

SENIOR ESSAY APPLICATION FORM

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Departmental GPA: 3.95

Preliminary Project Title: Joy Williams' Art of Cruelty: Modes of Uncertainty in 'The Visiting Privilege'

Potential Faculty Advisors (please indicate if you've contacted them about your proposal):

- 1) Maura Spiegel
- 2) Deborah Paredez
- 3) Bruce Robbins

Relevant coursework, and/or research experience: _____

Courses:

Collections: Contemporary American Short Stories (Denise Cruz);
Literary History of Atrocity (Bruce Robbins); An Earnest Look at Irony (Ben
Metcalfe); African American Novelists and the Question of Justice (Farrah
Griffin); U.S. Latinx Literature (Frances Negrón Muntaner); Shakespeare's
Poetry (James Shapiro)

Research experience:

- Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (2018-2020), independent research
supervised by Bruce Robbins; presented paper, "Danticat's Birds, Encrypted
Memory in 'The Farming of Bones'" at 2019 MMUF regional conference

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Senior Essay Proposal
Dept. of English, Columbia University
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Joy Williams' Art Of Cruelty:
Modes Of Uncertainty In "Preparations For A Collie" And "The Country"

In Joy Williams' short story, "Preparation for a Collie," a drunk mother and her five-year old son play in the living room while the (also drunk) father prepares a meal for the dog in the kitchen, muttering to no one, "Jesus, what a sad, stupid dog." Just the other day, after posting an ad for the dog, the father refused to give it to an interested owner because he felt it would not be safe in the new home. Now the mother leaves her son by the television set, "wobbling slightly," and announces without warning, "I'm going to kill that dog." The husband applauds her, encourages her to have another drink as she mixes Drano into ground beef. Such is the deftness with which Williams cuts from the quotidian into a subsurface violence. We are not primed for this shift; Williams' extremely plain narration retains a cool distance that hardly wavers as we are lurched into a cruel scenario. I propose to investigate Williams' plain style, which disguises itself as what Maggie Nelson might call a "brutality of fact" (Nelson 131) while simultaneously steeping us in uncertainty.

Alice Munro, in a paraphrase of Wallace Stevens, has another way of putting this: "What a story is, is devious. It pretends transparency, forthrightness. But this is all a masquerade. What good stories deal with is the horror and incomprehensibility of time, the dark encroachment of old catastrophes" (qtd. in Mitchell 116). Transparency, forthrightness—these are the promises of the no-nonsense first paragraph of Williams' "Preparation for a Collie," which reads, "There is Jane and there is Jackson and there is David. There is the dog" (33). But when we consider the story's ending—characteristic of Williams' bleak and wry vision of humanity—we know cruelty, or dark encroachment, is imminent. Maggie Nelson, in *The Art of Cruelty* (2011), defines cruelty

as “precision, purgation, productive unease, abjectness, radical exposure, uncanniness, unnerving frankness, unacknowledged sadism and masochism, a sense of clearing or clarity” (6). How might Williams’ simple narration posit itself as a sort of brutal honesty? If cruelty is precise, is not uncertainty the absence of precision?

In “Indeterminacies of Narrative,” the first section of his essay on Williams’ collected stories, *The Visiting Privilege* (2015), Lee Clark Mitchell argues that Williams “delights in provoking uncertainty; about what is genuinely there and what is otherwise merely imagined, about bizarre, otherworldly events and what they might otherwise actually mean” (114). Mitchell shares in another critic’s assessment that, in Williams’ stories, “The blank space between each of the sentences is loaded with intelligence and surprise, because you can never tell what the next sentence is going to be, or bring” (qtd. in Mitchell 115). But Mitchell does not define indeterminacy or Williams’ particular iteration of it. The uncertainty about what is genuinely there and what is imagined—what Namwali Serpell might call *mutual exclusion*—differs, for instance, from the uncertainty in the opening of “Preparation for a Collie,” which, through Serpell’s notion of *repetition* (24), disturbs a reader’s ability to make meaning.

Using Mitchell’s analysis of indeterminacy as a starting point, I thus aim to specify Williams’ particular *modes* of uncertainty. I borrow language here from Serpell’s *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2014), a *Seven Types of Ambiguity* for the twenty-first century, which argues that literary uncertainty, or an “agonistic unsettling experience over time” (Serpell 9), forces us beyond our own experiences, thereby proving fundamental to a literary ethics. *Uncertainty*, unlike Mitchell’s *indeterminacy* and its cousins (*ambiguity*, *difficulty*), can refer to the text or the reader’s mental state (Serpell 9). Although the two major camps of ethical literary

criticism—poststructuralists and humanists—disagree on how to analyze uncertainty, they both agree on what Dorothy Hale calls the New Ethics, i.e. the unquestioning submission to uncertainty in itself—a worship of alterity—which has paradoxically rendered “ambiguity unambiguous” (Serpell 17). In this light, Mitchell’s treatment of Williams’ stories appears to stop at uncertainty as an end in itself.

Serpell’s trifold approach—which considers ethics, aesthetics, and affect in tandem—aims to understand the mechanisms and functions of uncertainty as a reader’s continual shifting between knowing and not knowing (Serpell 20). She theorizes three primary structures that provide the foundation for uncertainty (two of which I’ve mentioned already): mutual exclusion, multiplicity, and repetition (Serpell 25). The stories I plan to analyze—“Preparations for a Collie” and “The Country,” an early story and a late story—rely primarily on mutual exclusion, either/or scenarios that allow for contradictory interpretations of the same event (Serpell 23-24). It is unclear, for instance, whether the father-narrator in “The Country,” whose son is able to communicate with the dead, is dead himself.

Seven Modes of Uncertainty focuses exclusively on the novel. My essay will investigate what Serpell’s framework might look like if applied to the short story, which, at least since Chekhov, provides some of the most elliptical prose, presenting us, in Chekhov’s case, with “ambiguous possibilities, with characters as mixed personalities, with readers often left hanging by narratives that seem unresolved, barely holding together” (Mitchell 5). It is possible that Williams has yet to receive significant scholarly attention precisely because she focuses on the short story, a genre which suffers from what Jennifer J. Smith, in *The American Short Story Cycle* (2017), calls the “general consensus—hard to pinpoint but nonetheless powerful—that

novels are harder to write and therefore more worthy of study (10). Mitchell similarly identifies this bias, noting that in an era where *The New Yorker* and other reputable literary magazines demonstrate great interest in the short story, it remains understudied as a major literary form (3). Mitchell's own "Disjointedness in *The Visiting Privilege*" (2019) perhaps marks the onset of scholarly attention for Williams' short stories.

But Williams' works have not gone unrecognized by her peers. Canonical postmodern authors such as William Gass, Don DeLillo, Donald Barthelme, and Raymond Carver all praised her stories, which are today "passed around MFA departments with something like subversive glee" (Winner). Well-known contemporary authors such as Ben Marcus and Karen Russell have recently published favorable essays on her work, which has in recent years been reprinted and collected. In some small way, then, my essay will aim to bridge the gap between Williams' scholarly and writerly reception, and provide insight into the cruelty and uncertainty of a voice crucial to, if omitted from, the postmodern American canon.

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