

A Subaltern Black Woman Sings the Blues: A Blues Aesthetic Analysis Sherley Anne Williams' Poetry

by

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Abstract

This paper looks at California poet Sherley Anne Williams, and the influence of the Blues Aesthetic upon her poetry within the context of the Black Arts Movement. Williams, a nominee for the National Book Award for *The Peacock Poems* (1975), wrote poetry reflecting the subaltern status of African Americans in California, especially the Central Valley, where she joined her parents, sister and neighbors picking cotton or working as a domestic servant for the wealthy agribusiness titans of the region. In this paper, I argue that Williams uses tropes and iconography from Black music of her childhood, including Billie Holliday and Ray Charles, to interrogate, aesthetics of whiteness as beauty, and alienation in romantic and familial relationships due to racial and class hegemony. I use theorist Emily J. Lordi's work in *Iconic Women and African American Literature* (2013) and the philosophy of Angela Y Davis to connect Williams' poetry and her children's book, *Working Cotton* with Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern and their expression as rooted in cultures in the periphery of the metropole. Ultimately, my paper demonstrates that Williams' work are acts of witnessing, giving a positive answer to Giyartri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" For African American women poets of the Black Arts Movement such as Williams, the answer is clearly yes.

The Green-Eyed Monsters of the Valley Dusk

sunset knocks the edge from the
day's heat, filling the Valley
with shadows: Time for coming
in getting on; lapping fields
lapping orchards like greyhounds
racing darkness to the mountain
rims, land's last meeting with still
lighted sky.

This is a car
I watched in childhood, streaking
the straightaway through the dusk
I look for the ghost of that
girl in the mid-summer fields
whipping past but what ghosts lurk
in this silence are feelings
not spirits not sounds.

The first two stanzas of the hauntingly beautiful poem above by Sherley Anne Williams, provide perhaps the best evocation of California's Central Valley, a place known for its flat surface, hemmed in by the Sierra Nevada and Coast Range—and as a parched, forsaken and poverty stricken region. Williams' poem evokes the crushing heat, the endless cycles of labor with the metaphor of the greyhounds lapping the field. The “ghost of that girl in mid-summer fields” likely refers to the poet herself, the child of African-American agricultural workers, or her sisters, all of whom worked picking cotton and harvesting other crops in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley. What emerges is as powerful as a Blues song, one that calls up the past, but anchors the listener to the spot contemplating a sense of place—its beauty and oppressions, its impact upon the girl child lapped by the swift, greyhound-like heat and light. The girl, watching the car, watching the passage of light and time, is not the daughter of a wealthy grower. The poet's Blues tone clues the reader in that this girl is a proletariat figure, whose body and being have been marked by laboring on that sun baked soil.

The San Joaquin Valley is known for problems of persistent, systemic unemployment, poverty and even violence, some might be tempted to wonder what aside from valuable agricultural commodities this region of California has produced worth celebrating. Yet it is a region which has produced a bounty of poets, including Williams, a native of the region, who has been hailed as one of the greatest African American poets of the latter half of the 20th Century.

Despite being orphaned by the death of both parents by her teens, Williams would become a nominee for the National Book Award and finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, as well as an important developer of theory regarding the Black Arts aesthetics. Although Williams' novel *Dessa Rose* is one of the most important neo-slave narratives by an African American woman in the past 50 years, I shall not be dealing with that work for the purposes on this paper, as I feel it deserves more time than I could devote to it here. The works discussed shall also all be reflective of Williams' status as a Central Valley and California member of the Black Arts Movement.

In this paper, I shall argue that Williams used her poetry, children's literature and theoretical writings in order to transform both her own personal and her community's painful experiences of poverty, racism and defacto segregation both here in the Central Valley and in urban California into transformative, empowering art, reflecting Antonio Gramsci's contention that truly liberating arts and literature must come from subaltern, proletariat peoples who speak for themselves—resisting the hegemony of the dominant white culture. Gramsci himself noted that popular culture and music in particular, can create an artistic aesthetic rooted in the working classes (373). In early 20th Century Italy, Gramsci called this “The Operatic Conception of Life” in his writings on popular culture.¹ He writes,

It is not true that a bookish and non-innate sense of life is only to be found in certain inferior strains of the intelligentsia. Among the popular classes, too, there is a ‘bookish’ degeneration of life which comes not from books, but from other instruments of diffusion and culture and ideas (373).

Gramsci argues that for the working class of his Italy, the Opera of Verdi and others provided a means of interacting with popular tropes through which to understand their lives and oppression. To many common people the baroque and operatic appears as a fascinating way of feeling and acting, a means of escaping what they consider low, mean and contemptible in their lives and education, in order to enter a more select sphere of great feelings and noble passions. Serial novels and below-stairs reading...provides the heroes and heroines (373).

The Music of the People: Gramsci, Subaltern Aesthetics and the Blues in Black America

Gramsci's discussion of music as a popular cultural tool for the working classes to embrace an art which is not that of “...superficial snobs, but something deeply felt and experienced” (373). For Gramsci, although popular Opera might be “pestiferous”—and although he appears, according to the editors of his works to favor the written word over radio, film and other expressions, we can see that he *did* see the value and ability of music to speak to the proletariat.

