, he sees black women only in relationship to black men, as subordinate. Black women, like white women, are considered to be extensions of the male ego. He introduces this world as a new one with black values, unlike white ones of the "old" social order, but the only substantial difference in this world is the race that is in control; the patriarchy remains unchanged. So despite racist oppression, black men are not prohibited from becoming sexist oppressors.

Literary Background

Throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries the black woman's place in history and society has been problematized by racism, sexism, and in many cases classism. Though some black women have managed to surface to the forefront of certain political movements, stereotypes of immorality and inferiority have kept most on the fringe. The black woman, who found it difficult to "fit in" society because of her unique experiences, encountered the same dilemma in her place in literature. Literature, called a mirror of society, often reflected societal restraints, leaving the black woman and her condition voiceless or only partially revealed. The existing genres of the nineteenth-century that black women occupied were the domestic/seductive genre of white women and the slave narrative genre of black men. These genres often had to be modified, expanded, or altered in some way to capture her life, experiences, and thoughts in writing. Black women writers of the nineteenth-century, because of the parameters of these two genres, had to pave their own way and

make their own traditions for writers yet to come; but this did not occur without cost and compromise in telling their complete stories.

Nineteenth-century black women writers were aware of society's definition of a "lady" and therefore tried to conform to it in their writings. They often used the domestic genre of white women to tell their stories. In the "Introduction" to *Our Nig* by Henry Louis Gates Jr., he cites Nina Baym's list of characteristics of nineteenth-century woman's fiction. The overplot as identified in her study, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* reads:

1. Pairing heroines, or pairing a heroine and a villainess, is a central component of "some exemplary organizing principle in all this woman's fiction."
2. The heroine is initially "a poor and friendless child" who is either an orphan, or who "only thinks herself to be one, or has by necessity been separated from her parents for an indefinite time."
3. The heroine, at the conclusion of her story, "is no longer an underdog." Her "success in life [is] entirely a function of her own efforts and character."
4. There are two kinds of heroine in this kind of novel, the flawless and the flawed.
5. The self is depicted to be "a social product, firmly...embedded in a social construct that could destroy it but that also shaped it, constrained it, encouraged it, and ultimately fulfilled it."
6. The heroine, as a child, is abused by those who have authority over her. In the realistic tradition of this kind of novel, a series of events represents "the daily wearing down of neglected and overworked orphans." The heroine's authority figures

"exploit or neglect her," rather than "love and nurture her." The heroine's principal challenge "is to endure until she comes of age and at the same time to grow so that when she comes of age she will be able to leave the unfriendly environment and succeed on her own." The heroine must "strike a balance between total submission, ...and an equally suicidal defiance." 7. The heroine is abused by one of several characters who "are the administrators or owners of the space within which the child is legally constrained. Least guilty are the mothers; often it is the loss of the mother that initiates the heroine's woes, and the memory of her mother that permits her to endure them. Most guilty are aunts, with whom many orphaned heroines are sent to live." 8. The heroine encounters people in her community who "support, advise, and befriend her," precisely as she is abandoned by her own family. 9. The heroine's ultimate "domesticity" is not defined by her relation to her own children but to her surrogate family members. 10. The plot of woman's fiction has a tripartite structure: an unhappy childhood, "an interlude during which she must earn her own living," and the conclusion. 11. In encounters "with a man, economic considerations predominated for these women. The women authors created stories in which, ultimately, male control and the money economy are simultaneously terminated." 12. Husbands and would-be lovers are less important to the heroine than "fathers, guardians, and brothers." 13. The path to the Christian religion is unmediated by men. 14. The "woman's novel" contains much explicit and implicit social

commentary. Slavery and intemperance are secondary themes. 15. The novelists themselves "abhorred and feared poverty" (xli-xliii).

Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* follows many of the characteristics of the women's fiction overplot. Frado, the heroine, is abandoned as a child by her white mother (2) who leaves her with Mrs. Bellmont, who severely mentally and physically abuses her until she is old enough to leave her indentured servitude (6 and 7). *Our Nig* also has a tripartite structure (10), but uses slavery/servitude as a primary, not a secondary theme. Near the end of the novel when Frado's husband abandons her and their son, she is thrown into poverty and forced to create a living for herself (10 and 11).

Narratives play an important role in creating a voice for slave women. Of the total number of surviving slave narratives, approximately 12% were written by black women, but none are as well known as those by men (Washington 7), except for Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; I suspect the obscurity of women's texts results from the privileged position men hold in American society and from the notion that women were not to speak or write for the public. As a result, the black male slave experience became representative of the black voice, even though the lives of men and women in slavery were radically different. The elements of the black male slave narrative are: journey from slavery to freedom as an individual act; the hero as "self-initiating, self-propelling, and self-sustaining" (Washington 8); "journey from slavehood to manhood;" "rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographical

mobility..." (8) and resistance. Most of these narratives also have authenticator letters that verify their stories. Some aspects of Harriet Wilson's work are characterized by traces of the slave narratives. Frado does not escape from slavery since she is technically a free black living in the North (she is quasi-free), and she does not display physical strength, but she performs many acts of resistance in her journey from childhood to womanhood. At one point, Frado, after being physically threatened by Mrs. Belmont, tells her that she will refuse to work if her employer harms her. Wilson also goes against society's grain by speaking of taboo topics, such as interracial marriage and Northern racism. And she actively tries to recover from poverty by working and writing her story. Along with sharing the theme of resistance, which I will discuss in depth in the chapter entitled "Black Woman as She-devil," Wilson uses authenticating letters, as do black male slave narrators, that encourage readers to purchase her book.

So without any concrete model of their own, black women writers of the nineteenth-century, and earlier, had to pave their own literary tradition, a tradition that would later benefit writers such as Sherley Anne Williams, author of *Dessa Rose*, the second novel my study. In *Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Christian gives a broad overview of the elements of the black woman's literary tradition, stating that the common theme of this tradition was "commitment to self understanding and how that self is related to the world within which it is situated" (172). The self of the black woman is central, not marginal as it is in American society and other literary genres. Mary

Helen Washington also states that the black woman's literary tradition, especially that of the narrative and autobiography, has at its center the lives, "thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women" (Washington xxi). "Their common denominator...derives not from the general categories of race or sex, but from the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment and over succeeding generations" (Genovese 179).

As in the African and African-American community, motherhood is a very important element of the black woman's literary tradition. Barbara Christian notes that mother as sacrificer and as sacrifice is a common thread in black women's texts. Within the area of motherhood is the persistence of the mammy image, but not at all like the traditional stereotype. Christian states that mammy in this tradition:

kicked, fought, connived, plotted, most often covertly to throw off the chains of slavery. She saw herself as a mother, but to her that role embodied a certain dignity and responsibility...doubtless a carry over from the African view that every mother is a symbol of the marvelous creativity of the earth. (5)

Mobility through space is also an element in the black woman's literary tradition, just as in the black male genre, but this mobility is also permissible from one class to another (Christian 182). Independence and economic stability is a recurring theme in the works of black women writers in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth-century. For example Frado moves from one area of New England to another to try to improve her economic status, while Dessa escapes from slavery to change her status from slave to free woman.

Female bonding is also a major thread in black women's texts. But a very clear characteristic of this tradition is social justice issues: "the rape of black women, the lynching of black men, slavery and Reconstruction, class distinctions among blacks, and all forms of discrimination against black people" (Washington xxii). Ultimately black women writers show how the quality of black women's lives is affected by the interrelationship of sexism and racism.

Williams' *Dessa Rose* employs remnants of both the nineteenth-century domestic novel and the slave narrative, but as an author of the twentieth-century in the black women writers tradition, she goes far beyond those parameters. In *Dessa Rose* Williams tells the story of the black rebel slave woman who has been silenced throughout history. Dessa, the protagonist, is paired with a villain who pursues her throughout the novel (white female genre); uses physical aggression to escape from slavery (black male and female genre); succeeds at end the of the novel--by recapturing her own story (white female genre); is abused by Nehemiah and the institution of slavery (all three genres); embodies the story of the black woman slave rebel (expansion of the black female genre); develops a strong friendship with a white mistress (black female genre); and is portrayed as a healthy sexual being. Sherley Anne Williams' novel blatantly confronts what the constraints of time, place, and condition prevented Harriet Wilson from portraying.

