REVISIONS OF THE ORAL: ORALITY AND SEXUALITY IN JOHN A. WILLIAMS'S *THE MAN WHO CRIED I AM*

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ABSTRACT

As contemporary American fiction evolves, new visions of the oral and folk must be employed to ensure the growth and future of a literature sure to become more multi-cultural. African-American literary critics often seek theoretical approaches to African-American literature through folk and oral traditions. These traditions demonstrate a concern with power, marginality, and language. Oral and folk traditions also suggest ways for artists to solidify their "marginal" cultural/ethnic aesthetics, heritage, and social concerns in American literature. My paper examines how the African-American literary tradition and its modes of orality continue to contribute to the making of contemporary fiction. I see the oral tradition as a valuable tool in exploring the black body and sexuality in the African-American literary tradition. I examine how the oral tradition in African-American literature works to deconstruct gender and sexual social orders through eroticized structures of voice in the text. In implementing the practice of such theory, the second purpose of the paper seeks to examine certain tropes of orality and sexuality in John A. Willliams's *The Man Who Cried I Am*. By examining the mythic sexualness of the black male, the voice of grotesqueness and violence, and the empowering effects of oral rituals, I explore how the text uses the power of the erotic (in orality) to aid African Americans in the process of learning to own their bodies and voices without "Othering" themselves in the process. Revisions of the oral tradition ensure new writing and critical techniques for the future of contemporary American fiction.

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> These two main streams of Negro expression are the Narcissistic level and The Form of Things Unknown… It can be said that there were Negroes who naively accepted what their lives were, lived more or less unthinkingly in their environment, mean as they found it, and sought escape either in religion, migration, alcohol, or in what I've called a sensualization of their sufferings in the form of jazz and blues and folk and work songs.
>
> Richard Wright —"The Literature of the Negro"

The oral tradition in African-American culture is unique in its presentation of oral aesthetics, not simply because it is black and orally derivative, but because of the apparent concerns of sensuality, sexuality, and the body presented in those oral modes. These modes are not hidden or subtle, but conscious, open, and encouraging modes taboo to the western world. Wright called these issues "the form of things unknown." When the oral tradition is heavily employed in the African-American literary tradition, these issues are further complicated. The tradition of African-American literature has developed and evolved to include this oral tradition, and the presentation of sexuality in them has still gone unnamed. What does it mean when a text seems consumed and immersed in what might be called an over-zealous presentation of sensuality, sexuality, and grotesque imageries and associations of the body? It means that sexuality is a part of that aesthetic, and in the African-American literary tradition it becomes vitally important to learn to see sexuality not just as a theme but as part of the aesthetic style of the works of African-American writers. Doing so increases the knowledge, understanding, and the perceived value of the text.

The purpose of my paper is twofold. First, I move beyond previous concepts or insights of the oral tradition in African-American literature. My primary concern is to define or name sexuality as an aesthetic incorporation of the oral tradition. The second purpose of the paper seeks to use John A. Williams's novel, *The Man Who Cried I Am,* as one critical example of how that theory is practiced. Williams's novel utilizes an oral tradition, and the novel's plot takes into consideration black male sexuality and identity during a time period of black machismo in which the defining of voice and body for black males peaked, the Black Power movement.

Many critics have talked about and stumbled over the force of sexuality in discussing the African and African-American oral tradition in literature. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry L. Gates foreshadows the connection between orality and sexuality in African oral tradition when he discusses Robert Thompson's description of Esu's sexuality:

> Esu certainly is not restricted to human distinction of gender or sex: he is at once both male and female. Although his masculinity is depicted as visually and graphically overwhelming, his equally expressive femininity renders his enormous sexuality ambiguous, contrary, and genderless. (29)

Gates broaches the connection briefly. His study of the tradition, while somewhat helpful concerning the vernacular, doesn't really address the full implications of an oral tradition in literature. Gates's theory has two basic problems, i.e., representation and full consideration of his findings.