Music could play a role in battling against hegemonic oppressions. The editors of *The Routledge Critical Reader: Antonio Gramsci* note that unlike other Marxists, Gramsci does not see oppression as solely economic. It is also present in the functions of the arts, popular media, propaganda and iconography:

Gramsci argues that culture, politics and the economy are organized in a relationship of mutual exchange with one another, a constantly circulating and shifting network of influence. To this process, he gives the name hegemony (164)

Hegemony via the praxis of culture has played a particularly problematic role in terms of music, tropes, fashions and iconography originating in African American life, but exploited for capitalist projects of profit in the selling of what is “cool,” “hip,” or even perceived as “dangerous” by dominant White America. A Gramscian analysis of culture means keeping in mind the challenges that the base—in this case Williams’ working class, rural and urban African-American communities—made to the superstructure, not only in terms of seeking redress against labor exploitation, de facto segregation, and other discriminatory practices, but challenging cultural norms the superstructure of white America produces, and which reinforced rigid notions of beauty, of musical or literary aesthetics, and gender norms. I shall show that one of the strongest challenges Williams’ poetry makes toward white hegemony is a rejection of white femininity, and thus white beauty, as normative. By invoking a Blues aesthetic, Williams turns the tables on white hegemony, and rejects attempts by the superstructure to use imagery of Black women for its projects of subjugation.

William’s poem “Blues is Something to Think About,” from *The Peacock Poems* (1975), is a powerful evocation of a subaltern, proletariat African-American woman using poetry to embrace the legacy the Blues, as poetics and philosophy. She writes:

A traditional statement about
a traditional situation
with a new response (lines 1-3).

The opening of William’s poem speaks to her desire to use the Blues form in poetry; the spoken of “new response.” These opening words announce that the Blues has meaning in speaking to the complicated, often painful nature of intimate relationships, but is far more than simply a tale of love gone wrong. Angela Y. Davis, feminist scholar and philosopher, links the Blues to African-American’s women’s ability to speak and make arguments about their condition. She notes.

To a large extent, what constituted...Black feminist traditions tend to exclude ideas produced within poor and working class communities, where women have not had the means or access to produce written texts. But poor Black women did have access to publishers of *oral* texts. In fact, in the 1920s, many Black women were sought after—and exploited—by burgeoning record companies. Black women were the first to record the blues...Even though the period of ascendancy of Black women blues singers was relatively short, these women nonetheless managed to produce a vast body of musical texts and rich cultural legacy (3-4). Unfortunately, because the Blues music written by these women came out of a working class aesthetic and tradition, and dealt with sexuality, it was deemed low-brow among African-American arts, according to Davis,

...in contrast, for example to endeavors such as sculpture, painting and classical music (through which the spirituals could be reformed). Consequently few writers, with the exception of Langston Hughes, who often found himself at odds with his contemporaries—were willing to consider the contributions of the Blues performers to Black cultural politics (10).

Davis notes that work of other African-American women writers and poets who were her contemporaries, including Williams, would influence her own scholarship into the philosophy of Blues aesthetics and motifs regarding labor, intimate relationships and sexuality (10). Like the operas of Verdi in Gramsci's time, for African-American women writers and theorists of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and Early 1970s, the Blues songs of foremothers like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Billie Holliday would serve not only as inspiration in terms of form and lyricism, but in terms of epistemology—their ways of coming to knowledge and understanding of their subaltern positions as women, and moreover, as African-American women. This would prove especially true for writers like Williams, who, like Blues singers of an earlier era, would bring their proletariat origins into their works. Consider her poem “The Collateral Adjective” from *The Peacock Poems*:

I sing my song in
a cycle round
spiral up spiral
down the adjective
has little to do
with the noun (lines 1-6).

As with many poems in *The Peacock Poems*, Williams is claiming back the lyrical, song-based nature of poetry. This is strengthened by the ostensibly simple rhyme schemes, but in that simplicity, Williams mimics the voice of the soulful singers she adores, gliding up and down in tone and timbre. The final stanza of the poem continues these motifs, and mimics the improvisational nature of Blues songs, as she writes,

Spiral up,
spiral down Cycle
the round circle the
song. Without a drum
that sings soprano
the tongue's only a
wagging member in
the void of mouth
speechless in the face
 of what it has said.
I never, never
thought to sing this song. (lines 1-12, stanza 3).