Why I Chose *Our Nig* and *Dessa Rose* for This Study

I chose Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986) for a variety of reasons. First of all, I wanted to study two novels by black women writers from different time periods that dealt with American servitude/slavery of the nineteenth-century. Secondly, I wanted my study to focus on authors and novels that have not been overexposed, so that I would not be contributing to an already flooded pool. And finally, I was particularly drawn to *Our Nig* because it is the first published novel written by a black woman, and I believe it has a wealth of significance in American literature as well as in history.

Rediscovering the past and reclaiming our ancestors' stories is crucial in the study of works by black women writers. This rediscovery and carrying on of tradition weaves a common thread between black women writers of today and of the nineteenth-century. I believe these threads manifest themselves in different ways in both novels, but I think they also interconnect and unite the works of Harriet Wilson and Sherley Anne Williams. I would like to address three of these threads in this comparative study of *Our Nig* and *Dessa Rose*: public and private readership, self-definition of the protagonist, and black woman as "she-devil."

I chose these three topics because they are very closely related and interdependent. Readership is very important in this study because every writer must have an idea or focus on a particular audience. Artistic decisions are partially made according to audience;

because many assumptions and stereotypes are imposed on black women by society, which includes the readership, public and private readership is a worthy topic to explore. Also, as a topic within this section, I give special attention to the treatment and portrayal of motherhood, which is an important aspect of the black woman's literary tradition as well in American society. I think it is interesting to note how both authors handle motherhood, since women are often judged by society (their readership) on their role as mother.

Likewise, I was interested to know how these black women writers would represent their protagonists amidst societal views, labels, and stereotypes and their need to define themselves realistically and responsibly. I wanted to see if and how their own stories and perceptions of themselves collided with American society's perception of them, which also affects readers' reception of the novels. Also, within this section, I focus on the topic of sexuality in relation to character portrayal. Many of the persistent myths and negative perceptions of black women are rooted in the sexual exploitation of slavery, therefore affecting the authors' portrayal of sexuality.

I chose the last topic, black woman as she-devil, because the she-devil is one of the prevalent stereotypes identified with black women, historically and literarily; I wanted to examine its root and how it works its way into the black women characters in these two novels.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE READERSHIP

Why and to Whom These Writers Write

To a large extent, most published literary works are for public readership because they are open to the market and anyone in the general public may buy any book if she so chooses. But in writing, authors use many different techniques and skills in the areas of form, language, and character development that point their works to certain audiences over others. As Deborah McDowell explains, public readership consists of an audience outside of the author's culture, while private readership consists of an audience within that culture (McDowell "The Changing Same" 93). Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* imply both public and private readership, but Wilson's autobiographical novel uses public readership more than Williams and for very different reasons. These differences can be attributed to the historical, political and social constraints placed upon black people in general and black writers in particular during Harriet Wilson's lifetime. Williams speaks to the silences or gaps in America's past history without the nineteenth-century limitations of history, politics, and literary form; she has the advantage of artistic freedom without the pressure of offending a white audience who, in Wilson's case, could determine her fate. Furthermore, since Williams is currently a professor of literature at the University of California at San Diego with a substantial livelihood, she is not writing for the purpose of relieving herself from an impoverished situation, as Harriet Wilson did.

In Wilson's *Our Nig*, it is apparent that she is appealing to a white audience, specifically a Northern, white female audience, when she apologizes for her novice status as a writer and states her motive for writing the novel. She

confesses her inability to minister to the refined and cultivated, the pleasure supplied by abler pens. It is not for such these crude narrations appear. Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life. (Preface)

When she speaks of ministering to the refined and cultivated, I believe it is safe to say that she is implying the white public. Also, because of poverty, she is unable to work physically, in order to get her son from foster care. It is from the financial backing of white readers that she can realize her desire of regaining her child and her financial stability. Though in the preface Wilson specifically states that she hopes that her "colored brethren" support her in buying her book, most free blacks of the nineteenth-century found themselves in the same socioeconomic condition as she, and most likely were unable to assist her in her quest for economic improvement. Perhaps, she appeals to a black audience for emotional support, not for financial support, knowing that they may have shared many of her experiences (Ernest 425).

Financial backing is not the only kind of support that Wilson needed for improving her social class condition; she also needed letters of authenticity that vouched for her strong moral character and the hardship that she encountered throughout her life. Authenticity letters were a norm in the autobiographical works of blacks (slave narratives)

because, slave or free, they were frequently perceived as a "depraved, vicious, and recognizably incorrigible, alien people" (206 Doriani). The writers of Wilson's three authenticity letters, (Allida, Margaretta Thorn, and C.D.S.) all say that they have known Wilson for a significant amount of time and can attest that she indeed has suffered many undue misfortunes, and is worthy of humanitarian aid. Allida, acquainted with the author for eight years at the time of the writing, speaks highly of her and tries to appeal to the readers' sympathy and humanity in order to encourage the sale of the book. She says on her friend's behalf:

I trust she will find a ready sale for her interesting work; and let all the friends who purchase a volume, remember they are doing good to one of the most worthy, and I had almost said most unfortunate, of the human family. (Wilson 137)

The above quote reads similarly to the letters of Thorn and C.D.S., who speak of their acquaintance with Wilson, and of her worthiness, then directly urge white readers to be good Samaritans and help their "dark-brethren" by buying the book. C.D.S. writes, "I hope no one will refuse to aid her in her work, as she is worthy the sympathy of all Christians, and those who have a spark of humanity in their breasts" (Wilson 140).

Though all of the letters plead for understanding and Christian charity, I notice that in the first and longest of the authenticity letters, Allida devotes a great deal of text to Wilson's ill treatment by her black husband who deserted her and left her financially unstable. Literally no time is given to the white racism and abuse she received at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont. However, within the text of *Our Nig*, Wilson

dedicates approximately five pages out of 131 to her unsuccessful relationship with her husband. This focus on the failed marriage as the root of the author's poor condition as opposed to the constant severe physical and emotional abuse by Mrs. Belmont, I believe, reflects a conscious decision by Allida not to displease the "good anti-slavery friends at home," namely Northern whites.

Sherley Anne Williams writes for wholly different reasons and appeals to a broader readership, including both public and private. I can imagine that she faced a very complicated task in writing about slavery, while born in an era of freedom. Her novel *Dessa Rose* is the combination of two stories taken from actual but unrelated historical accounts. The first is about a pregnant black woman who helped organize a slave revolt on a coffee; the second is about a white woman who set up a refuge for runaway slaves. She read of the first incident in Angela Davis' article, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." In Williams' novel, the two women meet and eventually befriend each other.

Williams also writes *Dessa Rose* because she is "outraged by" William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a highly acclaimed, yet slanderous account of the life of Nat Turner. She states in the Author's Note, "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth--and made of that process a high art--remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us" (ix). Therefore, she writes of the female rebel slave woman, whom American history has silenced and ignored, for all those who have been betrayed by historical and

literary accounts of black people and as "a stinging rebuke to historians and other commentators who have either failed to note or to name the female slave resistor or, even worse who have called her out of her name" (Davis 545). She also specifically states that "this [novel] is for the children...who will share in the 21st [century]" (Williams x [my emphasis]).

Williams' effort to revise the image of the female slave and recover her other history was spurred, as mentioned earlier, when she read Davis' account of an 1829 uprising of a slave coffle going from Maryland to the South. All six leaders of the rebellion were sentenced to death, including one woman, who was publicly hanged only after giving birth. Davis' source for the account was Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*. Williams never mentions the name of Dessa Rose's historical prototype, which is Dinah, so it is likely that she did not know her name. Davis and Aptheker never call her by her name either, though her name is given in one of Aptheker's sources. Mary Kemp Davis states in her essay, "Everybody Knows Her Name: The Recovery of the Past in Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose*," that the namelessness "underscores the magnitude of the problem of the either unnoted or unnamed female slave rebel" (546).

