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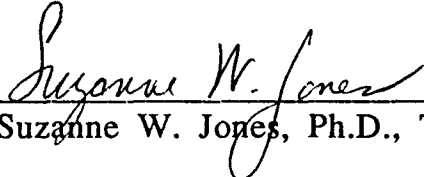
**Finding the Words: Negotiating Linguistic Communities
in Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose**

**Nanci Michelle Roberts
Master of Arts in English
University of Richmond
1994**


Suzanne W. Jones, Ph.D., Thesis Director

A study of linguistic communities in Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose, this thesis focuses on the relationship between cultural behavior and the use of language. Using anthropological studies on the role of language in society, as well as major criticism of the novel, this paper seeks to prove that only through equalizing linguistic power can the characters achieve a language system which accurately reflects their experience. The paper focuses on four primary communities: the unequal interracial community of Southern slave society, the slave community, the white planter community, and finally the equal interracial community that results after slavery.

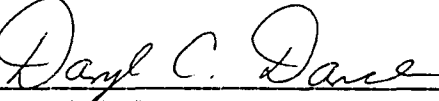
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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**FINDING THE WORDS:
NEGOTIATING LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES
IN SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS' DESSA ROSE**

By

NANCI MICHELLE ROBERTS

B.A., Mary Baldwin College, 1989

A Thesis

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*I couldn't put into words all this that was
going on in my head. I didn't have the words,
the experience to say these things.*

-Sherley Anne Williams

Robert B. Moore summarizes a tradition in socio-linguistic thought when he says of language that it "not only develops in conjunction with a society's historical, economic, and political evolution; it also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. Language not only *expresses* ideas and concepts but actually *shapes* thought" (331).¹ The scope of this relationship between language and thought cannot, however, be summed up quite so easily. The evolutionary patterns of both language and the culture which it reflects are much more complex than Moore's assertion seems to indicate. According to Edward Sapir, "[t]he relative rates of change between the two [language and culture] differ so materially as to make it practically impossible to detect the relationship" (102). Thus, the correlation between language and culture is less direct than one might imagine. Though the two evolve in relation to each other, one evolution generally precedes the other. Language often lags behind culture in its rate of change, and, as Sapir points out, language often provides a more accurate picture of a culture's recent past than of its present (102). This phenomenon is clearly illustrated in

Sherley Anne Williams' novel, Dessa Rose. In the novel, the characters find themselves in a new and rapidly changing set of circumstances, and the linguistic system with which they are equipped fails to adequately meet their changing needs. Thus, circumstances necessitate their creating a new linguistic system to correspond to their new understanding of themselves and each other. The novel begins with the stereotypical language of racism and misunderstanding, the culturally indoctrinated language of Southern slave society. This gradually gives way to the language of love and understanding as the characters develop close personal relationships and learn a new language appropriate to those relationships.

In Dessa Rose, Williams examines several linguistic communities and the linguistic changes which result when those communities collide. At the beginning of the novel, we see three clearly defined communities: the white planter community, the black slave community, and the larger interracial community of Southern slave society. It could be argued that Southern slave society, by virtue of its unequal power balance, is not a true community. It does, however, fit Ferdinand de Saussure's definition of a linguistic community as a group which functions according to a common set of conventions, regardless of racial or other differences (223). The communication system of the

interracial Southern slave society accurately reflects the characters' situation at the beginning of the novel, including the inequality of power between blacks and whites. This community serves as the starting point for the characters' progression toward building a new linguistic community because it represents the system under which they have learned their behavior patterns, their language, and their stereotypical understanding of each other and of themselves.

Southern slave society has taught the characters that they have a "place," defined by color and governed by an unequal balance of power in which whites are totally dominant and blacks have no voice. This idea of "place" carries with it a set of linguistic traditions which reflect the imbalance of power. Whites control the language to the extent that blacks do not even have the power to name their own children, let alone the power or command of language to participate effectively in the interracial community.

While many critics, including Deborah McDowell, Mae Henderson, and Anne Goldman, have addressed this question of power in their criticism of Dessa Rose, little work has been done on the theme of linguistic community. All the critics have recognized the importance of Dessa's search for her own voice and the role of naming in the novel, but

they have failed to recognize the importance of these power issues in the shift from slave society to equal racial community.² Their work has, however, paved the way for my exploration of the novel's linguistic communities and the way the imbalance of power must be addressed as the characters' relationships and experiences change and they move toward an equal and authentic interracial community beyond the bounds of slavery.