Lines 11 and 12 of this stanza speak to the sense of amazement that Williams has at writing poetry which speaks to her life as a working class African-American woman. While mainstream American culture, dominated by white hegemony, may have devalued her voice, in the inspiration of Blues singers, Williams finds a way to sing through poetry. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" first published in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988), Spivak argues that formerly colonized peoples are prevented from speaking due to the continuing hegemonic nature of power structures, which prevents them from being heard (104). Spivak's critique connects to Gramsci, as she wrote her influential essay in response to the subaltern studies group started by Ranajit Guha, who re-imagined Gramsci's original discussion of economic subalterns in Italy to include those formerly colonized by European powers. In his essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Guha writes that,

...Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both originated as the ideological product of British rule in India, but have survived the transfer of power and been assimilated to neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist forms of discourse in Britain and India respectively (1). Guha further notes that the term "elite" is mean in relation to "...signify *dominant*

groups, foreign as well as indigenous” (7). He further connects these elite groups back to Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern (7). I contend that formerly enslaved, terrorized and disenfranchised peoples, including African-Americans, can fit the rubric of the subaltern as Ghua defines them. Williams, and her working class community of Black Okies from the Central Valley, are further subaltern peoples, as they are the proletariat, living in the poorest region of California. My contention is that Williams poetry and theoretical work on Blues Aesthetics prove that she has negotiated a space where she can speak—despite hegemonic oppressions of the dominant white culture.

In her theoretical work as a scholar, Williams argued that the Black Arts Movement reflected an aesthetic and poetics similar to Blues Music, and one which allows African-American women writers to articulate in a manner that pays homage to a vernacular art which pervaded their upbringing. In the *Black Scholar*, Williams asserted, “Until we know the Blues intimately and analytically, we will not know ourselves.” Interviewed by Claudia Tate for the anthology *Black Woman Writers at Work*, Williams articulated her ideas on the Blues Aesthetic, writing,

What I really believe is that we as people must be consciously aware that we must prepare ourselves. Western, white people do this through literature but we black people don’t have that: we don’t emanate from a literature tradition. We do not have a literature in which we see ourselves perpetuated. We learn from most literature concerns white people; but we do, in fact perpetuate ourselves in the blues. I use blues as a body of consciousness expression that encompasses popular Afro-American music, so that at any given time, what is popular among Black people can be found in mass songs and instrumentation. In the blues, there is some kind of philosophy; a way of looking at the world...Blues is a basis of historical continuity for Black people. It is a ritualized way of talking about ourselves, and passing it on (208).

The Blues Aesthetic reflects a long rich tradition in African American poetics and literature. Cultural theorist Emily J. Lordi argues that the Blues Aesthetic uses tropes of the feminine blues singer, whether Bessie Smith, or Billie Holliday, and their evocative songs to speak back from the positions of disempowerment, which African American writers have faced and written about. Lordi notes,

...black woman singers are not just muses for writers, but innovative artists whose expressive breakthroughs illuminate literary works, but in turn retune us to music. In fiction, nonfiction and poetry, writers have consistently figured black female singers as inspiring voices, cultural heroes, beloved mothers, imposing icons, radical stars (2).

Lordi notes that James Baldwin and other writers who preceded the Black Arts Movement originated the Blues Aesthetic often grounded their work “in the politics of Black women’s singing” (2). Similarly, Jennifer Ryan argues that the Blues Aesthetic is not merely one of admiration and celebration of Black singers, but is inherently political and rhetorical, noting “...it’s most popular performers are those who draw attention to America’s limited freedoms” (44).² It is this emphasis upon pointing towards social injustice which links Williams and others in the Black Arts Movements to Gramsci’s contention that truly revolutionary art must come from the proletariat, subaltern themselves—not a member of the bourgeoisie speaking on their behalf.

The Catharsis of Speaking Back to Power

Williams’ poetry, and her the rhetorical work on the Blues aesthetic, can also be understood via Aristotelian poetics idea of creating art in order to achieve *Catharsis*—a triumph of bearing witness to wrongs, suffering and pain. Williams, however, created a new understanding of *Catharsis*—one absolutely necessary considering the flaws in Aristotle’s own philosophy, which did not challenge enslavement, or subordination of women. Second, Williams’ work, as an outgrowth of her involvement in the Black Arts and Black Power movements rejects cultural theorist Giyatri Spivak’s controversial contention that “the subaltern cannot speak.” I shall demonstrate that Williams’ poetry offers a voice of witness in the Blues Aesthetic of a subaltern person whose writing continues to speak since her death from cancer in 1999. Although Williams’ has wrongly overshadowed by others members of the Fresno School of Poets who were likewise the protégées of Pulitzer Prize winner and recent U.S. Poet Laureate Philip Levine (such as David St. John, Larry Levis and Gary Soto), her poetry and prose works offer the vital voice of a working class, African American, rural and female subaltern. This paper shall make clear that Williams’ work challenges California’s power structure predicated on racial and class privileges from a Black Power approach—a challenge just as salient now as it was when her writings first were published between the 1970s and 1999.

Williams’ movement toward a Blues aesthetic is rooted in her upbringing in the African-American community of Central Valley. Her parents, Lena-Leila Siler and Jesse Winson Williams, were part of the often forgotten wave of “Black Okies”—African Americans from the Southwestern United States, who, unlike other African Americans of the Great Migration—gravitated toward agricultural piece work here in the Central Valley.³ Williams’ parents were from Texas and they would raise Williams and three sisters in the Federal Housing Projects of southwestern Fresno. Poet and fellow Black Arts Writer Marvin X was both Williams’ childhood friend, her high school sweetheart and labor colleague in the developing West Coast Black Arts movement.