He never takes into full consideration characteristics such as Esu's ambiguity or sexuality, and because Gates believes that Esu functions as the model of interpretation for African-American literature derived from Africa, it seems appropriate to understand Esu's sexual aspects as they concern an oral tradition. Gates's use of the signifying monkey also seems rather inconclusive if we take into consideration the tradition of Esu and then follow the African-American traditions which follows: the dozens, boasts, blues, and jazz all incorporate sexuality and the body more than thematically. Even Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* processes the duality of a blues vernacular theory without ever taking into consideration where that duality derives from. He states that "the blues has always had a duality to it." (194). The duality of this black vernacular and oral tradition lies in the idea of creation and pleasure. These critics explain the double-voicedness of black texts, the ambiguity of language and structure in black texts, open-endedness as related to jazz and blues, but never the essential bodily connection of the tradition. Aural and oral manifestations specifically acknowledge sexuality, the body, and eros, and so too must texts based on oral tradition. In studying the oral tradition, one must ask why the dozens, blues, and jazz are so sexually explicit and apply those findings to the oral in the written text. There exists a design for the creation and pleasure in these forms. The African-American oral tradition incorporates sexuality into itself for a reason, and that is to rescue the captive body.

When the Emancipation Proclamation was enforced a freed body was still not a free body. The obstacle in the way of owning one's body and loving one's flesh was always there. Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" points out the complexities of the enslavement for African-descended women:

> But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private. And particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time —in stunning contradiction— the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness" resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (67)

Although Spillers's words relate directly to African-American women, her essay also demonstrates that the abuses, misuses, and violation of a group of people's ethnic or racial identity through language and sexuality affects past, present, and future identity processes of the entire said group. Once slaves were free, the images and gazes blacks dealt with from pre-slavery ideals (images of the black body as animalistic, evil, abnormally sexually aggressive) remained with them. Such misrepresentations had continued and were reinforced during slavery as a result of slaves being used as objects, breeders, and chattels. Emancipation heightened the images; free-

dom enforced a new myth, black men as rapists. If these images and the transmission of them through language influenced the disruption and dismemberment of collective identity, then like race, they are important, and one no longer takes precedent over the other because they are mixed and intermingled to form one identity. Further, that group cannot even begin to deal with identity until it has located some of the major sources of destruction (language and sexuality) and deal with them. The question then becomes how to get over the destruction, place the otherness, stop the pornotroping, and become a subject position in life and in literature? That form of things unknown, the sensualization of suffering that Wright speaks of in such a condescending tone, provides the answer.

When concerned with issues of identity, language, and sexuality, the oral tradition provides a viable way to subvert, reconstruct, and connect the private space. For the African-American, the oral tradition has survived slavery and sustained individuals. It gave the world blues, jazz, the dozens, and signifying. It continued an oral tradition of people past, but it is more than just an oral tradition, isn't it? The oral tradition is more than words and music. It is the beat of a heart, the rushing flow of blood, the arousing of emotion, and the wakening of the body. So why, in talking about the oral tradition in literature, have we skipped and skimmed over this part of the tradition? When we talk about African-American literature and its oral tradition, we can have a blues vernacular theory, a signifying monkey, a jazz metaphor for the text, and we can even finger the jagged grain all day and night, but never will we get to the underlying facet of this great tradition-eroticism and the body. The African oral tradition continued and evolved in the New World to save us from the full destruction of our African selves, to preserve linguistic culture, yes, but also to help us through those complexities that Hortense Spillers writes so much about. In this tradition we can honestly confront the gaze and subvert it without regard for intrusion/penetration that might come from Western written discourse modes.