In another account of the 1829 uprising, David Walker, in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829-30), literally erases the black female slave rebel. He mentions two main women, one a traitor to the uprisers, the other an active participant in the uprising, but he focuses wholly on the traitor. He calls the traitor's acts

"ignorant and deceitful" and "really insupportable" (Davis 546). By emphasizing only the negative actions of the female traitor, he leaves the female rebel unnoted.

Davis notes that it is not clear if Williams was aware of Walker's account, but she had to have noticed that Davis and Aptheker do not call this rebellious slave by name. In *Dessa Rose* Williams creates a revised story (though fiction), correcting the historical lies and restoring the omissions. She gives Dinah a new name and personal history; she also allows Dessa, Dinah's fictional counterpart, to escape execution, to nullify Nehemiah's attempt to define and betray her in *his* account of her, and to redefine herself in her own autobiography (I will speak at length of self-definition in the next chapter, "Self-definition of the Protagonist"). Dessa's action of writing her life is similar to Harriet Wilson's, but she is given the freedom, through Williams, of twentieth-century societal constructs.

Motherhood and its Appeal to Audience

In efforts to further bridge the gap between herself and her white readers, Wilson appeals to their strong sense of motherhood. In nineteenth-century America, and to a large degree today, "a true woman naturally loved her children; to suggest otherwise was monstrous" (Welter 171). Wilson was driven to write her book by the love of her child and the need to secure him. By making these motives clear in the preface, she places the responsibility for the continued mother/child relationship upon the readers. The author approaches several aspects of motherhood in *Our Nig*, including the audience's role

in preserving the bonds of motherhood, the author's relationship with her own child and her mother who deserts her, and the effects of an absent mother on her childhood.

But due to the very complex nature of *Our Nig* and the time period in which it was written, Wilson's portrayal of motherhood has been judged by critics in a range of ways, from a failure to a success. I found four main trains of thought on Wilson's appeal to a Northern white female audience of mothers on the grounds of motherhood, particularly concerning her characterization of Frado's white mother, Mag. The first view considers Mag's portrayal as alarming. According to Frances Smith Foster, in *Written By Herself*, Harriet Wilson's characterization of a white mother was unheard of for that time period. She writes:

It was a literary commonplace to describe black women as so brutalized that they had lost all intrinsic social and maternal sensibilities, but is almost without precedent in White American woman's literature to speak of a white woman, especially a mother, in this manner. (Foster 88)

The narrator of *Our Nig* says that after Jim, her black husband, dies, Mag returns to her hovel and begins living with a poor, unambitious white man. She does not try to improve herself and has "no longings for a purer heart, a better life. Far easier to descend lower. She entered into the darkness of infamy. She asked not the rite of civilization or Christianity" (16). When Mag's lover tells her that they must give her children away in order to find some place to make a living, she responds, "Who'll take the black devils?" (16). This description of white motherhood as well as the fact that Mag was

involved in an interracial marriage to a black man, Foster argues, goes against accepted societal and literary norms, as specifically prescribed by the cult of true womanhood.

P. Gabrielle Foreman offers another view of Mag as wife and mother in her essay, "The Spoken and the Silenced in *Incidents In The Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*." She believes that Wilson challenges her audience, subverting and inverting their control over the text. Because the text incorporates some elements of sentimental fiction, specifically the seduction novel, most readers expect Wilson to completely follow those guidelines, but she does not. As in most seduction novels, Mag, young and unprotected, falls prey to a ravisher who leaves her pregnant. Poor and with no place to go, she turns to strangers and her baby dies. But instead of following the seduction convention of dying, at this point she marries--a black man (Foreman 314). Marrying in nineteenth-century American society was highly regarded, but when that marriage is complicated with the issue of race, this action becomes extremely problematic. Wilson undermines the idea of virtue, but at the same time shows that the marriage is economically necessary. She says of the marriage:

You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons of the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag....She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy. (13)

Foreman argues that though the audience may be offended, she (Wilson) subverts their authority by questioning the existing virtue and answering the unrealistic alternative, death, with a practical one,

economic stability. She also notes that while the child of the seduction part of *Our Nig* dies, the second one, Frado, lives to tell her story (Foreman 314).

Beth Maclay Doriani holds a view similar to Foreman in that she offers a middle ground view of Wilson's portrayal of Mag. In "Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women's Autobiographies," Doriani suggests that the author represents Mag as both good and evil. Though Mag is poor, young, and seduced, and a mother out of wedlock becomes a scorned woman, the narrator is sympathetic to her plight. In the first few chapters, Wilson does not judge Mag, but treats her as the victim of a harsh, judgmental society. Her depiction of Mag's marriage to Jim and her "motherhood through him--in what is perhaps the most abhorrent configuration of miscegenation for the nineteenth-century--is not portrayed as evil" (Doriani 215). But after her black husband's death, she begins to degenerate, becoming a selfish and harsh mother. At this point, Doriani argues the narrator begins to set up Mag as evil. The narrator blames Mag's downfall on being oppressed for years, not on her interracial marriage. She says, "Mag had lived an outcast for years. She had ceased to feel the gushings of penitence; she had crushed the sharp agonies of an awakened conscience" (16). Mag is crushed by her condition in life and readily accepts it instead of trying to find her way out of "perpetual infamy."

Claudia Tate offers an altogether different view of Mag in her book, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*. Tate argues that the

narrator carefully constructs Mag sympathetically; she is loving, trusting and faithful in nature. Even though she marries and takes care of Jim for purely economic reasons, "the text insists that 'she nursed him faithfully and true to marriage vows till [his] death released her'" (34). So Mag's behavior is not altogether reprehensible; she is a good and faithful wife. Tate further states that Wilson builds her reader's sympathy when she takes on the judgmental voice of white society to disapprove of Mag's repeated offenses against social and religious mores. The narrator traces the root of Mag's offenses to the hardships of her life. Tate also states that reader sympathy is built when Wilson creates Mag's motherly affection for her daughter Frado.

When Mag and Seth, her lover, realize that they can not make ends meet and still support themselves and Frado, they decide to give the child away. But, Tate reasons, Mag does not simply abandon the child; she thoughtfully "locates reliable employment for Frado that will produce more sustenance than Mag is capable of providing" (34). She chooses the Bellmonts, though she knows that Mrs. Bellmont is cruel. Seth and Mag conclude that Frado has enough will and spirit to endure her treatment. Tate mentions that those who judge Mag harshly for Frado's abandonment are imposing twentieth-century values onto the text. She states:

...the placement of young black children into indentured service was very common during the early nineteenth century; thus we late-twentieth century readers must quench our eagerness to judge Frado's mother. Such placement, or abandonment, probably was not regarded as capricious parental neglect but as a

necessary and understandable response to extreme hardship.
(Domestic Allegories 33)

So she suggests that Wilson's nineteenth-century White northern female audience would be compassionate to Mag's plight and even more so to the motherless Frado. Frado believes her motherlessness and her oppression by the Bellmonts are the reasons for her miserable circumstance. She views herself as unworthy of a mother's love, but does not hold her mother responsible for her situation; she knows her mother had no other options (Tate 36). Tate points out that Frado sees herself as unworthy of this maternal love because of her acceptance of abuse by Mrs. Bellmont and because of her blackness. Frado says:

Work as long as I can stand, and then fall down and lay there till I can get up. No mother, father, brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger--all because I am black! Oh, if I could die! (75)

Instead of dying, Frado gets the chance to recover her lost mother by becoming, at the end of the novel, the loving mother whom she had yearned for as a child (Tate 37). And now the reader is drawn to preserve these bonds of motherhood through financial backing of the novel.

Sherley Anne Williams also creates very strong images of motherhood throughout *Dessa Rose*, images that, I believe, are sometimes poignant and yet surprising to her audience, but more acceptable due to the time period. As in *Our Nig*, race complicates images of motherhood within the text. The nineteenth-century view of motherhood for slave women was strictly biological and economic; the possibility of emotional attachment was not considered. But twentieth-

century author Williams offers a more realistic view of motherhood in her depiction of Dessa's pregnancy. Because of the near certainty that her child would be sold off for profit in slavery, Kaine, Dessa's lover, insists that she terminate the pregnancy by visiting Aunt Lefonia, who knows how to stop pregnancy before and after conception. Kaine does not want to suffer the emotional pain of having his baby torn away from him, but Dessa is distraught over the thought of having it destroyed. She says to Kaine, "'This our baby; ours, us's. We make it. How can you say, kill it? It mine and it yours'" (43). Here, Williams confronts the horror of slavery and its effect on mothers; this characterization of a slave mother clinging to her child's life completely contrasts with nineteenth-century white society's racist thinking and parallels Harriet Wilson's despair over possibly never recovering her child.