He recalls, “It was a very humble beginning for Sherley, growing up on our side of town.”⁴ Although California was ostensibly not under Jim Crow laws that pervaded many of the Southern and Southwestern communities of origin of Black Okies, the reality was that restrictive real estate covenants and social attitudes invested in the politics of white supremacy kept African Americans in the Central Valley cities such as Fresno from moving to other neighborhoods.

While living in a then small California city, the rhythms and cycles of labor for the Williams family were decidedly rural. In her 1992 children’s book, *Working Cotton*, Williams tells of days rising in darkness of the predawn hours to board buses which would take African Americans from her community into the fields to plant, hoe or pick cotton. As *Working Cotton* makes clear, the Black Okies toiling in the cotton fields were not only parents, but very young children including Williams herself, who would drag heavy sacks of cotton bolls behind them, throughout the day. In her author’s note to *Working Cotton*, Williams calls for recognition of the labor practices which use, and often exploit children of migrants in the Central Valley’s fields:

Our shame as a nation is not that so many children work the fields but that so few of them have other options, that the life chances of too many are defined by the cycle of the seasons. In environments characterized by minimums—minimum wages, minimum shelters, minimum food and education—individual character, the love of family, can only do so much; the rest is up to the country (1).

William’s contention and challenge in the author’s note, and indeed in all of *Working Cotton*, are steeped in Marxist and Black Power philosophies which challenge dominant tropes of the Puritan Work Ethic as a means of addressing the problems of women, children and African American subalterns in the United States.⁵ The Caldecott Honor Awarded children’s book, dedicated to the children of this valley, “and the adults who labor on the land beside them” lays bare the realities of working in the fields and orchards on the outskirts of communities such as this one. Complimented by Carole Bryard’s artwork, Williams’ childhood narrator raises a testimony to an often hidden world of children doing exhausting, sometimes dangerous agricultural piece work in extremes of cold or heat. It is significant as well that the child speaking in *Working Cotton*, as well as the speaker in many of Williams’ experiential poems drawn from her own life, speaks Catharsis in African American Vernacular Speech (AAVS). As a member of the Black Arts community, Williams was committed to Amiri Baraka’s ideals of Black poets and artists speaking and creating out of the language of their everyday life, rejecting what Baraka called “bourgeoisie art.” In her own essay on Baraka’s poetry and aesthetics, *Anonymous in America*, Williams’s notes, “here is a man who liberated our language, getting down in the streets, coining phrases that fired the cities.

And this was thunder to us” (3). Baraka, coming after James Baldwin and other African American writers of the first half of the 20th century, extended the understanding and interaction with the Blues aesthetic beyond invoking singers as muse, according to Lordi (335). The muse, and mythos of Black female blues singers as “naturalistic” in their pathos or pain, has been problematic, Lordi contends:

...the practice of treating black music as a metaphor for black life and literature often obscures the very nuances that interdisciplinary scholarship should reveal. This is because abstracting and idealizing music is a bit like idealizing people: it simplifies them and thereby diminishes their connection with others (337).

Instead of reifying the Blues aesthetic, as white and some early African American male theorists have in the guise of passive muse, Lordi asserts that later authors in the Black Arts movement, including Williams, have developed a more respectful, interactive relation to Blues musicians, singers and their works—one that reflects performativity of a “call and response” (384).

In her own poetry, Williams responded to Baraka’s call, writing in African American Vernacular Speech, inviting readers into scenes that reflected her own life. Her poetry, prose and theory work on Black Arts; based around the lens of the Blues music aesthetics, reflect the concept of witnessing in literature. Poet and activist Carolyn Forché notes,

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between “personal” and “political” poems – the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary... We need a third term, one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal. Let us call this space “the social.” It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice (9).

Williams’ poetry, prose and theory work in the Blues aesthetic all fit under the rubric of witnessing—an act of transforming her own pain of an impoverished childhood under the defacto segregation of California into an act of Catharsis and transformation. This transformation is not only personal; but as Forché notes, is connected to the political and claims for social justice. Williams, as a woman involved in the Black Arts and Black Power movements, used the poetry of witness to memorialize and reveal the realities for Black Okies in the Central Valley—a group Marvin X notes was often “hidden behind the veil, or behind the vineyard.”

Williams herself described her youth as, “the most deprived, provincial kind of existence you can think of” (158). In the tradition of Billie Holiday’s songs bearing witness to racism, Williams would use poetry to offer a powerful, lyrical voice that combines beautiful diction with stark imagery. In her poem “The Iconography of Childhood,” Williams recounts the power of the Blues to bear witness and reclaim the experiences of herself and her family in southwest Fresno. She invites the reader into the space of her childhood home in the projects:

These are tales told in darkness
In the quiet at the ends
Of the day’s heat, surprised in
The shadowed rooms of the houses
Drowsing in the evening sun.

In this one there is music
And three women; some child is
Messing with the Victrola.
Before Miss Irma can speak
Ray Charles does “The Nighttime”
And *AWWWW* is the fabled

Music you’alls seldom given
Air play in those Valley towns
Heard mostly in the Juke-Joints
We’d been told about; and so
Longed for in those first years
In the Valley it had come to

Seem almost illicit to
Us. But the women pay us
No mind. We settle in the
Wonder of the music and
their softly lit faces listening
To the songs of our grown (83).