The oral tradition in African-American literature is a response not only to the violation of language, but also to the violation of the physical body. It is a way to transform oneself from object to subject, to physically exist. In his essay "Do Right Women," southern poet and writer Kalammu ya Salaam speculates on the erotic nature of the oral tradition:

> Eurocentric representations of eroticism have been predominantly visual and textual whereas African-heritage representations have been mainly aural (music) and oral (boasts, toasts, dozens, etc.)…textual erotic representation invites and encourages private and individual activity. Aural and oral erotic representations, on the other hand require a participating audience, become a ritual of arousal. Music, in particular, is not only social in focus, it also privileges communal eroticism. Thus, whereas text encourages individualism and self-evaluations of deviance, shame, and guilt, musical eroticism encourages coupling, group identification, and self-evaluations of shared erotic values, sexual self-worth, and pleasure. (133-134)

The recovery of the body occurs as a result of this eroticism in the oral tradition. If Salaams's insights into the erotic are true, and the tradition of spirituals, blues, jazz,

and rhythm and blues suggest so, then what happens to a text when African descended writers utilize their African oral tradition in the work? Aural and oral erotic representations come into conflict with characteristics and duties of any textual representations. The textual structures and narrative techniques change as a result of the conflict. The textual and oral/aural representations, through their conflict, create a space in African-American text where the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our greatest feelings have room to teach, be self-evaluative, etc. However, just as meaning is sometimes lost in translations from one language to another, so too are elements lost in the incorporation of the oral traditions into written traditions. While the ritual of arousal, (the jazz and blues metaphors and structures) are still present in the text, the "self evaluations of shared erotic values, sexual self-worth, and pleasure" run the risk of becoming lost. In a sense, sexuality becomes the part of the oral tradition that can sometimes be lost or misplaced in the written text. The oral-based text, then, has to construct itself through sexual ambiguity and duality, appear graphic and bold in its representation, and examine distorted representations of sexuality and an unrecognized consciousness of being —the erotic, if it is going to fulfill its secondary function, creates a new being and identity. *The Man Who Cried I Am* does this at a variety of levels.

A number of Williams' novels and non-fiction work enjoyed literary success. However, *The Man Who Cried I Am* appears to be his most critically acclaimed work. Unfortunately, most of the criticism and acclaim that the book has received surrounds the use of the "King Alfred" plot and the parallel connections between characters and real historical figures. In a 1971 interview conducted by critic and scholar John O'Brien, Williams himself acknowledges, "I can't say that it please me too much…The acclaim has been political. I wouldn't mind so much if it was both political and literary. But the literary acclaim has been missing" (235). Undeniably critics do Williams, and the novel, a great injustice when they ignore the literary skill and depth that pulsates throughout the work. The very heart and mind of the novel is about the struggle for identity and form through traditional cultural and non-traditional ways. The themes, but most importantly the aesthetics of the novel, are attempts to break free of the internalized racist gaze.

The Man Who Cried I Am is a unique reading experience. The theme and plot are relayed through historical, surreal, and naturalistic forums. The novel's plot concerns Max Reddick, a successful black writer, who travels to Holland to bury a friend and make amends with his ex-wife. Aside from a reckoning with the past, Max's motivation for all that he does in the present is due in large part to the fact that he is dying from cancer. Like any human being faced with the dilemma of leaving this earth, Max seeks to make sense of his actions, his life, and his existence. The novel utilizes flashbacks for the medium of examination. Eventually, Max is provided with an unusual opportunity to really do something for his fellow brethren to validate his existence. In Holland, Max discovers a government plan to eradicate the existence of Blacks in the United States. The dilemma presented in the face of life and death shapes the plot of the novel. Issues of identity and selfhood stand at the forefront. As a descendant of an enslaved people, the protagonist Max Reddick is confronted with the racist mentality and distorted representations of black and white people derived from slavery. Myth plays a vital part in the novel. Myth can be seen in the exploration of interracial

relations, expatriation, cancer, and the voice of Max's alter-ego Saminone. Max Reddick may not be a slave, but as a descendent he must find a way to own himself, to exist beyond those representations. And in order for Max to do so, Williams makes it pertinent that these discoveries take place distinctively in an African-American tradition of empowerment of the body within the oral tradition. What eventually packs the punch, delivers the historical, surreal, and naturalistic feel is the vehicle of sexuality in the novel's oral structures. Williams uses and interchanges the two as writerly aesthetic techniques, as if they were one with each other. This suggests that he too understands the connection between the two.