The two smaller, racially defined, linguistic communities within Southern slave society function as separate systems, but each also depends upon and reacts to the other. For example, the slave community uses language to subvert the larger interracial community governed by the white man, to give blacks some power in an otherwise powerless situation. The planter community, on the other hand, uses language in large part to preserve the unequal balance of power, thus maintaining its control over the blacks and perpetuating the institution of slavery. From the beginning of the novel, the conflict between these two communities suggests the changes which naturally occur when the two meet outside the legal confines of slavery

When we first meet the slave woman, Dessa, she is entrenched in slave society's system of institutionalized repression. Imprisoned for her role in a slave coffle revolt, she awaits the birth of her child and her own

execution, which is scheduled to follow it. At this point in the novel, Dessa is a community of one. She has been separated from her family community, a community in which she could and did communicate. Her dreaming in the prologue of the past and the family she has lost represents an effort to return to that community, to speak what is almost literally a dead language. Here, dreaming is the only avenue of communication open to her, and it has become her reality. Dessa's isolation from her family and members of her own race appears to accomplish one of slavery's goals, that of separating blacks from one another, thus dissolving their sense of community and decreasing the probability of a group revolt. If the blacks were unable to develop a loyalty to one another, their loyalty would presumably be to their white masters, and uprisings would cease to be a threat to the survival of the master/slave society.

Even in this seemingly hopeless state of captivity and imminent death, Dessa can to some degree undermine the power of the white man. Though she cannot communicate with the outside world and her fellow slaves, she does communicate with the past through her dreams. These dreams and memories of her dead husband Kaine not only serve as a temporary mental liberation from her captivity, but they also provide us as readers with some insight into

the cultural and linguistic workings of the slave community. Dessa recalls Kaine's attachment to his banjo, an African instrument that for him represented a world without whites, a world where "[n]obody...belong[ed] to white folks, just onliest theyselves and each others" (Williams 33). We see that in the slave community's language system, "no whites" translates into freedom and dignity for blacks. Because in Southern slave society white people are the owners of blacks and the holders of power, white becomes linked with oppression.

It is not just white slave holders the slaves cannot trust but whites in general. Dessa remembers Kaine's pointing this out to her in answer to her suggestion that they run away to the North: "What is north? More whites. Just like here" (43). Thus, we see the formation of one of Dessa's stereotypes of white people. For her and the rest of the black community, oppression is tied to color without qualification. As Dessa states later, she had "only heard of 'good masters'---[she] didn't know nothing about no good white folks" (177). Clearly, "white" and "master" are conflated in her language system, and she has no basis for distinguishing between owners and non-owners.

Directly parallel to this slave language system in which white people are lumped into a single group is a white language system which stereotypes blacks in a

similar manner. In the white language system, blacks are referred to in terms which objectify them. Adam Nehemiah, the white writer who attempts to use Dessa's story for his book about preventing slave uprisings, relates to Dessa through animalistic language, a language which reveals the white assumption that the slave, much like the horse or cow, is merely a piece of property to be used to the white man's advantage. Nehemiah uses words like "rump" and "flanks" in describing Dessa's body and refers to her giving birth as "breeding" (13) and "whelping" (15). Clearly, this language is dehumanizing, and it reflects the way in which slavery reduced human beings to animal status. When Nehemiah describes the "toll in life and property" resulting from the slave revolt, "life" refers to the five white men who were killed, while "property" refers to the fifty slaves who were "destroyed or damaged" (14). If, as Mario Pei asserts, "language is the conveyor, interpreter, and shaper of man's social doings" (211), then the planter community's use of such dehumanizing language indicates a societal void in which something as important as human life can be discounted on the basis of a random feature like skin color, and the relationship between signifier and signified³ becomes a frightening variable.

The meeting of Dessa and Adam Nehemiah may be seen as the inevitable collision between the white language

system and the black language system that make up Southern slave society. The confusion and misunderstanding which result from this collision serve to highlight the differences and misunderstandings which are slowly overcome in the rest of the novel. Nehemiah and the book he plans to write represent the white community's attempt to perpetuate the language of oppression, and his effort to appropriate Dessa's words suggests the power of language to shape thought and behavior. The group that controls the language controls the community. When Dessa tells Nehemiah that he does not talk like a white man, he says, "I teach your master and his kind how to speak" (65), indicating that at least in his own mind he controls the words which in turn control the society. Examining that comment in light of the notes for his book, which contain animalistic references to Dessa, it is evident that Nehemiah's "teaching" is designed to further secure the white man's position as master and to more deeply confine the black people to slavery. His position as self-appointed teacher and perpetuator of oppression is interesting in light of the fact that he is not of the planter class, and "[h]owever much the plantation south might rely on slave labor, the 'negro tamer,' like the negro trader, had no place in planter society" (Williams 19). Thus, Nehemiah is engaged in preserving a society (community) of which he is

not a part. Ironically, he tries to use the words of the slave community (through writing down Dessa's story) to perpetuate the inequality of power between master and slave, and in doing so, to preserve the artificially constructed interracial community of Southern slave society. His efforts are eventually thwarted by his failure to understand the very language system he attempts to use.⁴