This poem embodies Williams’ ideas of the Blues aesthetic, as well as the Black Power movement’s reclaiming of realism of everyday African-American lives as worthy subject matter. Note how Williams uses imagery such as “tales told in darkness” to emphasize that African American art and aesthetics have been hidden, or kept in the spaces of the homes or “the juke-joints,” and are “rarely heard in Valley towns.”

Despite this attempt to silence Black culture, and obscure its presence in the Central Valley, to the point where hearing the music of one's own people "seems almost illicit," the child-speaker of the poem seems initiated into a spiritual resistance via Ray Charles' R & B music. The scene is takes on the roll of a sacred initiation into a Blues Aesthetic, where music, song art and ultimately poetry are a witness—a testament—to the beauty and vibrancy of African American lives. This is the wonder the child experiences.

Williams' development of the Blues aesthetic further developed, according to Marvin X, when Williams began listening to her older sister Ruby's Rhythm, Blues and Soul records. In that collection, Williams discovered Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. She would invoke Smith in her poem "Bessie's Blues" in *Someone Sweet Angel Chile*. In the poem, Williams evokes the pain-filled love songs Smith sang:

I am out of it
And at least I didn't
Die, But that don't stop
Memory which I
I know you have some of

too—and if I phoned
it wouldn't be beggin'
not even from what
you call a woman
like me Memory (60, lines 1-10).

The speaker of the poem could either be Williams in her youth, or equally could be her invoking Bessie Smith as a foremother, a way of accessing the memories of African-American, working class and female culture. Building on the work of Angela Y. Davis, Nghana tamu Lewis argues that the Blues aesthetic allows African-American women "...opportunities for self-formation and expression"⁶ (559). She notes that Smith's songs, in particular, were some of the first and most important works in the Blues aesthetics to influence both African-American male and female writers, including Langston Hughes (560-570). Thus, when Williams invokes Smith, she is placing herself in part of a long tradition rooted in the Blues aesthetic, and one that is proletariats in nature.

Rejecting Hegemonic Notions of Whiteness as Beauty and Power

Williams' Blues aesthetic also challenges hegemonic notions of white bodies as the norm. During the Black Arts movement, the idea of the Black body itself as beautiful, and worthy of celebration became a dominant trope. The complicated relationship to the dominant white power structure and iconography of beauty plays out in two other sections of "The Iconography of Childhood." In section III, Williams writes.

Summer mornings we
rose early to go
and rob the trees
Bringing home the
blossoms we were told
were like a white girl's
skin. And we believed
this as though we'd
never seen a white
girl except in
movies and magazines.

We handled the
flowers roughly
sticking them in oily
braids or behind
dirty ears laughing
as we preened ourselves;
Savoring the brown
of the magnolia's
aging as though the color
had rubbed off
on the petals' creamy
flesh transforming some
white girl's face into
Ornaments for our
Rough unruly heads (6).

The magnolia is the flower classically associated with the Confederate, Old South—and romanticizing of the plantation story a la *Gone With the Wind*. Magnolia trees were also planted throughout Central Valley cities and towns not only for ornamental beauty, but as a means to planting a symbol of southernisms and Old South values in a new home by white settlers from the South.⁷ White Valley settlers such as the Boswell family in Tulare County, whose Boswell Farms transplanted the plantation model of cotton growing, use and exploitation of Black and Brown laboring bodies in their fields, even conducted minstrel shows featuring “nappy headed” blackface performers at community events up into the early 1960s, as documented by Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman in their book, *The King of California*.

Williams’ section of the poem, then, can be understood as a Blues poem, one that subtly references the flower in the hair of one of her heroines, Lady Day or Billie Holliday—whose songs such as *Strange Fruit* by Abel Meeropol, bore unflinching testimony to the lynching, rapes and terrorism campaigns endured by African Americans at the hands of whites. Like a Holliday song, the poem unfolds with sad, aching beautiful lyrical qualities. We see Williams and her sisters sneaking out of their house in the Fresno Projects, to take some of the magnolia trees planted by whites in positions of power. Although Williams had “seen” white girls, the poem plays with the power that icons have in dominating the social landscape and memory. The movies referenced speak to the white washed imagery of what constituted female beauty during Williams’ childhood in the 1940s and 1950s—Vivien Leigh, as Scarlett O’Hara, and not Hattie McDaniel or Butterfly McQueen as her maid or mammy. By having the magnolia’s white petals age and become brown, “as though the color had rubbed off/transforming some white girl’s/ face into ornaments/ for our rough, unruly hair” Williams uses catharsis and witnessing to turn the iconography of beauty and race on its head. The browning of the petals suggests that Black and Brown bodies are actually the influence of the arts upon white culture. The “white girl’s face” becoming the flower in the “rough, unruly hair,” anticipates the reclaiming of natural black hair as beautiful in the 1960s and 1970s—when all of America, even white girls, would look to African American culture during the Black Power movement.