I am in no way suggesting that forging this connection was Williams's intention upon writing the novel, but that the connection happens because Williams is writing about identity. The African-American text begins to incorporate and reincorporate the black body unconsciously through the text. Perhaps it is time to stop viewing sexuality as a theme in literature and examine it as part of the oral aesthetic, or a literary aesthetic itself. The use of orality and sexuality in literature to reach the plateau of the erotic is essential to any work concerned with identity. The intersecting and interlocking of collective identity happens there, and the black writer must find a way to get there as well as the character s/he is constructing.

When Max is confronted with the essence of his identity, his existence, and his people, myths and misrepresentations of black men surface. Ironically, these concerns or questions don't come directly from the outside, but from the inside of Max Reddick, from the oppressor's gaze he has internalized. Max's actions in trying to invent himself suggest the importance of myth rather than actual mythical statements in the novel. The purpose of the aesthetic and plot of the novel then becomes to subvert the negative impacts of myths in any way possible. Williams's secondary character, Harry Ames, suggest why it is so important to vocally challenge myths when he says:

> In our society which is white —we are intruders they say— there has got to be something inherently horrible about having the sickness and weakness of society described by a person who is the victim of them; for if he, the victim, is capable of describing what they have believed non-existent, then they, the members of the majority, must choose between living the truth... and the lie. (49)

The connection between writing, identity, and existence is clear. Williams's aesthetic in the novel then becomes about bringing/birthing something into existence, the black man and black art, and there is no better way to do so than to challenge the things that those in power have always attempted to utilize to push them into nonexistence —language and sexuality.

From the very beginning of the novel, Williams applies a two-for-one aesthetic combination of orality and sexuality in the text. Max's status as a foreigner in another land speaks volumes of the technique that Williams uses:

> It was late afternoon in the Middle of May and Max Reddick was sitting in an outdoor café on the Leidseplein toying with Pernod….Max glanced a at the sky. God! he thought. It was like a clear high-noon sky in New York. (3)

The narrator makes reference to two distinctly different cities, one in Europe and the other in the United States, and Max Reddick has seen both. The play of differences in the text reveals the oral nature of the text and its primary goals. The geographical location uses the play of differences to make one aware of the importance of sound and Max's body. "He felt something *squish* as he moved, and the meaning of the feeling caught at his voice. "Ober," he said, then more loudly "Ober", and then later "Goddamn" and "Dank you" (7). The italicized "squish" provides insight into Max's body and the importance of sound. Max speaks two languages, but he uses English when he is in pain, an indicator that it is his first language. Max is an American in Amsterdam. He is a foreigner. The use of a foreign tongue by Max works to make the reader highly aware of Max's body. Distinctions by sound and body become a major theme and writing technique for Williams. They are the rituals of arousal in the oral tradition, and the writer's tools for showing alienation and division of identity.

The fusion of orality and sexuality takes place in the text also to make the reading a physical, as well as intellectual, process. Naming plays an important role in the tradition of African-American literature. Williams tropes on the idea of naming in the oral tradition by stressing not only the meaning but the sound of that name to ascertain the specific meaning. The pronunciation of Max's name becomes an issue when pronounced by Max's ex-wife, the foreign, un-American, white Margarit. Margarit pronounces Max as "Mox" instead of Max, or "Macks" as Max phonetically corrects her later in the text (279). The effect of sound, that Williams highlights so intensely, makes the reader aware of the physical process of aural and oral means rather than the pure intellectual. For the phonological syntax, the pronunciation of the name Macks Red-dick introduces the characteristics of Max's personality while simultaneously hinting at the importance of sexuality to the novel and to the character.

Max's use of black slang to white Margarit also reveals the underlying oral mode, in addition to sexual gazes, in Max's and Margarit's exchanges:

> "Roger? Roger is still Roger, what else?"
> "Still macking in his own intellectual way?"
> "Still what—?"
> "Macking. Macking. Oh, Margarit, you know what macking is."
> "But no I don't."