Deborah McDowell asserts that Dessa "sabotages" (150) Nehemiah's efforts to appropriate her story, citing as examples the way in which Dessa substitutes songs or stories about Kaine for answers to Nehemiah's questions and the way in which she "refuses to 'confess' anything . . . that would facilitate yet another misrepresentation (150). Though McDowell is accurate in her assertion that Dessa seems to like "'playing on his words'" (150), I would argue that she overestimates Dessa's cleverness. Yes, Dessa does admit to turning her conversations with Nehemiah into a game, as McDowell claims (15); however, I think McDowell overlooks textual evidence of the very real language barrier that exists between the white man and the slave. For example, "Dessa couldn't always follow the white man's questions; often he seemed to put a lot of unnecessary words between his 'why' and what he wanted to know" (Williams 54). Granted, Dessa tries not to give

Nehemiah any information that might lead to the capture of coffee members who might have survived, but I do not think her limited understanding of Nehemiah's language supports McDowell's theory that she is merely toying with the writer. To play the sort of game McDowell suggests would require a much stronger grasp of the white language system than Dessa appears to possess.

Dessa's limited understanding of Nehemiah's language is mirrored by his limited understanding of the slave language system. It is his own inability to understand that undermines Nehemiah's efforts to appropriate Dessa's words, rather than any conscious act of wordplay on Dessa's part. The slaves on the plantation where Dessa is imprisoned use the spiritual to communicate their plans for her escape, and though Nehemiah hears the song, he has no idea what it means. The refrain that answers Dessa's query, "Tell me, oh, please tell me, / When I be free?" (64) is cloaked in religious imagery: "sinner," "going ride that heavenly train," "the Lawd have called you home" (64). The natural assumption for Nehemiah or any other white person hearing the song would be that the slaves were singing of Dessa's approaching death; but within the linguistic conventions of the slave community, the song communicates a message of imminent release from captivity. The religious signifiers, which for the white

community hold heavenly implications, carry the message of earthly liberation to Dessa. As Nehemiah has tried to use Dessa's own words against her, so the slaves have taken the white man's Christian language and used it to their own advantage. Thus, the oral tradition of the slave has been used to subvert the "formal discourse" of Nehemiah and the white master (Henderson 653).

When Dessa addresses her fellow slaves through the song, it is the first time she has ever "sung a call of her own aloud" (Williams 63), and she wonders if she will be heard. Here, Dessa begins to acquire the voice slavery has denied her, though she does so within the confines of the song, the only avenue of communication open to her. Here, the song has replaced the dream as Dessa's means of communication; and Dessa, who could only "mouth" the words of Kaine's song in the prologue (Williams 5), now sings to get news from her liberators. Just as she is about to embark on the physical journey from slavery toward freedom, so she is also beginning to acquire the voice that will allow her to tell her own story, or in the words of Anne Goldman, "to articulate an 'I'" (313). In doing so, Dessa begins to acquire the power which will eventually allow her to participate as an equal in a new interracial community outside the realm of the master/slave society in which she has no voice.

This transition toward a more equal society is a long and complicated one. Though Dessa and her companions leave the physical confines of slavery behind them when they move to Sutton's Glen plantation, its language and customs are not so easily abandoned. After arriving at Sutton's Glen and giving birth to her son, Dessa is in and out of delirium. Again she retreats to dreams of the past, and in dreaming of her family, she realizes that "[s]omeone [is] missing" (81). When she finally wakes in Ruth Sutton's bedroom, it is to the realization that "[s]he [is] the one who [is] missing; she [has] been sold away" (88). Presumably, Dessa equates the strangeness of her surroundings with being "sold away," a frequent and frightening occurrence among the members of slave families. That she is free does not immediately occur to her, probably because being sold away is a more familiar aspect of the slave experience than is freedom. In addition, the mere presence of Ruth, a white woman, indicates slavery to Dessa, for whom "white woman" means "mistress."