Williams presents a very striking image of motherhood in her introduction of Rufel, the white woman who takes in runaway slaves. After Rufel very lovingly nurses her own daughter, she nurses Dessa's infant who is fretful and weak because his mother, weakened by the trauma of childbirth and the hardship of escape, cannot produce any milk to nurse him. The narrator writes:

Rufel had taken the baby to her bosom almost without thought....The sight of him so tiny and bloodied had pained her with an almost physical hurt and she had set about cleaning and clothing him with a single-minded intensity. And only when his cries were stilled and she looked down upon the...nut-brown face against the pearly paleness of her breast, had she become conscious of what she was doing. A wave of

embarrassment had swept over her and she had looked guiltily around the parlor. (105)

This image of Rufel is important for several reasons. First, a white woman nursing a black child during slavery is the direct contradiction of the common practice of the black slave wet nursing master's white children. I think that it is safe to say that there were few white women who would risk their social standing for the needs of a black infant, and most white women would not risk providing refuge for runaway slaves either. The narrator says of Dessa's thoughts about Rufel nursing her baby, "It went against everything she had been taught to think about white women" (123). This opposition is literally unheard of and I think is startling for even many twentieth-century readers because it contradicts the common practices of the past and because of the racial caste system that still exists today.

Rufel's mothering nature is further complicated by the issue of race. She naturally comforts the infant and does not realize the implications of what she is doing--"becoming wet nurse for a darky" (106)--until he stops crying. Her mortification is compounded when some of the runaways witness her nursing and are startled, puzzled by the vision of the child at her breast. But her embarrassment becomes secondary to her need to save, care for, and nurture the child. Rufel's action serves to preserve Dessa's motherhood; without her, the only nursing woman on the place, the child would have probably died. I believe this complex treatment of motherhood works to gain the sympathy of a twentieth-century audience, specifically the female members, despite the racial issues. Also noteworthy is the fact that the

white mother/black child imagery is reminiscent of Mag and Frado in *Our Nig*.

Another example of the motherhood image complicated by race and slavery is in the scene where Rufel and Dessa have a conflict over "mammy." Mammy is a term given to black women who as house servants loyally served white families. Mammy is characterized as nonthreatening, asexual, and having a strong love for white people (hooks 84). This term or stereotype is also used as a generic term for slave mother. Because of the ambiguity of the term, the two women argue over who "mammy" is. As Rufel knits, she speaks of "her mammy," a black servant/surrogate mother who faithfully served the women in her family, preparing her and her mother for a ball. Dessa listens to Rufel and becomes extremely angry, claiming that mammy never did any of the things that Rufel mentions. In fact she states that "a white girl" can not have a mammy, not in the same sense that she (Dessa) has one--an actual black mother who lovingly cared for her and watched one of her children get sold off in slavery. Dessa explodes, "'Your 'mammy'....Your 'mammy'!" No white girl could ever have taken her place in mammy's bosom; no one. 'You ain't got no 'mammy.'" Dessa imposes her story onto Rufel's; when Dessa speaks of "mammy," she speaks of her beloved mother, Rose, and, I suspect, she speaks for all those slave mothers who were forced to care for white people's children while their own were torn away from them. Dessa tries to prove that Rufel does not have a mammy by asking her to render her name. Rufel cannot. This entire scene and the act of

invoking the name of "mammy," the black mother, has a profound effect on both of the women. Rufel is crushed by Dessa's indignation and leaves Dessa to tell the story of her mother and her family as told to her by her mother. One woman reasserts her love and need of her mother, while denying those same feelings from the other.

In Williams' depiction of the mother, she directly confronts the issue of race in the image of interracial and black motherhood. She does not have to carry the heavy burden of not offending the white members of her audience because of our current twentieth-century laws that state racial equality. She also has the benefit of a more enlightened audience, who may be initially surprised by some of her mother images, but will be sympathetic to them. Harriet Wilson had none of these benefits, and I believe may have had a much more difficult time drawing in her audience of white mothers.

SELF-DEFINITION OF THE PROTAGONIST

Defining themselves as real, valuable women, in the face of a society and readership that had already formulated different ideas about them, proved to be a complicated task for black women writers, particularly in the nineteenth century. Nikki Giovanni, quoted in Elizabeth Fox Genovese's essay, "My Statue, My Self," expresses that for black women writers the identity of self is held hostage to the history of the collective; the representation of the self in literature invites intensive criticism of the culture (184). In Wilson's *Our Nig* and Williams' *Dessa Rose*, the protagonists, Frado and Dessa, attempt to define themselves and tell their own stories in a hostile environment, while other characters, and society, impose different stories upon them. The struggle to gain control of their own stories is evident in the various themes within the novels, but I will focus, specifically, on Wilson's subversion of authority in *Our Nig*, Dessa's reclaiming of her own story in *Dessa Rose*, and the authors' portrayal of sexuality in both novels.

Subversion of Authority in *Our Nig* and *Dessa Rose*

I have found two trains of thought concerning how Harriet Wilson sets up her authorial control and portrayal of self; the first expressed by Beth Maclay Doriani explains that she goes beyond and challenges the existing genres, while P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that the author uses an allegory of the slave narrative to set up her identity. Harriet Wilson, as discussed in the previous chapters, goes beyond the available nineteenth-century literary genres to express herself as a

black woman. In the full title of *Our Nig--Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. By "Our Nig"-- the author displays "conflicted ambitions for personal self-mastery and literary professionalism, on the one hand, and her society's ideology of racial inferiority on the other" (*Domestic Allegories* 39). She is very clever in her choice of title and pseudonym. Unlike the traditional black male slave narratives, she asserts authorial control by distinguishing her work as "sketches," not the traditional "narrative of the life." She also employs the use of African-American signification and irony when she identifies these sketches as those of a "free black," while in reality she is not much more free than a slave woman of the South (Doriani 212).

She uses her authorial control again by giving double meaning to the word "white," in "Two-Story White House." The first "white" describes the color of the house, while the second describes the color of the people who live within it. Wilson uses self parody in her title and pseudonym. By placing quotation marks around the name imposed on her by the white family, she questions its validity. Doriani argues that this is a sarcastic, comic retaliation against the culture which tries to deprive her of her true identity (212). She further states that using "our" challenges the notion that she can be possessed by someone and naming herself "nig" challenges the notion that her identity is solely based on the color of her skin and labels imposed on her by whites.

Also important to note in Wilson's novel is that she does not rely on, but goes against the white establishment by not including a white editor's preface and assistance. She writes, revises, and organizes her text on her own and none of the appended letters ever question whether Wilson actually wrote *Our Nig*, as was customary in slave narratives; they simply attest to her good moral character and her destitute condition.

By foregoing the use of a slave narrative genre or one similar to it, and using that of the novel instead, Wilson makes a bold move in asserting control over her story and shaping her own identity. At this point in the nineteenth-century, the novel was a genre used exclusively by whites; note that *Our Nig* is the first published novel written by a black person. She tells her story through a selectively omniscient third-person narrator, but fiction and autobiography meet as she lapses into first-person at certain points. In her preface and many of the beginning chapter titles, it is clear that this novel is autobiographical. Chapter one, called, "Mag Smith, My Mother," is told by a third-person narrator. Chapter two, "My Father's Death," and chapter three, "A New Home for Me," are likewise narrated in third-person. Also in the first sentence of chapter seven, she uses first person.

It is as if the narrator and the author become one when these inconsistencies in narrative voice appear in the text. By the end of the novel Wilson and Frado become even more connected, and the novel, due to its lack of closure, ends with the appended letters. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his introduction to *Our Nig*, states that the "guise of her

fictional account of her life, tends to fall away the nearer her novel approaches its own ending, and the ending of her text, the composite biography written by Mrs. Wilson's friends" (xxxvii). Wilson manipulates fiction and autobiography to exert more control over her portrayal of self.