In one word, "macking," Williams finds another way of making the reader aware of Max's body, the self-gaze, and the oral tradition. The fact that the slang term causes miscommunication and the relation of the word to the phonetic function of Max's name is an example of the subtle way in which the incorporated sexuality works in the oral tradition. It creates an awareness of physical and emotional differences. Max could have easily used "playboy," "womanizer," or any other typical and standardized word, but he chose macking. "Macking" or "mack" is not located in any SAE dictionary. The very meaning and existence of the word "macking" depends upon the culture. Macks are found in some of the earliest blues and jazz works. Its origin is at once sexual, oral, and mythical. Macking is a masculine process of finessing and finagling into a woman's bed or coaxing financial support from women through sexual charisma and good looks. In black culture, pimps are often associated with the image

of the male mack. In the novel's time period, macking symbolizes abundant black masculinity. Williams could have used another word; but to do so would change the direction of the conversation, and the image of the mack would not be introduced and revealed to the reader in order to be later dismissed. The ideology of the macker as the low class pimp, rolling in a Cadillac, top down, with a gangster lean grooving is disrupted when used in conjunction with "intellectual." Only in African-American literature would you find macking and intellectual in the same sentence. Sexualized black men aren't supposed to be worldly and intelligent. They can't possibly be both. However, as Max explains the intellectual finesse of Roger in his mack-mode, the reader begins to see the developing struggle of Max's identity. The mack is one image or gaze he must internally address. This example provides a case of the oral tradition revealing and subverting the white gaze.

Another example of Williams's unifying sexuality and orality in the tradition is less blatant and more complex. Williams's decision to make Max a writer delves into the complexities of an oral-based tradition in African-American literature. Max's occupation as a writer examines the spaces of oral conflict in writing. The embodiment of erotic representations from orality in literature appears in Max's struggle as a black writer. Max's occupation as a writer allows him to confront issues of race, sexuality, and language in one fell swoop, simply because it is an act of both observation and creation. Max challenges his otherness in writing. Honest and passionate writing allows Max to observe his place in the world and to create from that point. Max's writing is very similar to what Williams engages in using the oral tradition. In the text, there are certain eruptions of mumbo-jumbo, non-sensical words used by Max and his friend Harry Ames:

> "Streevus mone on the reevus cone," Max said enjoying the poolhall, jitterbug, non-sensical word game, a game whose meaning was conveyed not by the words, because they had no meaning, but by the tone of the voice, the inflection... Ames closed his eyes and said "Weeby on the streeby and a dit-dit-datty-dit." (43)

Max and Harry share a bond beyond that of black masculinity. They are two writers utilizing an anomaly (oral tradition) of Black culture in their art. The cultural recognition shared by the two writers provides sense and meaning where others cannot. As writers they understand the importance of touching with more than mere words. As black writers they understand the importance of evoking with emotion behind the words and the need for lyricism that touches the reader in an intimate way. The use of words and language are crucial elements to these two writers. Obviously, as Max points out, it is a non-sensical word game but Harry understands Max and Max understands Harry. There is no misunderstanding as there was with Margarit, but what happens when the world is full of Margarit-like miscommunications and less Harry-like understandings of language? What happens to, as Max says, "words and ways of using them that no newspaper" can ever use? (47). What happens to the meanings derived from tone and inflection of those words? They become dislocated and lost. They have no body and no form. There is no known form, no acknowledged tradition, but the form is there, somehow it exists. Max's anger and confusion cause him to question himself as a writer: is he a freak? Harry makes the question rhetori-

cal, which is another sign of orality in the text, by its open-ended and ambiguous nature:

> Harry laughed. "Well, you're colored and you wonder how come you're a writer because there is no tradition of colored writers. Are we related to some ancient Yoruba folklorist, to Phillis Wheatley. (48)

Much later in the novel, Max discovers a way, a vehicle, and a body. He finds himself "wanting to get away to write…to do with the novel what Charlie Parker was doing to music, tearing it up and remaking it; basing it on nasty, nasty blues." (209).