At the heart of many of Williams’ Blues aesthetic poems in both *The Peacock Poems* and *Someone Sweet Angel Chile* are the complicated, sometimes fraught relationships between African-American men and women, be it father and daughter, lovers, or mother and son. “The Wishon Line” (90-91) appears in Williams’ second volume, *Someone Sweet Angel Chile*. Widely anthologized, “The Wishon Line” which gives the poem its title is a bus line used by working class African-Americans in Fresno to travel to work and obligations. The poem deals with the reality of working class life in the Central Valley, and the silencing of that life by the brutality of a capitalist system predicated on exploitation of the bodies of those who toil in the fields, restaurants, homes and factories here. It also deals with the death of Williams’ father, who she lost at age eight. She writes:

The end of a line
is movement the
process of getting
on, getting off, of
Moving right along.

The dank corridors
Of the hospital
Swallowed him up
(moving right along
Now—from distant
Sanatorium
To local health care
Unit—the end of
That line is song:
TB is Killing
Me We travelled some
To see Daddy on
That old Wishon route
But the dusty grave
Swallowed him up.

ii.

These
are the buses
of the century running
through the wealth of
the town, Huntington
Park, Van Ness Extension
The way stops of
Servants, rest after
Miles of walking and
Working: cotton, working
Grapes, working hay. The
End of this line is
The County: County
Hospital, County
Welfare. County Home—
(moving right on—No
One died of TB
In the 50s; no one
Rides that Line for free (90-91).

As with Williams' other poems, "The Wishon Line" is a masterpiece that uses form and imagery to embody a Blues catharsis and treatise on poverty and working class life here in the Valley. "The Wishon Line" invites the reader on the bus that Williams and her family took to visit her dying father. This same bus line is the one used by servants to get to the houses in the old centers of wealth of Fresno; the places where they served as nannies, housekeepers, cooks or gardeners for the white power elites here in the San Joaquin Valley. Like her children's book, *Working Cotton*, "The Wishon Line" also raises testimony for the African-American and other raced agricultural workers whose toil creates the wealth of this region; while remaining in abject poverty themselves. It may be her most Marxist poem in its overt critique of the social injustices faced by her family, in California, a state popularly thought of as more liberal and less oppressive. Using the metaphor of the bus line, and allowing the reader to travel with her on it through Fresno, Williams lays bare the suffering and difficult labor of the subaltern proletariat of California—the base. She also shows us the wealthy homes of those who create hegemonic systems of power, in Huntington Park and Van Ness Extension (line 6, second stanza)—a place where African-Americans and other poor of her community are muted in their role as servants. In her essay "Women and Capitalism," Davis writes, the worker's alienation has immediate consequences for the relationship between (men and women) and most significantly, for women themselves. The products of the labor are lost to the worker, who has brought them (151). By writing of her parents' marriage, their work and her father's death, Williams proves that the Blues aesthetic can allow a subaltern woman to speak, and speak with lasting power.

Davis argues that although domestic labor has been devalued across the board, African-American women in particular have "paid a heavy price" for strengths acquired in not being locked in the gilded cage of the Middle Class housewife, as so many white women were.⁸ Davis writes,

Like their man, Black women have worked until they could work no more. Like their men, they have assumed the responsibilities of family providers. The unorthodox feminine qualities of assertiveness and self-reliance—for which Black women have frequently been praised but more often rebuked—are reflections of their labor and their struggles outside the home. But like their White sisters called 'housewives' they have cooked and cleaned and have nurtured and reared untold numbers of children. But unlike White housewives, who learned to lean on their husbands for economic security, Black wives and mothers, usually workers as well, have rarely been offered the time and energy to become experts at domesticity. Like their White working class sisters, who had to carry the double burden of working and living and servicing husband and children, Black women have needed relief from this oppressive predicament for a long, long time (6). Williams captures her mother's life as a working class African-American woman in section vii. of her long poem, "The Iconography of Childhood" (89). She writes:

My mother knew what
figure she cut in
the world and carried
hurt in silence,
once in great whiles roused
by some taunt or threat
to rage mutely then
setting back to
mutter angrily
and to sleep. By the
time I come to my
first memory of
her face she was
already mamma
as I knew her for
the rest of her life.
I saw a ghost in
Flashes in lumbering
Fury and shaking
Laughter growing
Pretty. In these glimpses
I know the woman
Lena who was sister
To my uncles John
And Jimmy who married
Jesse Winson
And died on the
Texas Panhandle
Years before my birth:
Taciturn, quick
Tempered, *hell-thay*,
My uncles said.

The *hell-thay* and vibrant mother Williams never knew herself reflects Davis's argument that working class African-American women need relief, not only from caring for their families, but from doing back-breaking labor (in the case of Williams' mother, agricultural piece work), for which they are poorly paid. The poem also demonstrates how subaltern women are doubly silenced; both by racism and gender oppression, as Spivak claimed in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* The silencing occurs after marriage to Williams' father, hinting at the difficult nature of African-American intimate relationships, subjected to the stresses of racism and economic oppression.