It is important to note here that the characters at Sutton's Glen do not exactly fit the stereotypical categories of "mistress" or "slave" assigned them by Southern slave society.⁵ Ruth is a "mistress" whose husband has abandoned her and whose slaves have all run

away. By the same token, Dessa and her fellow blacks are runaway slaves, living in comparative freedom but still performing the tasks of slaves and still dependent upon the white woman for their survival. Thus, Sutton's Glen houses a community which mirrors the traditional plantation community but which lacks the fundamental element of ownership, a community foreign even to those who inhabit it. Even the plantation setting itself defies the traditional mold: "[T]hat flashy house . . . and passel of niggers in a region where there were few slave holders and few of those who owned more than two or three slaves, all that land planted in cotton when any fool could see that this was corn country" (Williams 108). Thus Williams creates a setting in which her characters' situation becomes plausible,⁶ what Marta Sanchez aptly refers to as "a cultural borderlands" (23).

The characters enter into this "borderlands" armed with the language and conventions of Southern slave society, language and conventions which prove inadequate. In creating this unique community from the merging of other social and linguistic communities, Sherley Anne Williams makes it not only possible but necessary for her characters to create a new language system to fit the relationships which they begin to develop. In the process, she forces the characters to move into new, unsterotypical roles which

provide them with freedom and personal power. For Dessa and for Ruth this changing of roles requires the questioning, and ultimately the rejecting, of their fundamental beliefs about the nature of "black" and "white." Each must reconstruct those ideas based upon personal experience. For Ruth, it means abandoning the privileged role of white plantation mistress and developing an understanding of blacks as people, not just as servants. For Dessa, it means learning to trust a member of the white race, which for her has always been the source of oppression and pain. In the process, the two women form a friendship that transcends the barriers of color and class and places them at the center of a new interracial community of equals.

As Sapir notes, the "rapidly increasing complexity of culture necessitates correspondingly [sic], though not equally rapid, changes in linguistic form and content" (102). Thus, the residents of Sutton's Glen find themselves in a community that changes culturally before changing linguistically. Consequently, they must rely upon the faulty linguistic traditions of the past until their language evolves to correspond to their community. Ruth refers to Dessa as "colored girl" (92), "wench" (93), and "darky" (92), presumably because those are the words she has been taught to use in identifying blacks. Nancy Porter

describes this reliance on stereotypes as resulting from the "enforced childishness and 'protected' ignorance of southern white womanhood" (261). Ironically, the white woman, with whom Dessa has associated power, is victimized by the same patriarchy that has oppressed Dessa and her people. Ruth silently acknowledges her weakness in Southern slave society when Nathan asks what will happen if her husband returns. While she assures him that she will not allow the fugitives to be returned to slavery, she knows that she will "have no more rights than they" (162) when and if the white man comes home. Ruth's victimization by slavery may be seen in the way her emotions conflict with her learned standards of behavior. She nurses Dessa's son "almost without thought" (105), instinctively responding to the child's cries of hunger. Yet, she feels "some mortification at becoming wet nurse for a darky" (106). Here, we see the conflict between Ruth's natural human inclinations and her culturally indoctrinated response to the idea represented by the word "darky." While Ruth likes nursing the baby (106), the conventions with which she has been brought up cause her to define the child as "darky," rather than "baby," and reflect the inadequacies inherent in slave society's language system.

Dessa experiences a similar internal conflict. She

cannot nurse her baby herself, so she must rely on Ruth to do it; but she is uncomfortable with the situation. Her stereotypes about white behavior are as strong as Ruth's about black behavior. For example, Dessa cannot understand Ruth's sharing the bed with her. Because she has never experienced this type of treatment from whites, Dessa assumes that Ruth is "touched, maybe; strange in the head" (121). Dessa cannot equate the idea of kindness with white people, so the fact that Ruth's actions fail to fit her definition of "white" leads Dessa to define the behavior as abnormal. She has no other reference point from which to name it, and "to inspect that fact [Ruth's not conforming to what Dessa has been told about white behavior] too closely [is] almost to deny her own existence" (123). Should she be forced to redefine "white woman," she would also be forced to redefine herself, because her self-definition is based almost entirely upon her position as a slave. Through acknowledging the good in Ruth, Dessa might be forced to acknowledge the similarities between them, thus negating the concept of "other" upon which much of her self definition has been based.

Ruth does attempt to act "white," in the way that both she and Dessa understand the word. She thinks of herself as "mistress" and attempts to analyze her behavior in terms of her "place" (129) as white mistress. As confused

as she sometimes is by her own actions and the actions of those around her, Ruth clings tenaciously to the stereotypes that have governed her life. Because of this clinging, she cannot understand the behavior of the blacks living on her plantation. The fact that these black people seem "so unversed in what [is] due her place [as a white mistress]" (141) makes Ruth "uneasy" (141). She cannot comprehend that the blacks are free, and that their actions are governed by that sense of freedom. Like Dessa, she has no experience with members of another race, outside the traditional master/servant context. And like Dessa, she is forced to rely on her stereotypical training for answers and order within this unfamiliar situation. Because those stereotypes fail to maintain order in her life, Ruth becomes confused.