The Man Who Cried I Am acts as the type of novel Max wishes he could create. Williams uses orality and sexuality in the traditions of the blues and jazz. He delivers certain aesthetics of the oral tradition, but what is as crucial as those aesthetics is the purpose for joining sexuality to the oral tradition. Williams finds a way to make new art, but also to create identity. By being based in an oral tradition, the text focuses and refocuses on owning and possessing one's body and on finding that space of the erotic. Williams makes it clear that Max has a voice by making him a writer and by stressing the oral nature of the text. Delving deeper into the novel, one discovers that he also attempts to use sexuality as a means of empowerment. I've already suggested one way in which Williams uses the oral tradition to subvert the myths and white gaze of the black man through the examination of the name Max Reddick. I now wish to draw the connections between that example and Williams's use of sexuality to place Max outside the myths.

Chester Hedgepeth's *Theories of Social Action in Black Literature* attempts to prove that a Samson theory exists in *The Man Who Cried I Am*. In pleading his case, Hedgepeth states, "The tragedy of Williams's novel lies both in the hero's concept as a sexual athlete…Williams equates manhood with sexual prowess, a concept which reinforces the mythic supersexuality and predominantly biological nature of blacks" (31). Hedgepeth points out the implications of the overt presentation of Max's sexual escapades as a tragedy. While there is some truth in his statement, critics should take into consideration the composition and aesthetic of the novel. There is a duality to the nature of sexuality in the text. At times William employs it to make Max the subject, rather than the object of the gaze. Then there are times when he uses it to show that Max is seeking something greater in it, and that the text is also seeking something greater in the use of sexuality. In the opening chapter, Williams uses sexuality to subversively empower Max:

> The girls were something else again, big-legged and big buttocked. (Very much like African women, Max thought.) They pedaled past, their chins held high, their knees promising for fractions of seconds only, a flash of white above the stockingtops and then….Max would think: Go, baby! (3)

Later, another passage reads:

> Would she still be as blond? (How he hated that robust blondness at first after the malnourished black of Africa. (5)

Clearly, Max ogles and objectifies women, both white and black women. By making these women objects Max becomes more of a subject. It's not a good way, the only way, or the most politically correct way for the black male character to become subject, but it is consistent with the time of the novel's setting. At this particular point of the novel, Max is the product of the historically masculine black nationalist and black power movements. Max's actions and words are an attempt to place someone else in the position of being objectified. Just as Max is a product of the time, so too is Williams. He utilizes sexual objectification to subjectize Max. Further, the play of differences also reveals the importance of body to the text. The contrast of colors and differences in description of bodies enunciates the black body in the text.

Perhaps I could accept Hedgepeth's argument if I did not believe that Williams works to topple these great myths, not by denying or ignoring them but in allowing them to consume Max. Williams utilizes bold representations of sexuality, rather than avoidance and shame of Max's sexual prowess, a direct result of the oralness of the text. Williams's depiction of Max's sexuality in the novel is based on Ralph Ellison's concept of jazz, and that it is the overt presentation of sexuality that becomes the cruel contradiction implicit in the art form. Max must lose himself to the mythic identities even as he finds himself (234). Hedgepeth's argument works on the assumption that sexual prowess or aggressiveness in the black male is tragic and wrong simply because it fits a stereotype. Max's immersion into sexual liaisons is less about sexual prowess and more about what he learns about himself in those sexual encounters. The use of women and sexuality continues to be a ploy Williams administers to remake and empower his character.

Several additional anomalies in the text strengthen Williams's use of orality and sexuality in the text as ways for Max to get to that space of empowerment. In the forms of the grotesque and the surreal, the reader learns the importance of finding a space when Max meets the killer/prophet Moses Boatwright. Moses, and Ivy-league educated black man, kills and castrates a white man. Williams uses Boatwright as an introduction to the myth of the black male as brute. Aesthetically, he employs Boatwright as the tone and inflection of meaning in his text. Moses seems non-sensical, but he isn't. He's like the words that come to Max but no newspaper can ever use, he's the dislocated meaning and purpose of the oral tradition in regards to body.