The Subaltern Black Woman Rejecting Hegemonic Powers of Capitalism in Agribusiness

How does Williams escape from the silencing of African-American women? Patricia Hill Collins argues that Black feminist thought rejects the ideas that African-American women make sense of their lives by attempting to emulate the powerful "...and have no valid independent interpretations of their own oppressions" (184).⁹ This is especially prominent in Williams' poems about her own relationships with lovers and her son represent an awareness of the vice-like grip of racism. In her poem "Driven Wheel" from *The Peacock Poems*, Williams subtitles the it "myth, story and life" (30). The first section, called "first story," is situated in a bedroom, where the speaker of the poem is with her lover:

The darkened bedroom, the double bed,
the whispers of the city night,
against it, her voice, husky, speaking
past the one soft light
 I am through you wholly woman. You
 say I am cold am hard am vain. And
I know I am a fool and bitch. And black.
Like my mother before me and my
sisters around me. We share the same
legacy are women to the same
degree. (lines 1-11).

The first section of "Driven Wheel" boldly tackles the negative stereotype of the "hard" African-American woman. In her analysis of the Blues aesthetic, and the rhetorical moves made in Blues songs, Lewis notes Blues songs to

...provide self-sufficient, and arguably more importantly, self-signaled coping mechanisms for dealing with the reality of frustration and acrimony that naturally (and inevitably) attend any sexual relationship between women and men (603).

"Driven Wheel" is rooted in this meditative power of the Blues aesthetic to acknowledge the painful breach between African-American men and women, caused by slavery, poverty, segregation and exploitation. The fourth stanza of the poem's first section is more explicit in acknowledging this. Williams writes,

Not circumstance; history
keeps us apart. I'm black. You black And
how have niggas proved they men? Fightin
and fuckin as many women as
they can. And even when you do
all the things a white man do you may
leave fightin behind but fuckin stay
the same (lines 16-22).

The powerful stanza offers an understanding and acknowledgement that hurtful, sometimes abusive behavior by African-American men emanates, in part, out of systemic oppression that all people of her community and race have been part of. The dysfunctional relationship between the feminine speaker in the poem, and the man in the urban bedroom she shares, is part of a continuum. Davis writes in her introduction to *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*,

The historical context within blues developed a tradition of openly addressing both female and male sexuality reveals an ideological framework that was specifically African-American. Emerging during the decades following the abolition of slavery, the blues gave musical expression to the new social realities encountered by free women and men. The former slaves' economic status had not undergone a radical transformation—they were no less impoverished than they had been during slavery. It was the status of their personal relationships that was revolutionized. For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of Black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding sexual partnerships into which they entered. Sexuality was thus one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which it's meaning were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation...the Blues, the predominant post slavery African American musical form, articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs ad desires (1-2) ¹⁰

Williams' poetry illuminates the difficult negotiation of power dynamics in the relationship between the speaker of her poem, and her lover, who she calls "...a fine fine man/the superman of his time/the black time big time/in a mild mannered disguise/revealed only as needed:/ the steel heart stone heart/ and its erratic beating (lines 1-7, stanza 6). The allusion to Clark Kent and his alter-ego Superman plays upon the hidden power of African-American men, perhaps only truly understood by their wives and lovers. The "steel heart stone" in line 5 evokes a hardness that African-American men have had to project in a world where they faced lynching, beatings, unemployment and other indignities.

Overall, the poem's tone is one of compassion while still acknowledging frustration in the distance and problematic communication in the intimate relationships between African-American men and women. Williams' love poems are never saccharine, but always strong, piercing and truthful to her clear-eyed view.

Philip Levine, the recent U.S. poet laureate who served as Williams mentor during her undergraduate years at Fresno State University, noted that unlike other poetry writing students at Fresno State, Williams did not write about either unrequited love or pastoralist.

From the start, she wrote about the lives around her; there were people in her poems, people she celebrated and whose speech she echoed with surprising authority. No beginning student in my classes had ever written like this before...There was one poem in particular that Sherley was determined to get right—it concerned her sick and dying elder father in a local hospital. (Public transportation was, and still is, all but nonresistant in Fresno). About two-thirds of the way through the semester, she read the class a revision of the poem, which she seemed satisfied with. I found this new version, through well intentioned, a mess. And said so. Sherley raised her hand and asked if she might say something. Of course she could, and I braced myself for what was coming. She gathered her books, rose and said, 'Professor Levine, go fuck yourself.' And walked out of the room...The following week Sherley was back in class with a new and better version of the poem. The final, clearly stunning version, now clearly about her father, appeared almost 20 years later under the title "the wishon line" in her second collection of poetry, *Someone Sweet Angel Chile* (24).

This story about the young poet Williams early writing of this poem speaks to her determination to honor her people; her parents, sisters, neighbors—the working class and working poor of the Golden State. Levine's recollections of Williams also speak to her absolute determination to write the poem in her own language, on her own terms. Later in the same essay, published following Williams' death. Levine recalls that a publisher offered to publish a first novel Williams wrote about a working class African American family in Fresno if it were revised with more violence. Williams told Levine that,

...she believed these changes had been requested because the book dealt with a black family, and the editor wanted the younger brother to murder a drug pusher after discovering that the pusher had lured the sister into drug use and then raped her. Sherley wanted my take. Before I could answer, she said... 'these are my characters, the brother and the sister. I love them and I don't want to betray them.'