P. Gabrielle Foreman, in her article, "The Spoken and the Silenced in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*," gives a different point of view of Harriet Wilson's portrayal of self. Citing Hazel Carby, Foreman states that *Our Nig* is actually an allegory of a slave narrative set up in the North. The title, she states, is the most intentional element that links the work to a slave narrative. Wilson purposely uses irony and narrative skill in her use of punctuation. By setting off "North" to highlight the white house's association with the Southern Plantation and by putting "our nig" in quotes, she shows the ownership it suggests and, in turn, the repossession of herself.

In one of the appended letters, by Margareta Thorn, Thorn states that Wilson "was indeed a slave, in every sense of the word" (139). This statement further connects Wilson's text and herself to slave status. Letters from whites, supporting the work, were common in the slave narrative genre, as stated in the previous chapter.

Foreman gives evidence that images of slavery are not limited to the title and framing letters, but can be found within the text. For example, this imagery of slavery is used in describing her relationship with the Bellmonts, especially Mrs. Bellmont. Wilson describes Frado's household chores in the rhetoric of slavery: "Frado was called early in

the morning by her new mistress....She was shown how it was always to be done, and in no other way; any departure to be punished by a whipping" (29). Language like "mistress" and "whipping" clearly conjures up images of southern slavery, not something one would expect to hear about the condition of a free black.

Wilson's portrayal of Mrs. Belmont is truly indicative of the image of slave mistress in slave narratives. She says in the preface, "My mistress was wholly imbued with *southern* principles" (Preface). "She was self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and severe" (25). By describing Mrs. Belmont in this fashion, Wilson gives a disturbing view of Northern white womanhood and completely undermines the notion of the cult of true womanhood and Northern restraint, a topic I will discuss further in the next chapter. Indeed Mrs. Belmont's brutality is a trait more fitting of a Southern slave master than a Northern lady. Wilson's language clearly places Mrs. Belmont in the category of a white Southern master and Wilson in the category of harsh critic of Northern racism.

Wilson reveals a definition of the black female that defies social constraints on the writer's identity as a woman and a black person, as well as the reproduction of those constraints in the genre conventions that she manipulates (Doriana 200). Wilson achieves a creation of self through subversive interplay with readers' expectations--reshaping genres, clever use of title and pseudonym, portrayal of a Northern white woman, and exposure of Northern white racism.

Whereas in Frado Harriet Wilson constructs a picture of herself as a survivor and critic of racism by manipulating genres and language, Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa reclaims her "self" by manipulating Adam Nehemiah who tries to redefine her. Nehemiah is a scholar, an up-and-coming author who writes books for the Southern planter aristocracy that serve as a how-to on managing slaves. He writes down Dessa's story, when she is imprisoned after the coffee revolt, because his motive is to become rich and gain access to the aristocratic class of Southern planters. Nehemiah wants to rename and redefine Dessa in the book he is writing, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Populations and the Means of Eradicating Them*. She tells her story to him because she has no choice; she does not want him for her audience. "Nehemiah is unfit for such a role--not only does he have a distaste for 'recalcitrant negros' (24) and other darkies, but also a desire to make her voiceless" (Delancey). This author does not want to tell Dessa's story; he wants to make her story his own. His intention of making her story his own is apparent when he expresses the joy he feels that slave owners as well as all other southern whites will be compelled out of fear to buy his book, making it a big success (Williams 25). Nehemiah also states, "Pray God this darky don't die before I get my book!" (27).

In Nehemiah's effort to redefine Dessa, he tries to rename her and impose racist stereotypes upon her. During his dealings with Dessa, Nehemiah imposes a "series of demeaning epithets [on her, including] 'Girl' (45), 'gal' (227), 'darky' (232), and 'a dangerous criminal' (220). And when he does remember her name, he calls her

"Odessa." He, and other whites, obviously assume that "Dessa" is a deviation or incorrect pronunciation of Odessa by "darkies" despite the fact that "Dessa" is truly the young woman's name. She muses at his misnaming her, "Why he don't even know my name...talking about Odessa" (225).

Nehemiah not only tries to rename her, but he also tries to place perpetuated racial stereotypes on her. He adamantly believes these stereotypes and, I believe, fears her. By placing these labels on her, he believes that he is more able to dehumanize her and therefore "control" her. He speaks of her, and of her race, in dehumanizing ways. For instance, after learning about Dessa attacking her master, he writes in his journal entry, "Truly, the female of this species is as deadly as the male" (39). Nehemiah uses "species," a word only used in casual conversation to describe animals. He also says of Dessa, at the end of the novel, "The blackness of the darky heart, Sing and laugh, and all the time plotting" (220). Though Nehemiah thinks he knows her, he absolutely does not and can only use demeaning stereotypes to describe her. It is important to note here that Williams plays on the use of color just as Wilson does in her title with the color white; Williams uses "blackness" in its traditional western literary sense to mean evil and wicked, as well as to describe the color of a people. Dessa knows that Nehemiah sees her as "something terrible," as something not even human. But she resists all of his and society's attempts at renaming and redefining her and proposes to define herself.

During her interview sessions with Nehemiah in the cellar, Dessa often talks around the subject and uses many names in describing her life, thus concealing rather than revealing her personal history. Mary Kemp Davis in her essay, "Everybody Knows Her Name..." states that Dessa "signifies upon" Nehemiah. One type of signification is "'to talk around the subject, never quite coming to the point'" (547). Rather than divulge her whole story to him, she struggles to maintain control of her history. Nehemiah can never be successful at recovering Dessa's story because he does not have an inside knowledge of her culture; therefore, she is always at an advantage. For instance, when Dessa refers to Kaine, her husband and baby's father, Nehemiah thinks the name ridiculous one that has no real meaning and gives no thought to spelling. But he has no idea that the name "Kaine" plays off of sugar cane and refers to his physical and personality traits, namely his skin color and the "sweetness he has brought into Dessa's life" (Davis 549). "Kaine was the color of the cane syrup taffy they pulled and stretched to a glistening golden brown in the winter" (60); or "No one had said her name so sweet. Even when he was angry, Dessa; Dessa. Her would always know the way he called her name" (47).

Williams further signifies on Nehemiah by having him miss the obvious connection of Kaine's name to the Biblical Cain. This is particularly surprising because both of Nehemiah's names--Adam Nehemiah-- are also Biblical. He most likely does not know that Kaine is a tiller at the Vaughn Plantation, just as the Biblical Cain is a tiller and a gardener. When Dessa speaks of Kaine, Nehemiah becomes

restless; he sees no value in this part of her life. Sometimes he does not even record this part of her life, though it has great value to her. According to Davis, his inability to recognize the significant elements of her life undercut "the reliability of what he is recording in his book" (550).

His unreliability costs him in the end when he unsuccessfully recaptures Dessa. He says that he knows Dessa because he has written about her in his book and can identify her by the brand and the scars on her hips, but his authority is undermined by unlikely sources--two women. When Nehemiah finds Dessa, he drags her off to jail, gives a description of her, and claims that she is a runaway slave. The sheriff is not convinced, so Nehemiah, who appears to be mad at this point, demands to see the identifying marks on her hips. Rufel walks in and insists that Nehemiah has mistaken Dessa for someone else. It is Nehemiah's word against that of a respectable white lady, Rufel. Nehemiah cannot accuse Rufel of lying because this goes against the system; it is improper to accuse a white woman of lying. So a slave woman is called to check if Dessa has scars as he says; the slave woman denies that she has any. Here, Williams has these women rewrite the script assigned to them by society. It is unheard of for a black person, especially a woman, to speak against a white man in the face of the law (the sheriff). Their roles are shuffled and reassigned. "These women, all three victimized by Southern patriarchy and its racial and sexual politics, find a power within that system by turning its assumptions about blacks and women topsy-turvy" (McDowell 159). Nehemiah's

effort to be an author of a story of enslavement fails; therefore, Dessa is free to write her own story.