Evident from his name, Moses Lincoln Boatwright is the messenger and key to freedom from the white gaze. His given names are somehow related to freedom or rebirth. Moses's purpose seems to be to draw out to Max the confusion in himself. Moses's endeavor to become a philosopher echoes Harry's statement about being a black writer. He asks Max, "ever heard of a Negro philosopher" (56). It's as if the existence of the myths of the black man negates the existence of what can actually be. As a Harvard educated intellectual, Moses has a grotesque image of himself before he commits murder because his existence as a Negro philosopher is not possible.

Moses sees himself as evil, not because he killed a man and ate him, but because he is:

> ...an abomination. Ugly, black, cutting back my thoughts so I wouldn't embarrass people, being superbly brilliant for the right people...But those acts (killing and cannibalism) had more in them. This world is an illusion, Mr. Reddick, but it can be real. (58)

Whether we choose to acknowledge it consciously or not, Boatwright's act is about more than black identity, it is about creation. The act of killing and cannibalization becomes about observation and creation so that he can remake himself from what he sees. He commits these acts because he knows how unreal and fake this world is. The element that makes Boatwright an abomination is that he was black and he did not find a body or a space for his thoughts.

In "Sex in Black and White," an excerpt from Williams's *Flashbacks: A Twenty-Year Diary of Writing*, he reveals the stories of a Moses-like event in an attempt to assess the complexities of interracial love and sex:

> Note these reports, the first from the Washington *Eagle* for July 16, 1921 Of a lynching in Moultrie, Georgia, and the second from the Baltimore *Afro-American* from March 16, 1935, of a lynching in Florida:
> They tore the Negro's clothing off before he was placed in a waiting Automobile... The Negro was unsexed and made to eat a portion of His anatomy which had been cut away."
> "In the case of Claude Neal, a mob... dismembered his genitals and stuffed them into his mouth to compel him to eat his own flesh." (26)

Lynching never directly enters into the text, but it is there in the underlying myths, in the forbiddeness of interracial love and sex, in the interest of Boatwright's psychiatrist question as to why his victim was a white male. We must see the adept maneuvering in Williams's writing as he takes historical events and does something very different with them in the character of Moses Boatwright. Moses' act seems deep-seated in the myth of the supersexuality of the black male and the black male as brute. Williams revises the grotesqueness of the past for a reason. Weeks after Max's visit with Moses, he receives a letter from Boatwright which causes him to ask, "Goddamit, Moses. Did you really need me then?" (66). Just as the Hebrew Moses needed Aaron, so too did Moses need Max. It is at this point of the novel that myth and mythmaking become crucial to Max and the text. For if the message is not delivered and understood, what good is the message.

The fact that Moses, the Negro philosopher, has an orgasm each time he reveals his story serves as evidence that his enjoyment comes not simply from killing, but also from devouring (physically, orally) what consumed him throughout his entire life —mythologizing it for Max. The reality of Moses killing and eating a white man suggests that Moses wanted to devour the very thing that made him ugly and abominable, white America's propagation of degrading and destructive images of the black man. Moses wanted to eat away at the myths and their creators just as they'd done to black men for so long. He takes the heart and genitals because "isn't that what life is all about, clawing the heart and balls out of the other guy?" (65) Williams fashions Boatwright as a metaphor for black existence in white America. The killing of white persons and Western tradition isn't at hand, but the ingesting of white gazes and Western cultural traditions which work to negate and destroy black existence is an issue. The emphasis on cannibalism and retelling the story suggests that oral means are the most powerful ways to expel the myths. Moses's impending doom is predestined long before the murder; it happened at the ingesting of all that is white (e.g.,his Harvard

education in conflict with his status as a black male) at the cost of all that is black. The consumption of body parts suggests empowerment, the act of observation and creation that Boatwright and Max needs. Williams also suggests that the oral telling becomes sexual for Boatwright.

