

suicide. PPMD is something that legislators in in thirty other countries, including Australia, England and Canada, have long understood. In 1938, England passed the Infanticide Act, which automatically reduces a mother's murder of her infant to a manslaughter charge understanding much better than the U.S. that mothers like Sanchez are acting within a twisted reality over which they have no control.

Reader, if what I write does not fall with the margins of scholarly expectation I apologize but halfheartedly since there is no precedent set in my discipline for such a woman to speak for herself lest she risk being labeled "emotional" or accused of "making a spectacle out of herself." When I set out to think about autobiographical writing and even more problematic, women and mental illness, from a critical and scholarly viewpoint I faced a multitude of discursive problems. Not only am I woman and therefore by definition lacking an authoritative language to identify myself in the first person, there still exists the dissociation between critical mind and material body. Since subjective writing must come from the experience of a body, a gendered body marked by its sociocultural origins and by extension the emotional and therefore dismissed voice of the female from the academy, how can I possibly address my readers as a credible scholarly voice if I am by my own admission a woman, a writer, a mother and occasionally mad? I tell you within the unspoken experiences of women, the forced privacy - silence and the absence of language without which the self cannot be constructed - here is violence. A discursive violence that constitutes irrevocable psychological harm to its subject. The deepest trauma is in denying women access to language beyond - she is forced to store the substance that makes meaning and critical argument to everything she writes outside of the privacy of our memories. What I have written here is the story of survival in order that I can begin the work of first person witness. My story begins this way...

The truth is, I didn't like my newborn son. He was cute, I knew that - he did usual newborn baby things... That's all. I waited - the love, the indelible bond that my socio-cultural upbringing said I ought to express towards my child - nothing. I felt nothing.

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The Whole Life of the Poet: William Carlos Williams and His Bicultural Heritage

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William Carlos Williams's "To Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" has long been referred to as his great love poem. In the poem, we see the aging Williams as speaker reflecting on his life with his love, wife Florence Herman (Flossie). In addition, we see the poet coming to terms with not only his age and his love, but also his cultural identity, his "secret life." Williams described his life as secret because he never explicitly brought the aspect of being bicultural to his writing. It is at the time of writing this poem that he realizes the ways in which he has written about his life in the past - "made up" and "lost." It is only now, years later, that the speaker/poet is able to reconcile his lost life, his mixed race existence that, finally, insists on "being written down." What we see in his most famous love poem is a confession of sorts, not only to Flossie, but also to himself, to his heritage, to his "whole life."

American born poet William Carlos Williams has been celebrated as one of the key figures in the American modern poetry movement. In addition, he has been widely and favorably critiqued as documenting the plight of those who made up his environment - the people of Rutherford, New Jersey. In his epic poem, *Paterson*, Williams pontificates, "Any poem that has worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what the poet is." However, through the years, critics and Modernists alike have not considered Williams's "whole" life when criticizing his work. They have seen him as "the doctor poet," "the New Jersey poet," and/or "the Modernist poet," but have neglected to see "what the poet is." Though those aspects of Williams are important parts of his character, we must also pay attention to his bicultural heritage. In acknowledging his cultural composition, we come closer to understanding Williams as a whole person and poet.

The aim of this paper, then, is to reconsider the reading of three poems ("To Elsie," "The Desert Music," and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower") in an attempt to gain a better understanding of Williams's struggle with his bicultural identity. In order to successfully read these poems through this multicultural lens, I will briefly discuss Williams's background as he mentions it in his writings. Through Williams's acknowledgement of his bicultural identity, we are able to do justice to his poetry; we are able to read his work as he suggests it be read as "the whole life." For the purposes of this paper, I refer to Williams as "bicultural" and "multicultural." These descriptors are meant to represent his parents' divergent backgrounds and the influence they had on the creation and maintenance of his identity. While this description of Williams may seem anachronistic - in that these terms and/or their connotations may not have been present at the time of his life - I find that they enable new critiques and understandings of his work.