Dessa struggles for control of her voice, story, and audience; and her voice gets stronger as novel goes on just as Harriet Wilson's story becomes more autobiographical, more her own toward the end of her novel. On the other hand, Wilson is also gradually losing control; for example, her child dies, unlike Dessa's, before she can help him. At first Dessa does not want to remember slavery and the past, though she cannot forget. But she eventually tells her story only in the presence of other slaves. She reveals only small pieces of her life to Rufel-- whom she has a somewhat uneasy friendship with due to the complexities of race--sharing items that would be considered part of the collective history of slaves. In the final section of the novel, she tells her story to an audience of black women, which is very much in keeping with the black woman's literary tradition.

Williams ends *Dessa Rose* with Dessa retelling her story in a familial setting and securing her place in history; she will not be ignored and nameless like her historical prototype, Dinah. By telling her story to her descendents, she repossesses herself as a free woman. She says in the Epilogue:

I told that West part so often, these childrens about know it by heart. Mony tell it to his babies like the memories was his....This why I have it wrote down, why, I has the child say it back. I never will forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands. Well, this the childrens have heard from our own lips. I hope they never have to pay what it cost us to own ourselves. (259-60)

So Williams gives Dessa a self-representation that is complete, whole; Dessa recaptures her story and defines herself in her own words, on her own terms, just as Harriet Wilson does throughout her novel.

Sexuality in *Our Nig* and *Dessa Rose*

The portrayal of sexuality or the self as a sexual being has been problematic for black women writers in the past. With the burden of the societal stereotype of the sexually promiscuous Jezebel and without the benefits of the sexual revolution of the 1960's and 70's, nineteenth-century foremothers were not afforded the same freedom as their twentieth-century daughters. But I believe that both nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers are very careful and conscious of the way they present their characters sexually or deal with the issue of sex altogether. This is the case with the representation of sexuality in *Our Nig* and *Dessa Rose*. In "The Darkened Eye Restored," Mary Helen Washington speaks of the difficulties that representing sex presented for nineteenth-century black women writers:

The anxiety of black women writers over the representation of sexuality goes back to the nineteenth century and the prescription for womanly "virtues which made slave women automatically immoral and less "feminine than white women," but that anxiety is evident even in contemporary texts, many of which avoid any kind of sexual vulnerability or project the most extreme forms of sexual vulnerability onto children and poor women. Once again the issue is control and control is bought by cordoning off those aspects of sexuality that threaten to make women feel powerless. If pleasure and danger are concomitant aspects of sexuality, it seems clear to me that black women writers have, out of historical necessity, registered far more of the latter than the former. (38)

I agree that the need to control their texts and their representation of the self affects how black women handle sexuality in their works. This is particularly true in Wilson's novel. She diminishes virtually all references to the issue of sexuality and when she alludes to sexuality, it is masked. The closest she ever comes to speaking of sexuality is when she speaks of her mother, the poor, fallen Mag; however, she resists portraying Frado in this way. Though Washington says that this apprehension of portraying sexuality persists in contemporary works, I did not find this to be the case in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. In fact, Williams is quite open and positive in her representation of sexuality in respect to the protagonist, Dessa. Needless to say, these two novels offer polarized representations of intimacy.

The erasure of sexuality in *Our Nig* is evident throughout the novel. Claudia Tate refers to this as "effaced sexual discourse" and shows an example of it in Wilson's comparison of Mag and Frado's sexual maturity. Wilson writes of Frado's mother, "As she merged into womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for, there fell on her ear the music of love, awakening an intensity of emotion long dormant" (5). She uses the same statement, "merged into womanhood," at the end of the novel, when she describes Frado coming into adulthood. What is different between the uses of this statement is that when Mag "merges into womanhood" she is thrown immediately into a sexual experience which leads to pregnancy, while Frado pursues her need to improve herself mentally. Wilson writes, "Frado had merged into womanhood, and, retaining what she had

learned, in spite of the few privileges enjoyed formerly, was striving to enrich her mind" (115). There is no mention of sexuality or physically coming of age.

Even when the narrator mentions Frado's would-be-husband, it is in the last and one of the shortest chapters, entitled "Winding up the Matter." All hints of physical or romantic attraction are placed on the male, while Frado's role is never described or mentioned; she is passive. Wilson writes:

...was it strange she should attract her dark brother; that he should inquire her out; succeed in seeing her; feel a strange sensation in his heart towards her; that he should toy with her shining curls, feel proud to provoke her to smile and expose the ivory concealed by thin, ruby lips; that her sparkling eyes should fascinate; that he should propose; that they should marry? (126)

Wilson never allows Frado to show how she feels about her suitor/husband, perhaps out of fear that audience scrutiny would damage her representation of herself. After they are in the safe bounds of marriage, there is still no real mention of Frado's feelings towards her husband. Only two pages out of five are devoted to their relationship and of those pages, the reader never hears Frado's husband speak. He seems to be mentioned only to legitimize their son. Wilson focuses solely on her condition: Samuel, her husband, abandons her; she has a child; he re-enters her life, then leaves again.

Tate finds yet other elements of the absence of sexuality in the text, with the relationship between Frado and the Belmont sons. She believes that there are "intimations of covert seduction in the novel"

(48). The frequent presence of the sons, Jack and James, in Frado's sleeping quarters, and she in theirs, is sexually suggestive. Also, they always comment on or make reference to her beauty. For instance, Jack says, "She's real handsome and bright, and not very black, either" (25); James says of Frado, "Is this that pretty little Nig, Jack writes to me about...?" (47). These statements along with her displacement of sexual awakening with intellectual awakening, accent hesitance to acknowledge sexuality. At the end of the novel there are glimpses of hidden sexuality as she asks for reader sympathy--which is common in the domestic genre. The narrator says "Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not, because some part of her history is unknown, save by the Omniscient God. Enough has been revealed to demand your sympathy and aid" (130). The history known to no one except God, I believe as does Tate, may hint at sexual abuse as well as that part of her life of a sexual nature.

The great anxiety over the representation of sexuality does not permeate the text of *Dessa Rose* as it does *Our Nig*, despite the pervasive historical stereotypes. Ntozake Shange in the introduction of *Erotique Noire*, entitled *Fore/Play*, expresses the root of this anxiety well. She states the dilemma between black people and sexuality:

We are lost in the confusion of myths and fears of race and sex. To be a 'good people, to be 'respectable' and 'worthy' citizens, we've had to combat absurd phantasmagoric stereotypes about our sexuality, our lusts and loves, to the extent that we disavow our own sensuality to each other. (xix)

But Williams resists falling into that trap; she does not rob her characters of their sexuality. In fact, she portrays Dessa as a healthy,

whole sexual being and she gives an unflinching picture of interracial sexuality, between black men and white women. Unlike many slave women, Dessa was not subjected to sexual abuse and rape. She was "spared much that others suffered," but instead had a very loving relationship with Kaine. At the outset of this novel, Williams informs the reader that love was not obliterated by slavery and brings this sentiment to life throughout the many intricate relationships in the novel. In the Author's Note she states, "I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expressions" (x).

Immediately, in the Prologue, "expressions of love" are evident. The whole scene consists of Dessa, while imprisoned, reminiscing about a sweet, intimate time with Kaine. These memories of Kaine are so vivid that they engage all of Dessa's senses--"Even now against closed eyelids, she could see them--Kaine's eyes...and his voice in her ear. Hey, hey Dessa da'lin, This Kaine calling, calling..." (5). Dessa's feelings of love and sexual attraction for Kaine, and his for her, are not veiled or skewed like Frado's in *Our Nig*. She is very clear in her desire for him. In this first scene with Kaine, her thoughts race:

Suddenly, fiercely, the wish was upon her. To be always in this moment, her body pressed to his, his warm in the bend of her arm....Talk as beautiful as his touch. Shivering, she pulled at his shirt. This was love,...Lawd, this man sho know how to love... (4)

After Kaine's death, her escape and refuge on Rufel's plantation, and the birth of her son, Dessa becomes involved in another relationship with a freed slave named Harker; he helped her escape

from her cell, delivered her baby, and found a safe surrounding. Williams' portrayal of Harker is that of a responsible, hardworking, caring black man, contrasting greatly with that of Samuel, Frado's husband. Instead of using and abandoning Dessa, he wants to love and provide for her. Dessa says of Harker: "Kaine was like sunshine, like song; Harker was thunder and lightning...in the way he come into my heart, way he shook me [not physically]" (209 [my emphasis]). He says of her, "I never wanted at nothing till I met you" (209) and "I don't want to love you in the woods cause we don't have no place else to be" (209). He has a genuine concern and love for her; there is no hint of any of the prevailing myths or sexual stereotypes in their relationship. It is real, honest, and whole, even in the harsh circumstances and threats of bondage.