Through recognizing and acknowledging their confusion, Ruth and Dessa begin to move toward recognizing one another as people, rather than as the stereotypical "black" and "white" they have been taught to see. Each must acknowledge qualities in the other that fall outside those stereotypes. Though Ruth forces herself to think, as her position as white mistress dictates, that Dessa "must have done something pretty bad" to earn the punishment she has suffered (145), she cannot help feeling sorry for Dessa. In addition, she is not thoroughly convinced that Dessa has

endured the punishment described because she has not seen the scars. Through her efforts to see the proof of Dessa's pain, Ruth first draws a connection between the slave woman and herself. As Dessa recoils from the white woman's attempt to look at her body under the bedclothes, Ruth blushes, "thinking for the first time of how humiliating *she* would find such an inspection" (Williams 149, emphasis mine). Here for the first time Ruth begins to view Dessa as a woman, like herself, and not just as a "darky."

In addition to equating Dessa's embarrassment with her own, Ruth comes to identify Dessa with her own beloved Mammy. Thinking of Dessa's being beaten and branded naturally leads Ruth to wonder if Mammy had ever been beaten, and she is surprised to find herself angry at the thought of someone doing such things to Mammy (148). Through relating Dessa to Mammy as a slave and to herself as a woman, Ruth begins to consider Dessa as someone, rather than as the something suggested by terminology such as "wench."

For Dessa, whose position as slave has more thoroughly indoctrinated her in the policies of the black/white relationship, realization comes more slowly. She listens as Ruth talks to herself, but she will not allow herself to understand, for "if she understood the white woman, she

would have to . . . have to, have to do---Something" (119). The thought trails off because Dessa is unable to let herself think of what understanding the white woman might entail. Unlike her very real inability to understand Nehemiah's language, this lack of understanding is purposeful on Dessa's part. She deliberately allows the language barrier to exist when she might overcome it. She is not yet prepared for the possibility of allowing herself to communicate with the white woman or for changing her views of the white race; and by refusing to understand she allows herself the comfort of retaining her stereotypes and the safety of viewing the white woman as "other."

As with Ruth, Dessa's progress toward overcoming stereotypes comes in the form of equations. She admits her inability to articulate her feelings about Nathan and his relationship with Ruth: "I couldn't put into words all this that was going on in my head. *I didn't have the words*, the experience to say these things. All I could do was feel and it was like my own flesh had betrayed me" (188, emphasis mine). Here, in acknowledging the incongruity between her experience and her vocabulary, Dessa expresses the dilemma faced by all the residents of Sutton's Glen as they search for the words with which to understand themselves and each other. Dessa feels that she and Nathan are part of each other, after all they have

been through together. Along with Harker and Cully, they form a separate community of coffee escapees and share an understanding of the world that is unlike that of the other fugitives. Dessa feels that Nathan's relationship with Ruth is pushing them apart. She acknowledges the fact that while Nathan's having a relationship with anyone might cause her problems, Ruth's whiteness compounds the difficulty (188). She cannot comprehend the relationship between Ruth and Nathan because it falls outside the realm of her experience. She is truly shocked when Harker suggests that Ruth and Nathan might have something like the relationship she shared with Kaine (204). The possibility of that sort of love existing across racial barriers has never occurred to her. Her experience with interracial sex has been confined to stories of forced encounters between white masters and slave women (Williams 188). She cannot grasp the idea that sex between two people of different colors could be anything other than white men raping black women "[c]ause they could" (220).

Like the institutionalized rape of black women, naming in slave society represents power. The master's naming his slaves indicated his absolute power over both language and culture. With this power to name came the power to misname, to call a slave "out of name," using whatever

form of address suited the master at the time.⁷ Williams has put a new twist on the naming issue by having whites "called out of name" as frequently as blacks. Ruth is referred to as "Rufel," a pet name given to her by her black Mammy (137), through most of the book. Here again, Williams has reversed the master/slave relationship. Ruth Elizabeth's given name has been replaced with one made up by a black woman, just as the names slave mothers gave their children were replaced with names chosen by their white masters. Ruth has ambivalent feelings about the name. Though she refers to herself as "Rufel" (156), she recognizes the improper and diminutive nature of the name when the black girl Annabelle uses it: "'Miz Rufel' was a slave-given name, discarded by white people when they reached adulthood. Annabelle had put Rufel almost on the same level as herself by its use now, making Rufel appear a child, Young Missy in tantrum, rather than Mistress of the House" (103). It is interesting to note that under the rules of slavery white children could discard names given to them by black care-givers, while blacks were forced to keep the names their white masters gave them, rather than the names given by their own mothers. It is also interesting that Ruth cannot stop thinking of herself as "Rufel" (103), despite the impropriety of the name.