The Whole Life

Born "William Carlos Williams" September 17, 1883 in Rutherford, New Jersey, Williams was born to immigrant parents. William George Williams, a New York businessman, was born in England, while Williams's mother, Raquel Hélène Hoheb, was from Puerto Rico. Williams notes in his autobiography when growing up he mostly heard Spanish and French spoken in his house, mentioning that his mother spoke very little English when he was born. The weight of having two non-American parents would be ever present in his writing. For instance, Williams would later in life see a lot of his English father in himself, as a "reflector" in Book III of "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," as the poet/speaker is coming to terms with his identity. However, Williams's mother's influence on his writing can be seen much more explicitly in his work throughout his entire life and not solely in his later years as is the case with his mentioning of his father. The poet discusses his mother's "influence" on his writing in his autobiographical work, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*:

I was conscious of my mother's influence all through this time of writing, her ordeal as a woman and as a foreigner in this country. I've always held her as a mythical figure, remote from me, detached, looking down on an area in which I happened to live, a fantastic world where she was moving as a more of less pathetic figure. Remote, not only because of her Puerto Rican background, but also because of her bewilderment at life in a small town in New Jersey after her years in Paris where she had been an art student. Her interest in art became my interest in art. I was personifying her, her detachment from the world of Rutherford. She seemed an heroic figure, a poetic ideal. I didn't especially admire her; I was attached to her. I had not yet established any sort of independent spirit. (16)

Perhaps we can take this influence of his "mother" and extend it so that it also represents the influence of his mother's culture - partially his culture, as well - on his writing. It should also be noted that he talks of his view of his mother as "detached" and "remote." It would seem that Williams is struggling with not only the power of his mother's influence and the role it plays in his writing, but also the power he gives his cultural roots.

In the same vein of viewing of his mother "looking down" and as very much separate from him, in his critical study of William Carlos Williams, James Breslin posits "Williams later liked to think of himself as combining his father's tenacity of purpose with his mother's passionate feeling; but to be fully awake and creative, he felt, he had to purge their remote idealism and enter the ordinary life, crude as it might be, of the New Jersey town in which he had been born" (7). Again, we notice that Williams made a conscious decision to be his own self. And, it was in this making of self that Williams tries very hard to separate his parents' cultures (and his) from his writing. The outcome is his incessant need to write about Rutherford, a city that neither of his parents really "belonged" to, as did their son. This desire to write of New Jersey, his own town, can even be seen in Williams own reflection of his cultural roots in relation to the United States: "Of mixed ancestry, I felt from earliest childhood that America was the only home I could ever possibly call my own. I felt that it was expressly founded for me, personally, and that it must be my first business in life to possess it" (Thirlwall 185).

In being raised by two parents of different nationalities and looking more European than Puerto Rican, perhaps the first instance Williams was forced to formally acknowledge his heritage was in choosing his "literary signature":

I had a great time making up my mind what my literary signature should be—something of profound importance, obviously. An advertising friend of my father's spoke up strongly for plain W. Williams. "It's a common name," he said, "but think of the advantage of being the W. Williams." To me the full name seemed the most revealing and therefore better. (*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 108)

While this certainly shows a conscious effort to be "revealing," it is ironic that his inclusion of "Carlos" was not present until the publication of his second book, *The Tempers* in 1913. Literary critic John Lowney, in his book *The American Avant-Garde Tradition: William Carlos Williams, Postmodern Poetry, and the Politics of Cultural Memory*, suggests: "...the tension between Williams's ethnic filiations and his avant-garde affiliations dominated his early construction of a literary identity, as the indecision over his choice of authorial signature for his first two books indicates" (30). However, it is not until the publication of *Spring and All* in 1921, eight years after his second book, that we begin to see murmurings of his heritage in his work, specifically in one of the most well known poems in the book, "To Elsie."

To Elsie

With the publication of *Spring and All*, one of Williams's most highly acclaimed books of poetry, also came the birth of the poem "To Elsie." The poem is considered one of the poet's most socially conscious and socially critical poems. However, as previously noted, the problem in past readings of the poem is that very few critics have seen the piece as Williams shining a mirror to his face, as way of him making sense of his cultural background.

From the first two lines of the poem, "The pure products of America / go crazy," the reader is struck with the separation of the "pure" and, perhaps, the impure - the William Carlos Williamses. It should be noted that it is the pure products that go crazy and not the impure or the mixed products (people) that go crazy. It has been suggested, "the reason why 'the pure products of America' such as Elsie Borden, 'go crazy,' is because they are rootless. They have 'imaginizations which have no peasant tradition to give them character'" (Dijkstra 176).