If we remember those two very distinct definitions of the erotic, then we must realize that Moses finds his place of observation and creation, thus his place for rebirth, in the telling of the story. Its telling becomes a form of communal eroticism with Max and his writing. Moses is confronting the chaos of his greatest feeling and his greatest sense of self, while all the while Max is learning, learning to see "precisely" that he must somehow find a way to do the same, although in a less horrific manner. Max's endeavor to find a place between the real and illusions is less horrific than Boatwrights'. The way he uses the women in his life parallels the way Moses tells of his grisly acts. They each can become the subject, rather than the object. They attempt to exist immersing themselves into the images, while simultaneously contradicting them in their own way. It is indicative of the way the entire text works and is structured. Williams seeks to create out of the chaos.

Again, Williams indicates the connection between orality and sexuality in the written text with Boatwright as the medium. The delivery of the message becomes as important as the message. Like Max, we are repelled by Boatwright, his actions, and his pleasure in revealing the act. We are now getting the meaning, not simply from words, but from tone and inflection. That is the oral tradition, and the use of language must be sexual and oral (these accesses to eros) for tone and inflection cannot successfully and effectively come across in the text any other way.

Williams's final endeavor to reveal the connection between orality and sexuality in written texts is through the trickster-like figure of Saminone. Williams employs the voice of Saminone as Max's last lesson about his identity. After Max undergoes tests in the hospital, the voice of Saminone arises. Saminone helps Max realize what he must see to overcome the myths. In *Black Act,* Earl Cash ties Saminone to the Little Black Sambo figure and elaborates on his role:

> Saminone is important because he constantly teases Max by calling him a "nigger," by playing the dozens with him and by attacking Max's hubris. Saminone keeps Max in touch with the reality that regardless of any personal successes he is still a black man. (108)

Saminone encourages Max to finally accept the full implications of being black. Max's action of risking his life for the survival of the black race mirrors and deflects Boatwright's actions. His actions are heroic and selfless, rather than horrific and selfish. Even Saminone acknowledges, "What you done was a black act. No white man'd ever do that" (399). Max accepts that he is a part of a collective community. In accepting his blackness, he acknowledges the myths and the contradictions and the continuous internal battle embodies in his offspring, Saminone.

Saminone is the final technique of inflection and the importance of body and eros in the text. Saminone acts as another bid by Williams to base a novel on nasty, nasty blues. The inclusion of Saminone in the text is the oral tradition in literature. Saminone represents improvisation and an eruption of the text, popping up

polyrythmically; he is the main beat to which Max must keep time. Saminone is also a voice without a body. Saminone symbolizes that place of observation and creation that Max has sought throughout his life. It is no small coincidence that Saminone erupts in the text while Max is in the hospital for the cancer, proclaiming his existence, "I am" (186). Saminone is birthed into existence by Max's voice and body. All the factors of identity intersect: language, sexuality, and race, ironically appear in the presentation of one who possesses no body of his own, but rather that of another. Like a spirit or trickster figure, Saminone is genderless and sexually ambiguous. Saminone is important both to Max's occupation as a writer and to his sexuality. I am reminded of the summation of Esu's characteristics when I read what Max says about voice:

> The voice was no longer female, nor male either. A voice without a body. The words spiraled down Max's consciousness and he remembered that as a child he had to make spirals between the two blue ruled lines on his paper. (191)

The reason the voice without a body triggers a memory of Max's childhood memory of writing is because for him the two are connected, a voice and a body, the use of language and sexuality. The very act of writing and the way he chooses to write, basing it on nasty, nasty, blues helps him counter and corrupt those negative images and he creates himself.

Williams demonstrates an understanding of the complexities that come with grounding a text in the black oral tradition. His use of black vernacular and slang, the tradition of naming, the importance of sound, and the inner-working of myths, and a trickster-like figure coincide and work in conjunction with the body. The construction of the novel by these means indicates that in African-American literature there exists the possibility of the incorporation of sexuality as an aesthetic in the black oral tradition for the preservation and recovery of linguistic as well as sexual identity. In *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African-American Literature*, writer and critic Gayl Jones states, "Oral tradition like written tradition, provides techniques and suggests new structures for the writer... Oral literature, like written, offers points of technical discovery for the individual writer" (12). John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* is arguably the greatest proof of Jones's statement and thesis of the oral-sexual aesthetic in African-American Literature. As American literature evolves to include more oral traditions.

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