Though she is acutely conscious of the problems

concerning her own name, Ruth exhibits no sense of the issue of naming with regard to others, particularly blacks. Only through an argument she and Dessa have about Mammy does she begin to see how important naming and misnaming can be. In addition, the different signifieds which Ruth and Dessa attach to the signifier "mammy" become not only evidence of their different linguistic communities but also a bridge through which they begin to understand each other. As Ashraf Rushdy points out, this argument about Mammy brings both women to a crisis point, a point at which each feels compelled to defend her identity and her definition of Mammy (375-76). When Ruth talks about Mammy, Dessa insists that "'Mammy' ain't nobody name, not they real one" (125) and challenges Ruth to remember Mammy's real name (Dorcas). The fact that Ruth cannot immediately recall the name serves as a chance for Dessa to confront her own problems as a black child whose mother nursed white children, while also serving to upset Ruth.⁸ For both women, "mammy" represents love and caregiver, and the confusion about the meaning of the word becomes a battle ground through which each learns to accept the validity of the other's definition of "mammy" and of the love associated with the word.

For Ruth, the argument raises issues about her relationship with Mammy and forces her to search for

words to describe a closeness she always took for granted. It is as if her world has been turned upside down by Dessa's forcing her to view Mammy in a different light. She recalls that her family started calling the old servant "Mammy" because her mother felt the name would give the impression that Mammy had been with the family for years (130). For the first time Ruth thinks about this decision with Mammy's feelings in mind: "Had Mammy minded when the family no longer called her name? Was that why she changed mine? . . . Was what she [Ruth] had always thought loving and cute only revenge, a small reprisal for all they'd taken from her [Mammy]?" (137). Through this argument with Dessa, Ruth begins to understand that the woman who raised her was perhaps more than that, that Mammy had a life outside her role as servant, a life of which Ruth was not a part.

She also begins to question the love that she and Mammy shared, "wanting desperately to believe that Mammy had loved her not only fully, but freely" (147), hoping that the love shown her by Mammy had not been merely part of Mammy's role as slave. This questioning of love leads Ruth to examine her own feelings toward Mammy. In trying to explain her relationship with Mammy to Nathan, Ruth says, "She treated me just like--" (132). She cannot say the word "child," because in doing so, she would be equating

herself with the vision of "pickaninny" (132) in her mind; and for the first time she realizes that Mammy was a "nigger" (132). Here, the language of slave society conflicts with experience, and Ruth begins the process of redefining which marks the beginning of understanding and of linguistic change. Though she settles for telling Nathan that Mammy was her maid, a voice inside her that cannot make its way to her lips calls Mammy her "friend" (133). Ruth's conflicting emotions regarding Mammy indicate that she is beginning to acknowledge her own stereotypes about black people, and in doing so is taking the first step toward breaking down those stereotypes.

An important breakthrough in the journey toward building a new community free from stereotypes comes with the naming of Dessa's son. From his birth, Ruth and her son Timmy have referred to the baby as "Button," and though it is a pet name, it also suggests a thing rather than a person. When Ruth offers it as a suggestion, Nathan rejects it immediately, implying that he understands the importance of naming this child who has been born outside the institution of slavery. Though Nathan and Harker favor naming him Kaine after his father, Dessa wants to name him after her liberators, Nathan, Cully, and Harker. In rejecting calling him Kaine, Dessa takes another step toward favoring her new community over the old one: "The

baby's daddy, like that part of her life, was dead; she would not rake it up each time she called her son's name" (Williams 159). While Ruth suggests the name which is eventually chosen, the decision is not hers; she is no longer the slave mistress who names babies. In addition, the name she offers, "Desmond . . . 'Des' for Odessa, 'mond' to represent the men . . . who were responsible for his free birth" (159), acknowledges the separate community of coffee escapees into which Desmond was born. Dessa's decision to use Kaine for a middle name marks the baby as a bridge between the old life and the new; Dessa will not forget the past entirely, but she will not try to live in it either.