Not only does the speaker make explicit mention of the pure products, implying, of course, that there are impure products (the poet/speaker), but he also takes the idea of mixed race one step further with his description of Elsie as "perhaps / with a dash of Indian blood." As critical readers and scholars, we must question why Williams's insistent mention of this wrecked purity is of importance. Could we not assume that the poet speaks to this occurrence in America not only as witness, but also as participant, as multicultural man amongst those that are not (Pound, Eliot, etc.)? Lowney speaks to this isolation and its implications of ethnicity in America:

More recently, the cultural anthropologist James Clifford has read "To Elsie" as an exemplary text of "ethnographic modernity." Williams's standpoint of participant observation in "To Elsie" is ethnographic in that he "finds himself off center among scattered traditions," while modernity is encountered through the poem's complex evocation of lost authenticity. (69)

Also, worth mentioning is the poet's description of the "young slatterns," as "without emotion" that "which they cannot express." Here, we have the poet/speaker clearly "expressing," quite unlike the pure products. We can see this as Williams's way of aligning himself with the impure products and not the pure products. Again, he is not a witness; he is a participant. However, what is

interesting is that only five stanzas later the speaker removes himself from the impure products with his statement concerning Elsie: "expressing with broken/brain the truth about us." The "us" here is the pure products, and Williams includes himself and quite possibly still finds himself identifying with these pure products. This impulse to hide one's cultural identity is explained in Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez's essay, "Modernism and Boricua Literature: A Reconsideration of Arturo Schomburg and William Carlos Williams." Gonzalez suggests that Williams was "racially 'suspicious' in a national context of routinely policed racial borders, in which communal belonging is guarded from the inside as well as the outside. Hence the general amnesia concerning Williams's Puerto Rican heritage" (256). As Gonzalez hints, at the time of publication (1923), poetry did not serve as social commentary, let alone serve as means of confessional or as way to discuss matters of race. However, Williams's "To Elsie" operates on all three of these levels. And, to read this poem without making the connection between Williams's bicultural background and characters, such as Elsie, is just as reckless and unproductive as the absence of the one who drives the car "to witness/and adjust." We, as critical readers and scholars, must adjust the meaning of the poem; we must see the poem as commentary on mixed race and see this as part of the whole life of Williams.

The Desert Music

Twenty-two years after the publication of *Spring and All*, Williams revisits more explicitly his cultural roots with the 1954 publication of *The Desert Music*, specifically in the title poem. The book, written after Williams suffered a heart attack, multiple strokes, and severe depression, marks a noteworthy shift in his subject matter and his view of self. What is interesting is that after these unfortunate events, we see a new William Carlos Williams emerge in his writing. Williams reinvented himself after being faced with these several near death experiences. There was a sense that "having confronted him with the possibility of death, and of mental capacity, which he said feared more, it had had the effect of prompting him to clarify his purpose" (Paul 2). Therefore, there became a desperate and sudden need on the poet's part to "pull the diverse parts of his experience into unity" as not seen before in earlier poems. There is, as Breslin suggests, "a manner that is openly discursive and personal" in "The Desert Music" and later poems (203). What is most noticeable in this new personalness that Williams brings to "The Desert Music" is his desire to reevaluate himself as poet. And, while this is unquestionably central to the understanding of the poem and poet,

in hopes, again, of reading the whole life of Williams, we should recognize the role his otherness (multicultural identity) plays as well.

In careful reading of "The Desert Music," written years after Williams had "seen the desert," the subjects of birth and death are ever present. However, I would suggest that these births and deaths are not necessarily only those of Williams as poet, but also of Williams as American and Williams as "other." In his book *The Music of Survival*, Sherman Paul conjectures that, for Williams, "death (descent), as he always believed, was a condition of rebirth (ascent)" (17). Therefore this rebirthing can also be seen as a real need to reconcile his past and his way of approaching such issues as birth, death, what it is to be American, what it is to be an other - a need to come "back to some truths he had glossed over" (Paul 17).

This quest for truths is immediately apparent within the first lines of the poem as the speaker/poet asks, "How shall we get said what must be said? / Only the poem." It is through the poem that the poet hopes to find these truths about himself, as poet and as multicultural man. There is then a sort of a promise to not only himself to discover these truths, but also to the reader as Williams says, "Only the poem / only the made poem, to get said what must / be said." We now expect Williams to shed light on what he has kept dark for so long - his bicultural self. And it is through his interfering confessions throughout the poem that we come to realize that he is coming to terms with more than simply his self as poet, "I cannot escape / I cannot vomit it up..." Julio Marzan speaks to this same issue in his fundamental book, *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*:

So that the "agony of self-realization" will not be just that of the embryonic form on the bridge, but of Williams who sees himself in that alter image: "I cannot escape/I cannot vomit it up." The 'it' is his own chronic spiritual embryo, ever in "agony of self-realization," which will always be there, and which only the poem brings to full gestation: "Only the poem! /Only the made poem, the verb calls it/into being." (246)

Much like in "To Elsie," we see Williams again identifying both with the others and also with the "pure products." There is a stark contrast between his inability to escape his heritage and, therefore, wanting to become a part of it. However, later in the poem, he distances himself, "Why don't these Indians get over this nauseating prattle / about their souls and their loves and sing us something / else for a change?" We also see a

reemergence of the "Indian" (in "To Elsie") as representation of this otherness that the poet clearly struggles with throughout the poem. Also harkening back to language seen twenty-two years earlier in "To Elsie," is the description of brains "scattered." In "To Elsie," Williams depicts Elsie with a "broken brain." However, in "The Desert Music" we see the poet describing himself with scattered brains. We should also pay careful attention to the connotation of these words - both "scattered" and "broken" signify an isolation and an incompleteness that both Elsie and Williams embody.