What do you think?’ At first, I was too moved to say anything; I wanted to hug her. Instead, I advised her to follow her instincts; someone would publish it as it was. I was wrong about that—this remarkable book has never been published. But that afternoon, the student became the teacher” (34).

Levine’s story reveals that Williams was a person of integrity and courage, who would eschew publication rather than exploit the working class African American community that birthed her extraordinary talents. After Williams’ death, Toni Morrison noted

She represented a kind of quiet talent that is often hard to sustain without really strong effort of the will. Young writers owe people like her a debt.

Conclusion: A Need to Listen to Williams’ Blue Poems Again

In a blog, Huffington Post writer Jenee Darden, one of Sherley Anne Williams young female students in the last semester, prior to her death in 1999 she taught at UC San Diego recalled that Williams was a tough by inspiring teacher—and

the first black woman I ever called professor....And I was one of the last students she taught at UCSD. I visited her office a few days after taking the final. Her room was filled with special mementos, pictures and literary conference posters from all the people and places she visited in the world. I had no idea her work was so revered in the African-American Literary World. She never bragged about her accomplishments in class like some professors do. We had a great conversation. I explained how her teaching excited me about writing and literature. And I told her I was looking forward to taking more classes with her because I was going to minor in literature. Prof. Williams face changed. She gently cupped my hands. Her eyes softened and she gave me a weak smile. I thought it was sincere, but a little strange. A few months later I got a call from my literature classmate. Prof. Williams had died from cancer in July. She was only 54. Her behavior during her office hours made sense to me. The woman was dying, but she took time to answer all my questions...she cared and that’s what good teachers do. My love for literature began after listening to Professor Williams lectures. Life is interesting. She grew up a fruit picker, but planted seeds of knowledge through her writings and teaching.

Ms. Darden's metaphor is apt; in closing it is my humble hope that this paper might draw others to the works of Sherley Anne Williams. As the daughter of working class people myself, her poems gave me a sense of solidarity and purpose in a Golden State that is often not a golden life for those of us who are not wealthy, or white, or even from major cities. Sherley Anne Williams continues, even after her death, to be the sweet Blues singer of California—whose poems echo over the landscape of the working peoples, raising a voice to their struggles, transcending suffering with her amazing art. Nearly 15 years after her death, Sherley Anne Williams' words continue to sing the Blues, and tell the truth about the subaltern people of California.

End Notes

¹ A Gramsci Reader, Section 3 (373).

² Post Jazz Poetics: A Social History.

³ From Mark Ara and Rick Wartzman's history of the Boswell family's cotton empire, *The King of California*. In this work, the journalist and critic look at the continued presence of Black Okies in California's Central Valley. Although most works such as Isabella Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* focuses entirely on the Great Migration, California studies of African American migration into both the Valley and into urban centers such as Oakland and Los Angeles have noted that there is overlap between the Great Migration and Black Okies—the later group often having much in common with the “white” Okies (who were, in many cases, of part Native American heritage) such as family pictured in Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph, *Migrant Mother*, taken in Nipomo, Calif. Florence Owens Thompson was half Cherokee. In addition, my colleague at UC Merced, Michael Eissinger, is conducting research documenting African American rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley, documenting Black Okie families who worked in agriculture.

⁴ From my own oral history interview with Marvin X, born Marvin Jackmon, on 2-15-2014, in Oakland and Berkeley Calif.

⁵ It is key to understand that California, and the West's libertarian ideology of limited government which favored the development of huge corporate farms connects with the ideas of Weber in *The Spirit of Capitalism*. Although the first conquerors of California's Native nations were Spanish Catholics, once the Gold Rush occurred, the protestant work ethics and ideas of God blessing those who succeeded took sway. For more on this, see Joan Didion's *Where I Was From* (2003), which discusses how the myth of self-sufficiency was born, perpetuated and sustained by her ancestors and other white agricultural barons of her elite class in California.

⁶ This is discussed in *The King of California*. In addition, author Joan Didion, whose own family had ties to the south, discusses white California settlers and their descendants planting flowering camellias in Sacramento—as a physical and daily reminder of the power structure of old, white settlers over new comers, both in her first novel, *Run, River* (1960) and in her memoir on California, *Where I Was From* (2002).

⁷ From Collins' essay "A Black Woman's Standpoint: The Foundation of Black Feminist Thought," in *The Black Feminist Reader*. Joy James and T. Denean Sarpley-Whiting, London, United Kingdom, Blackwell, 2000.

⁸ From *Women, Race and Class*: "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working Class Perspective" Chapter 13, London, The Women's Press Ltd. 1981. This is an online PDF of the chapter. It does not have traditional page numbers, so I have counted pages.

⁹ "In a Different Chord: Interpreting the Relations Among Black Female Sexuality, Agency and the Blues" *African American Review* vol. 37, No. 4, pages 559-608.

¹⁰ Published in the Book Review section of *The New York Times* in 1988. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/d/davis-blues.html>

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