The old life of slavery and the new one of freedom converge in the scheme the runaways develop to raise money for their move west. They decide to "sell" one another as slaves and then to escape from their new "owners." Though they have moved beyond the bounds of slavery, they must use its conventions and language in their efforts to physically move out of slave territory. Their knowledge of those conventions allows them to move comfortably between the two language communities of slavery and freedom, and for the first time, they are able to use the slave experience to their advantage. Evidence of how far they have come in developing their new language

community may be seen in the way they have to consciously remember the "place" of the slave: "Our life depended on no one speaking out of turn. We was slaves; wasn't posed to know nothing nor do nothing without first being told" (211). Ruth also has to remember her "place" in slave society: "She was to act high-handed and helpless if she was in a tight spot" (212). There has been a major shift from characters who were initially trapped by their visions of "place" to characters who must remember to act the parts of "mistress" and "slaves." This playing on the conventions of slavery represents the ultimate subversion of the system, and not only are the blacks involved, but Ruth, the former white mistress, is also a participant. Here, the two communities of black and white are united in subverting the larger community of southern slave society. The new interracial community uses the conventions of the old one to its advantage, rather than being governed by them as they were in the beginning of the novel.

In the process of this subversion, Dessa and Ruth are confronted with other revelations which finally cement the relationship they have begun to develop. Through the experience of seeing Ruth almost raped by the plantation owner Oscar, Dessa learns that Ruth's whiteness is no protection against lust, that Ruth is just as vulnerable to rape and abuse at the hands of white men as she is. Thus,

her assumptions about the power of Ruth's white skin are abandoned. Seeing Dessa's scars for the first time has a similar effect on Ruth. She begins to overcome her "childlike assumption that blacks are part of the support system of her environment and to see them as human and individual" (Porter 262). Their recognition of one another as women, without the distinction of color, makes it possible for them to begin to identify with one another. The fact that they share the vulnerability of being female allows them to develop a tenuous closeness.

The closeness itself is difficult for Dessa to handle because she does not know "how to be warm with no white woman" (220). Consequently, when Ruth tells her that they are "friends" (239), Dessa has difficulty grasping the true meaning of the white woman's words. She ponders this as she walks away from their hotel room, realizing that "that was what the white woman was talking about, being Martha, being like Carrie to [her]" (240). For Dessa, "friend" has always meant "black," and she tries to reconcile the word to what she knows of white people. In this attempt, she defines Ruth as "white woman," a term that is oddly like Ruth's use of "wench." For though Dessa has begun to trust Ruth, she still cannot see beyond "white." Again, she falls back upon her experience: "'Friend' to her might be like 'promise' to white folks.

Something to break if it would do them some good" (241). This time, however, Dessa is willing to take a chance with Ruth. Though she tells herself that she will not expect Ruth to truly be her friend (240), she decides that she will not "draw back from her neither" (241).

Dessa's decision to give Ruth a chance is almost immediately tested, for Nehemiah accosts her on the street and takes her to jail. Once again behind bars, Dessa feels as though she never "left the first jail or this last white man" (244). She is dangerously close to losing all hope of the freedom that she has almost achieved, and she knows that the only possibility of her escaping the situation alive lies in the hands of "Miz Lady." Ironically, in light of her calling Dessa "friend," it is imperative that Ruth convince the sheriff that Dessa is "nothing but her slave" (252). Again, the characters use the words and conventions of slave society to subvert the society itself, and only because Ruth and Dessa have moved beyond those conventions are they able to succeed in using them to their own advantage.

After their escape from Nehemiah, Ruth and Dessa take the last step in their journey toward friendship and understanding. Dessa tries to call the white woman "'Mis'ess,'" and "'Miz,'" and in Dessa's words, "It was like I cussed her" (255). In this passage, misnaming has been

redefined. Names like "mistress," which were appropriate to the master/slave situation and even through the transition period at Sutton's Glen, have become insulting in light of their newly formed friendship. Ruth corrects Dessa, explaining that her name is Ruth. She has finally overcome the childishness imposed by plantation society and given up "Rufel" in favor of being an independent woman. Dessa responds to Ruth by finally correcting the pronunciation of her own name, "Dessa Rose. Ain't no O to it" (256). For the first time, each refers to the other by her proper name. Ironically, Nehemiah articulates their relationship, even before they have sealed it with the exchange of names: "'You-all in this together' . . . 'Womanhood' . . . 'All alike'" (255). He is right; it is their common ground as women which has allowed them to become friends, but they are not "all alike." They have very different experiences and visions of the world, and in their accepting of one another, they have acknowledged and validated those differences along with the similarities. As Dessa says, "I wanted to hug Ruth. I didn't hold nothing against her, not 'mistress,' not Nathan, not skin. Maybe we couldn't speak but so honest without disagreement, but that didn't change how I feel" (256).

Through this recognition of similarities and acknowledging of differences Sherley Anne Williams'

characters finally create their new interracial community out of the remnants of the community of slavery. Williams does not, however, opt for the "happily ever after" ending. Ruth does not accompany her black friends on their journey west. Instead, she moves east, to what Dessa describes as "Philly-me-York---some city didn't allow no slaves" (259). Thus, Ruth adheres to her ideas of interracial community and freedom, but not with the same group with which she found those ideas. The implications for a more widespread community of interracial equals are increased with Ruth's leaving the small established community she has helped to create.