Perhaps no more clearly is Williams's inability to identify with either the American or the other self than in the stanza:

What else, Latins, do you yourselves
Seek but relief!
With the expressionless ding dong you dish up
To us of your souls and your loves, which
We swallow. Spaniards! (though these are mostly
Indians who chase the white bastards
Through the streets on their Independence Day
And try to kill them). (283)

It would seem that he is addressing the "Latins" as though he, himself, is not of Latin descent - as if he is not simply ready to come to terms with this part of himself. However, there seems also to be a strong resistance on his part to acknowledge his "white" or European self either as he couples "white" with "bastards." There does not appear to be a real "winner" in this scenario, and there does not necessarily have to be a winner in order for Williams to resolve his identity issues. It should be noted that in reexamining Williams's choice of words and subject matter, there is a way of reading the poem as one of cultural identification concerns and truth seeking.

Ironically, the poem ends with Williams's declaration: "And I could not help thinking / of the wonders of the brain that / hears that music and of our / skill sometimes to record it." This is Williams's way of making sense of the rebirth that he has gone through, it is his explanation for why he sought these truths out concerning his various selves. Attention should also be placed upon his description, now, within the last five lines of the poem, of the brain. The brain is now of "wonders" and not broken or scattered as before. Perhaps this is Williams's way of illustrating his journey of understanding himself as well.

Speaking to the multiple selves that Williams seemed to have struggled with and gave careful attention to in "The Desert Music" is a letter from American painter

Marsden Hartley to American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, both friends of the poet, on October 9, 1923:

Williams...certainly has made a splendid struggle to plasticize all his various selves and he is perhaps more people at once than anyone I've ever known—not vague persons but he's a small town of serious citizens in himself. I never saw so many defined human beings in one being. That's because he's Latin and Anglo-Saxon in several divisions and he being an artist has to give them all a chance. (Lowney 25)

Therefore, it can be said that with the publication of "The Desert Music" we notice Williams giving them (his selves) "all a chance" more so than in "To Elsie." However, one year later, the poet would be his most revealing in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

Asphodel, That Greeny Flower

It certainly can also be suggested that in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," Williams comes the closest to acknowledging his cultural heritage. With this acknowledgment also comes Williams's reflection on how he had kept his cultural makeup at bay his entire life. Just as in "The Desert Music," Williams examines his role as poet, in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." While also reexamining his role as poet, he also reexamines his role of a bicultural individual. The poem, consisting of three books and a coda, is a poem of "self-healing" (Kallet 9). This self-healing is brought about through his discussion, again as we saw in "The Desert Music," of life, death, and rebirth. In this case, as was the case previously, the death is of his ethnic self, as Marzan points out, "Williams' fate of having to accept the many deaths of Carlos (and the Carloses of the world) also caused his having to imagine new ways of keeping that complete self alive. Deaths produced rebirths, sadness produced the joy of poetry, winter ends in a new beginning" (122). We can read the poem as a way of keeping his whole self, his whole life intact.

Williams begins the poem with a bit of reluctance: "And so / with fear in my heart / I drag it out / and keep on talking / for I dare not stop" (10). Certainly this dragging out that the poet speaks of is in reference to what he must say to Flossie. However, should we read this poem as a dragging out of what he has kept private for so

long - this cultural heritage - we notice a trepidation, which would be understandable since, as we will see, Williams never quite comes "clean" as much as he does in this particular poem.

We see the poet expressing to his reader, to Flossie, and to himself this transformation of self that has taken place, "Look at / what passes for the new. / You will not find it there but in / despised poems. / It is difficult to get the news from poets / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" (18-19). It would seem that the speaker is calling attention to not being able to find "news" in poetry, due to the poet's lack of wanting to offer up this information to his/her reader. We can, then, read this as Williams's commentary on the state of poetry, but also as advice to his readers to not look too hard for "news," for the inequality of the races, for the people of Rutherford, because most poets simply do not address this.