Another representation of sexuality that Williams features is that between Nathan and Rufel, black runaway slave and white plantation owner's wife, respectively. Their relationship is reminiscent of Mag and Jim's, but only in respect of the races of the individuals. These images may be startling for many readers, as is Rufel's breastfeeding of Mony, Dessa's baby, because it brings to light all of the cultural taboos and fears about black male sexuality--sexual prowess, the image of the "Big Black Buck"-- violating white female "purity." But Williams undermines these images, by portraying an equal sexual attraction between the two. The text reads:

Rufel and Nathan made love for the first time later that week..
 .He took her in his arms....she clung to him as he undid her
 bodice with practiced ease....Will-less, she gathered around

him; the day exploded into a thousand nights and endless stars..
 .Supine, she waited for him to enter her again. (167-8, and 171)

When she walks in on them, Dessa is quite startled and angered. At this point she refers to Rufel as Miz Ruint, implying that she is ruined because of her actions. In that time period, she would be considered ruined or spoiled goods and, even though interracial relationships are more common today, the same attitude in some ways persists. If she were discovered by white members of society, Nathan would have been accused of rape and killed. But Nathan was not a stranger to sleeping with white women; at fifteen he started having sexual relations with his mistress, Miz Lorraine, at her demand. He knew that the possibility of being found out could undoubtedly mean death, but this is what made the act more attractive, more powerful and, I assume, what made Dessa so angry. The narrator says of Nathan: "It was the terror...that made it so sweet. If climax...was like death, then a nigger died a double death in a white woman's arms. And he had survived it. He walked a little taller, aware of the power hanging secret and heavy between his legs" (171). I believe that Williams paints an honest picture of sexual dynamics as affected by the conditions of slavery and racism; she covers many different aspects of sexuality, without the fear of readership backlash and the other characters' slandered, particularly Dessa. To paraphrase what Ntozake Shange says in the introduction of *Erotique Noire*, Williams writes a story where we, specifically black women [Dessa], are not myths or stereotypes, art forms or sex objects, just simply folks intimate and in love (xx).

Though Harriet Wilson obscures most aspects of sexuality in her novel, she challenges her readers to think about the complexities of morality and virtue. She bends the text to define herself to fit her experience as a black woman and "shows that the world of a black woman as a person is inextricably bound up with others" (Doriani 207). A revision of the nineteenth-century white women's literary and social stereotype, as well as the definition of true womanhood, would have been necessary to fill in all of the literary silences of sexual morality in Wilson's text.

On the other hand, Williams presents a full spectrum of sexuality in *Dessa Rose*, confronting and undermining sexual stereotypes about black people, black women in particular. Due to the persistent stereotype of black women as promiscuous and the societal belief in the cult of true womanhood, her portrayal of Dessa as a complete, loving sexual being would, without a doubt, have been considered scandalous and unspeakable in Wilson's era. But with the benefits of a changing time and greater sexual freedom for women, the whole story of black women's lives can be honestly and realistically told.

BLACK WOMAN AS SHE-DEVIL

"Fight, and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick, then bite," one slave advised her daughter. A sizable minority of "fighting mule-headed" women refused to "take foolishness" from anybody. (Sterling 56).

The above quote exemplifies the resistance that many black women put forth toward the oppressive, dehumanizing institution of slavery and all those who perpetuated it. This aggressive resistance worked against black women during the nineteenth-century, directly opposing American society's pervasive ideal of a true woman. The very nature of slavery and servitude denied these women access into the accepted, yet stifling cult of true womanhood, which served as a catalyst in forming many of the ingrained stereotypes of black women. In order to explain how the black woman was viewed by society and in literature, we must explore the ideal nature of a woman of the nineteenth-century.

According to Barbara Welter, in her article "The Cult of True Womanhood," "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). At the center of woman's virtue was piety, the source of her strength. Purity, sexual purity, as discussed in the previous chapter, proved to be extremely problematic for the black woman slave or servant. Her vulnerability left her unable to protect herself from vicious, uninvited sexual encounters; and, for the slave, unable to legitimize her children through the law.

Submissiveness also proved to be problematic and often deadly for the

black woman; to resist meant survival, but resistance directly opposed an important aspect of the true woman; the result was labeling female resisters as non-women and/or "she-devils."

Of the various stereotypes, the two most devaluing and prevalent are those of Mammy and Sapphire; Mammy was the fat, asexual, nonthreatening, and benevolent ideal nanny, while Sapphire was something altogether different. The she-devil, an expansion of Sapphire, possesses characteristics of otherworldliness and aggression, both physical and verbal.

bell hooks gives a thorough definition of the Sapphire stereotype imposed on black women in her book, *Ain't I A Woman*:

As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful....The Sapphire image had as its base one of the oldest negative stereotypes of woman--the image of the female as inherently evil. Christian mythology depicted woman as the source of sin and evil; racist sexist mythology simply designated black women the epitome of female evil and sinfulness. (85)

Added to this Sapphire definition to create the she-devil are the characteristics of otherworldliness, destructiveness, and aggression, physical, mental and verbal. The black woman protagonist as she-devil works its way into the characters of Frado in *Our Nig* and Dessa in *Dessa Rose*. I do not agree with the societal labels placed upon these women, but recognize that they were strong women who had to use some form of force to survive. Unfortunately, any type of aggression in these women went against the existing order of the nineteenth century. According to the *Young Lady's Book* on the virtues of

submission, "It is, however, certain that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required of her" (Welter 159).

Contrary to the submissive and obedient nature that was prescribed to her gender, Frado was strong, self-reliant, and high spirited. This is evident immediately at the beginning of the novel. At age six, she is described as having eyes that sparkled "with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint" (17). Her mother, Mag, says of her, "Frado is such a wild, frolicky thing, and means to do just as she's a mind to" (18). Early on Wilson clues the reader in on Frado's determination to survive by giving her a fighting spirit and strong will; she survives abandonment by mother and husband, physical, mental, and verbal abuse by Mrs. Bellmont, inhumane living arrangements, loss of her child, and poverty.

Frado is able to survive her harsh surroundings not only by sheer will and determination, but through cleverness and trickery, giving her some degree of control over the white world that oppresses her (Dorani 216). As a child, she uses trickery initially to ally and entertain her white classmates, but she frequently made them the butt of her jokes. The narrator says that she was

ever at some sly prank when unseen by her teacher, in school hours; not unfrequently some outburst of merriment of which she was the original, was charged upon some innocent mate, and punishment inflicted which she merited. They enjoyed her antics so fully that any of them would suffer wrongfully to keep open the avenue of mirth. (38)

Despite that she could obtain her control only by being a prankster or class clown, she did it skillfully and at the other children's expense in order to gain control, making her the subject of their merriment, instead of the object of their hostility.

As Frado grows into a young woman she discovers her own voice, and her strong will grows; she uses these two aspects of herself to reach the same goal as she did in the classroom as a child--to gain control in an oppressive environment. In a monumental scene with Mrs. Bellmont, her nemesis and chief oppressor, she finds her voice and stands up to her. After Frado does not return from a chore as quickly as Mrs. Bellmont wanted her to, Mrs. Bellmont moves to strike her with a stick. Frado aggressively responds, "Stop! strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you" (105). After challenging her verbally, Frado "stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (105). Mrs. Bellmont does not strike her, but is shocked and defeated. I can only imagine what would have happened to the already sick Frado if she had not openly and aggressively defied Mrs. Bellmont. Mrs. Bellmont, and the white world in general, want Frado to behave and submit, but her spirit cannot be broken. For Frado, being passive, as nineteenth-century ideals dictated, would have proven to be detrimental, possibly further impairing her health.