The experience of the runaways who move west gives a less hopeful picture of the possibilities for continuing this equal community. As Dessa describes it, "Negro can't live in peace under protection of law, got to have some white person to stand protection for us" (259). It is interesting to note here, however, that the linguistic changes begun by the community at Sutton's Glen have continued. Not only has Dessa changed the language with which she describes others, she has also changed the language with which she refers to herself. Her use of the word "Negro" in the passage above indicates this change in her self image. Previously, she adopted the words of the white masters in referring to herself as "darksy," "nigga," etc. Now she uses

positive language that makes her a person and not a thing in her own words. This change is perhaps even more important than the changes in the way others describe her because it indicates that Dessa has ceased what Jean Baker Miller calls the "internalization of dominant beliefs" (25). She no longer thinks of herself in the derogatory terms imposed by the white man.

The success of Sherley Anne Williams' characters in creating a new language system to fit their new community offers hope to the interracial community which reads her book. Though we as readers have not experienced the degree of linguistic subjugation the novel's characters have overcome, we are certainly living in the legacy of that master/slave community. The change that occurs for Williams' characters gives us hope that, because language is a living system, we may be able to create a truly widespread equal community in which both language and convention reflect the commonality of our experience, while also preserving its diversity.

¹ Moore cites Simon Podair's "How Literary Bigotry Builds Through Language," from the March 1967 issue of *Negro Digest* as the original source of this information, but the idea also appears in the work of linguists Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir.

² The critics have discussed at great length the appropriation of Dessa's words and her reclaiming of her story. Anne Goldman relates this appropriation of Dessa's words to the appropriation of her body, as does Marta Sanchez in her discussion of body as text. Goldman, however, places more emphasis on Dessa's motherhood and the way in which Dessa's pregnancy and her lack of power are related. Nancy Porter, on the other hand, focuses on motherhood as the means through which Dessa and Ruth begin to relate to each other and to form their friendship. Porter also touches on Ruth and Dessa's argument about Mammy, a central element in the arguments of Deborah McDowell and Ashraf Rushdy. Mary Kemp Davis, too, sees this argument as pivotal; however, her concentration is on the politics of naming and misnaming

in the novel. Mae Henderson, who also recognizes the importance of naming, tends to approach the question of linguistic power from the angle of actual textual control. Despite their varying ways of addressing the question of linguistic power, all the critics have concluded that in telling her story herself at the end of the novel, Dessa has reclaimed the voice that slavery has denied her. It is interesting to note that while the other critics cite the triumph of Dessa's oral tradition over the written tradition of the white man, Mary Kemp Davis asserts that Dessa "has begun to inscribe her own history *in her own hand*" (544-45, my emphasis).

³ According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; there is no innate link between the two (67-69). Once the sign becomes fixed and signifier and signified are linked, the relationship cannot be altered by choice. Time, history, and societal change may cause the relationship between signifier and signified to evolve and thus change the nature of the sign, but no individual or community may actively create such a change (72-76).

⁴ At the end of the novel, we see Nehemiah's failure to appropriate Dessa's story as he scrambles to retrieve the scattered pages of his novel, pages which are described as containing "nothing but scribbling" and being "blank" (Williams 255). Here, Williams is signifying on William Styron and his Confessions of Nat Turner in showing how a white man cannot successfully tell a black story, a story he has not lived and cannot understand.

⁵ This goes back to Sapir's description of the linguistic difficulties which arise when a culture evolves more quickly than the language used to describe it. Thus, we see the rapid cultural change which necessitates a corresponding linguistic change (102).

⁶ Because Ruth and her husband clearly are not a part of the community in which they live, we as readers can believe that no one notices the runaway slaves' presence on the plantation. Also, the Suttons' owning a large number of slaves in an area with a comparatively small slave population allows us to presume that if anyone should notice the runaways they would assume the Suttons had merely added to their already large collection of blacks

⁷ In I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou discusses the politics of misnaming in great detail, describing white women who changed the names of their black maids for their own convenience (90-92). In Angelou's description, we see the legacy of misnaming left after the abolition of slavery and are better able to understand the far-reaching implications of the commentary Williams is making in Dessa Rose.

⁸ The significance of this argument and the meaning of "Mammy" was discussed in a class led by Suzanne W. Jones at the University of Richmond on April 14, 1993. The original idea of Dessa's difficulty with being a black child whose mother cared for white children belongs to Dr. Jones.

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