Williams goes on to discuss death as we see him do in "The Desert Music," "Approaching death, / as we think, the death of love, / no distinction / any more suffices to differentiate / the particulars / of place and condition / with which we have been long / familiar. / All appears / as if seen / wavering through water. / We start awake with a cry / of recognition / but soon the outlines / become vague again" (19). To not read this with his bicultural status in mind would be nearly impossible. We see the poet describing to Flossie that, as death approaches, there are no longer these distinctions that were once so present, such as being English or Puerto Rican. The poet describes to his wife how he appears blurry, as "wavering through water." And, perhaps, this is part of why Williams had such difficulty coming to terms in his poetry and, also, in his life with being multicultural.

A discussion of cultural roots without mention of his immigrant parents would seem most irresponsible. And, perhaps, the William Carlos Williams of the 1920s would not have explicitly made reference to either parent or both with the chance of being labeled. However, it is in Book II of the poem that Williams makes reference to what can be possibly viewed as his mother, Elena, half of his identity. "...I at once found myself surrounded/by gypsy women/ who came to me, / I could speak little Spanish, / and directed me, / guided by a young girl, / on my way" (21). Marzan suggests, "the 'gypsy women' were the embodiments of his foreign heart. From that point in his life a young gypsy girl 'directed' and 'guided' him on his way. She, a young version of the dark-eyed Elena, became synonymous with his dark Kore, his Carlos self" (192). This mention and allusion to Elena crops up in the poem because Elena represented half of him, Spanish, his other self. And, through this acceptance of her guidance, Williams is thereby accepting half of his heritage.

Before Williams concludes Book II and after alluding to Elena, he makes a

startling admission: "All suppressions, / from the witchcraft trials at Salem / to the latest / book burnings / are confessions" (26). Assuming that we are reading this as a means to read the whole life of the poet, surely it is plausible then that these "suppressions" are the poet's own. This also explains much of the way Williams sees his suppression of his bicultural self - as confessions. Perhaps we can also read this as a sort of defense, his way of explaining his bicultural "amnesia" as Gonzalez refers to it.

Worth mentioning as well is the poet's use of the words "single image": "For in spite of it all, / all that I have brought on myself, / grew that single image / that I adore." We must question what this single image could possibly represent. Would it not be possible that the single image could be how Williams projected himself as American, as a child of two parents of the same cultural background? The poet confesses that he has brought this one sided, pure product man and it seems he wants to take responsibility for that image which he has made available to others. Not only does he make himself accountable for this projection, he also explains that it was an image he adored. This would, then, explain his difficulty in letting go of who he really is not and never was.

It is within the next book, Book III, that Williams's father makes an appearance. The poet writes of a man in the subway who reminded him of his father. In the man's face Williams saw his own. By the time the man exited the subway, the man had become all humans: "With him / went all men / and all women too / were in his loins" (Marzan 120). Why now, though? Why in a love poem would Williams's father appear? Could it not be due to Williams need to rectify his heritage? Could it not be because at this (other) time of rebirth, Williams recalls who he is in relation to his identity? Williams goes on to talk of his father, "Speak to him, / I cried. He / will know the secret" (32). The secret the poet's father knows is that which Williams had suppressed his whole life in his poetry, his roots, his parents:

Williams's journey takes the form of a dreaming back to early memories, to his childhood, and back deep into human memory, to see the shapes down on the walls 'of prehistoric/ caves in the Pyrenees' (PB, 174). The movement of dreaming back and of descent are one; both represent an inner voyage to the depths of the self, in a quest for origins. (Kallet 123)

We clearly see that in his landmark love poem, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," Williams has brought his other self to the poem, "out of a compulsion to both claim a new kingdom and recover his old one, to fuse and balance his divergent parts into a

composite whole, like the name he chose: William Carlos Williams" (Marzan 41).

Conclusion

Nine-tenths of our lives is well forgotten in the living. Of the part that is remembered, the most had better not be told: it would be of interest to no one, or at least would not contribute to the story of what we ourselves have been. A thin thread of narrative remains—a few hundred pages...They constitute our particular treasure. That is all, justly, that we should offer. (*Autobiography*, Williams xi)

And so begins Williams's autobiography. Although, at the time of his writing, critics, peers, and even Williams, himself, seemed uninterested in the role a poet's race/ethnicity places on his/her poetry, it is hard to escape the weight William Carlos Williams's heritage plays in his poetry. This is not to say this is the sole way of reading Williams's work, however; it is difficult to deny that there are some correlations present, regardless of Williams's explicit intent. It is through this new lens that we are able to read Williams, not just as New Jersey poet, as doctor-poet, or as Modernist, but also as product of his heritage, as *the whole life*.

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