Even in bad health, Frado as a young woman still has an independent spirit and a strong will to survive on her own. She resolves to take care of herself and tries to gain economic independence by sewing. When she becomes ill, she pledges "to cast

off the unpleasant charities of the public" (124) and embraces this philosophy throughout the turmoil of her adult life, including abandonment by her husband and the loss of her child through poverty. Her final act of rebellion, or more appropriately independence, is the act of creating *Our Nig*.

Frado/Wilson, like most black women, had to be resourceful and clever to rise above and simply survive in a hostile white environment. She resisted society's pull for her to be submissive; to be submissive meant the difference between life or death. Harriet Wilson used elements of aggression in order to make the most out of a very difficult life. I believe her will to live as best as she could under the circumstances, makes her a strong woman with a strong determination to survive, not a she-devil. More appropriately, I assert that Mrs. Bellmont is the real she-devil who uses brute force and physical violence for no reason other than sheer hatred and malice.

When Seth, Mag's second husband, names the Bellmonts' as a potential home to place Frado as an indentured servant, Mag responds, "Bellmonts? His wife is a right she-devil" (17). Mrs. Bellmont's reputation for brutality precedes her, but her reputation is rightly stated; for her acts of inhumanity are shocking and she creates an image that is polar opposite to a true woman. For instance, after Mary, the Bellmont's daughter, falsely accuses Frado of pushing her in a lake and Mr. Bellmont will not side with his daughter, the two--Mrs. Bellmont and Mary--are outraged. "No sooner was he out of sight than Mrs. Bellmont and Mary commenced beating Frado inhumanely; then

propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her in a dark room, without any supper" (35). On another occasion, after beating Frado, Mrs. Bellmont threatens to "cut out her tongue" (72) if she tells James of the incident. Again, Mrs. Bellmont says she will "cure her of tale-bearing" by putting a wedge of wood between Frado's teeth and beating her with a rawhide (93). Mrs. Bellmont's abuse, also including verbal abuse,--she calls Frado "black nigger" (34)--occurs continually throughout the novel, especially when Frado exposes Mrs. Bellmont in a lie or when Mrs. Bellmont wishes to silence her or make her submit. Her evil behavior echoes that of Simon Legree of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who violently brutalizes his slaves, more than that of a reserved Northern lady. She is truly a she-devil.

In Dayle B. DeLancey's essay, "The Self's Own Kind: Literary Resistance in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*," he states that strong women in male-dominated cultures, such as Western culture, attract negative labels. They are evil, "otherworldly and destructive" and are often left to a fate of insanity. He further states that this belief in the strong, disobedient, rebellious woman as mad "gains 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" (59). But Sherley Anne Williams does not allow that fate for Dessa. To do so would be an unrealistic portrayal of many black women who struggled during slavery and in American society, but survived in spite of it all, with sound minds, to tell their stories. Like Harriet Wilson,

resisting literary convention by discovering her voice and telling her story was one way Dessa escaped madness. Another way was by asserting physical force to free herself from bondage and gain control of her life. Because of Dessa's rebellious nature, many whites viewed her as a "freak of nature," a monster. As a pregnant woman who actively participated in a slave uprising, killed white men, and was condemned to death, but lived to tell about it, she dramatically contradicts the American societal image of a submissive, obedient woman.

Contrary to convention, the effect of Dessa's aggression was more devastating for its recipients than for her. Her oppressors seem to lose their minds instead of her; as discussed in the previous chapter, Nehemiah literally goes mad when Dessa resists his capture and prevents him from misreading her. The slave dealer, Wilson, who was attacked on the coffee uprising, was also driven mad by his experience and his remembrance of Dessa. The narrator states, "The unnatural, almost superstitious awe in which Wilson seemed to hold the darky had whetted Nehemiah's curiosity; slave dealers were not usually so womanish in their fears..." (15). It is further stated that, the "she-devil ...still haunted Wilson's nightmares" (15). Her physical aggression, which is otherworldly to him, serves Dessa's desire to wield control and arouse fear among those who try to oppress her.

After their master kills Kaine, Dessa does the unspeakable--she attacks the master. For this bold action, she is placed on a slave coffee to be sold off. During the uprising, Dessa takes part in killing some

white men in order to free herself. When Nehemiah questions her about the uprising and the killings, she answers, "I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can" (13). For these killings, she is labeled by whites as "devil woman." Wilson, the slave dealer, repeatedly refers to her as a devil because he is so frightened by her violent aggression. Dessa's friends even refer to her as "debil woman" (54, 93) and "enjoy retelling the story of her exploits during the uprising" (Davis 556). Dessa does not like the name, but accepts it from her peers because they do not use it viciously, but triumphantly, in a way that celebrates her escaping the bonds of slavery and death and gaining freedom. She accepts the imposed epithet on her own terms; she and her friends know that it is not she who is the devil, but it is the system--slavery--and those who perpetuate it. Just as Mrs. Belmont is the real she-devil in *Our Nig*, not Frado, enslavers are the devils in *Dessa Rose*, not Dessa.

I can only wonder what would have been Dessa's fate had she never forcibly opposed her oppressors to gain her freedom. Death by execution or insanity might have been her fate, just as it might have been for Harriet Wilson if she had played the obedient, submissive role that nineteenth-century society assigned women. As black women in a hostile environment--bondage, abuse, poverty, abandonment--often the only means of survival was to fight back, verbally, mentally, and physically. I am sure both Wilson and Williams were conscious of this struggle when they constructed their characters with strong, unbreakable and willful spirits. I believe that black women writers cast

off the historically sexist confines of submissiveness and recognize aggression as an integral part of the black female self. Toni Morrison, quoted in Frances Smith Foster's book *Written By Herself*, says it quite plainly:

There's some difference in the ways they [women writers] approach conflict, dominion, and power....But I do think black women write differently from white women....Aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure.
(Foster 94, [my emphasis])

CONCLUSION

The significance of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* is tremendous as it allows us a glimpse into a small slice of time in the life of a nineteenth-century black woman. What Wilson confronts in racial, gender, and class issues seriously complicates her novel. Because Harriet Wilson as a writer and as a black woman is trapped by the racist sexist limitations of nineteenth-century American society and politics, she leaves many silences and gaps in her text. However, even though she presented only "sketches" of her life, her revelations were powerful enough to be silenced and driven into obscurity for over one hundred years. Sherley Anne Williams speaks to those silences concerning black women in literature and history, by revising, bending, and expanding the literary parameters that stifled her foremothers. She gives life to people ignored by history, like Dinah, the black woman slave rebel. Unlike Wilson, Williams is free to confront any subject, any part of the character's life without fear of a public backlash or of slandering her literary character. Unlike Wilson, she is free to write as she pleases, nor does she have the pressure of portraying herself in a way that is agreeable to white society's standards as does Wilson.

Wilson states that she writes her book for money in order to secure her child, but she uses many themes that would clearly offend her Northern white nineteenth-century audience. Wilson uses the epithet "nig" to describe herself and to show how the Bellmonts referred to her; she portrays an interracial marriage between a fallen white woman/bad mother and a black man--her parents; she exposes a

fake fugitive slave; she portrays a white woman as a she-devil--a label usually placed upon black women; and she confronts hypocrisy in Northern, white abolitionist homes (White 22). The narrator says that Frado is "maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their houses, North" (129). These controversial themes probably destroyed Wilson's chances of making a profit from her novel. Was Wilson aware of this risk? Was she also trying to make a social comment? Or would she have been unable to tell her story without compromising herself if she did not speak to these controversies?

Williams, benefitted by time, is able to tell the story of slavery, but with the aim of focusing on "particular acts of agency within an oppressive and degrading system" (McDowell "Negotiating between Tenses" 160). She gives the authority back to the slave by allowing Dessa to tell her individual story. Recovering authority is important; therefore, so is the act of twentieth-century writers writing about slavery after freedom. By witnessing slavery now, in novels, "future generations that might otherwise succumb to the cultural amnesia that has begun to re-enslave us all in social and literary texts that impoverish our imaginations" (McDowell "Negotiating between Tenses" 161) will be enlightened and given a complete picture of the past.

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