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RECLAIMING DISABLED POETRY; WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS'S LATE WORK

KATHRYN LYNN MAYBERRY  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Janet Lyon  
Associate Professor of English and Women Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Christopher Reed  
Distinguished Professor of English  
Honors Adviser

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## ABSTRACT

In 1951, noted physician and American poet, William Carlos Williams, suffered the first of many strokes that would render him paralyzed. This thesis explores the development of disability aesthetic in Williams's late work, particularly "The Desert Music," written in the spring of 1951. I focus on key figures of atypical embodiment and how they operate in the poem—what agency they are granted, what connection they have to the speaker, and what they contribute to the discussion of a poet's relationship to embodiment and poetry. Ultimately, these atypical embodiments form a uniquely disability-oriented consideration of poetic consciousness that drastically departs from Williams's previous work and warrant consideration as disabled poetry.

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## Introduction

The American Modernist poet William Carlos Williams was born to immigrant parents in 1883, just one year after the Williams family came to live in Rutherford, New Jersey. As a young man, Williams studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania between 1902 and 1906 where he met a lifelong friend, Ezra Pound, and first explored his talent as a poet. Following several medical internships, Williams began his own general medical practice at 9 Ridge Road in Rutherford where he would reside for rest of his life. Throughout his poetic career, Williams developed a style that valued the “thing itself”; Williams began to use this thing-centered style—a style that can be described, loosely, as defamiliarization or the process by which objects are presented as they are and not as they are known—under the influence of poetic Imagism of the early 1920s (“Defamiliarization” 343). His work with concrete poetics is exemplified in his widely known poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow,” first published in Williams’s 1932 collection *Spring and All*, which offers a simple, concrete consideration of a common farm scene:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens (“The Red Wheelbarrow” 224)

Although the poem is short and reminiscent of Pound’s “In A Station of the Metro,” it has garnered a lot of critical discussion, especially for the way that it represents Williams’s attempt

to bring his reader into contact with a mundane object so as to allow her to experience it and appreciate it as though it is entirely new.

As Williams matured as a poet and after an intellectual falling out with Pound, his poetry evolved past its Imagist origins and away from the style of the European modernists. He focused on creating a distinctly American verse in contrast to transnational modernist literature. His new work was to be written in what he called “American Idiom”—that is, using only American locutions and language. *Paterson*, Williams’s long American epic poem and contribution to American literature as a purely American epic, represents the culmination of Williams’s search for the American idiom. Composed over the course of Williams’s career as a poet, *Paterson* exhibits the poet’s most experimental departure from traditional poetry as it was understood in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

My argument in this thesis is that William Carlos Williams’s experimental style, which evolved from his early objective minimalism to a more nuanced incorporation of polyform narrative as seen in *Paterson*, changed dramatically after a series of strokes he suffered beginning at age 68. It is my aim to trace briefly the contours of that trajectory in order to then focus on the form and style of the post-stroke poems, especially those collected in his *The Desert Music* (1954). My argument here will be influenced by disability theory. I maintain that Williams’s early attention to the world of “things” was influenced by an objective stance that owed a great deal to his identity as a medical doctor and that his post-stroke work reflects his reluctant reckoning with disability as a condition that called for new ways of understanding the body—particularly his own body—in the objective world. Previous discussions of Williams’s late work

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<sup>1</sup> Later books in *Paterson* experiment with Williams’s developing form, the variable foot or triadic line, which Williams was still perfecting by the time of his death in 1963.

fail to take Williams's disability into consideration and in doing so overlook an important facet of Williams's purpose and post-stroke aesthetic.

Williams recovered almost completely from his first stroke in 1951. But his second stroke the following year left him with permanent right-sided paralysis, loss of speech, and difficulty with sight.<sup>2</sup> "The Desert Music" was written in the spring of 1951 for a speaking engagement at Harvard University, and was the first work Williams produced after his stroke.<sup>3</sup> Making this distinction, I will argue, is key in understanding Williams's late poetry because his new disabled embodiment—paralysis because of stroke—contributes directly to a shift in content and, to some extent, form in Williams's poetry.

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<sup>2</sup> Williams speaks candidly about the effect of his first stroke in 1951 in a letter to Srinivas Rayaprol the following year; "One reason I have not written you more often is that a years [sic] ago next March, the 28<sup>th</sup> to be exact, I have a "stroke", a fairly mild paralytic affection which hit me in the right side crippling my arm, leg, face as well as my speech. It came gradually over a few hours landing me in the hospital where I was confined for 3 weeks. It took me 3 months to be able to be up and about but it has taken me almost the rest of the year to feel more or less normal again. I still stumble a little over my words and my right arm is painful and not at all what it was but I can drive my car punch the typewriter. That's a lot" (Williams, "29 January 1952").

<sup>3</sup> Some works, like *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, were started prior to Williams's first stroke and finished after.

### “To Elsie”

In Williams’s early poems, references to disability are few and those that exist do so for symbolic use. Williams’s occupation as a doctor situates him in an interesting place as a poet, especially when considering his treatment of physical variation and disability in his work. As a doctor, Williams was trained to view disability as a medical problem in need of a solution; however, as a poet he is trained to observe the mundane and the extraordinary with an artistic eye. Even so, Williams’s early work does not dwell on the merit of disabled bodies towards the development of poetic style—that is to say, he does not engage in a disability aesthetic.

Williams’s poem “To Elsie” which first appeared in the collection *Spring and All* (1923) employs the titular character as a means to examine “the pure products of America,” in a wholly ethnic consideration of the state of American culture and society (“To Elsie” 218). Elsie, by way of her characterization in the poem, is Williams’s mentally disabled (“with broken / brain”) housekeeper (217). Although the title seems to suggest the poem is an ode to Elsie, the poem itself is little less than an objectification.

Elsie does not make her debut in the poem until about half way through. Her hanging presence in the beginning of the poem renders her as an understood continuation of the “pure products” Williams lists:

mountain folk from Kentucky

or the ribbed north end of  
Jersey  
with its isolate lakes and

valleys, its deaf mutes, thieves  
old names  
and promiscuity between



devil-may-care men who have taken  
to railroading  
out of sheer lust of adventure (“To Elsie” 217)

Williams intends her to feel as much a part of this list as she is apart from it. She both fits and rejects the model that Williams constructs in the beginning of the poem because she can easily be reduced to category along with “mountain folk” and “deaf mutes,” but she also warrants exception from them, perhaps because Williams knows her. When Elise finally does appear in the poem, her presence is dwarfed not only by the lengthy tally of other socially deplorable figures but also by the beleaguered lead-up to her name:

... a girl so desolate  
so hemmed round  
with disease or murder

that she’ll be rescued by an  
agent—  
reared by the state and

sent out at fifteen to work in  
some hard-pressed  
house in the suburbs—

some doctor’s family, some Elsie— (“To Elsie” 218)

Descriptors like “desolate,” “hemmed round / with disease or murder,” “hard-pressed” all add to the weight of Elsie’s introduction, making her out to sound like a symptom, above all else.

Williams crafts a palpable crescendo to Elsie’s introduction in the poem but the climactic moment fails to deliver, or perhaps what it delivers is simply undesirable. Roger Gilbert’s astute discussion of the poem pinpoints the drama of Elsie’s introduction; ““some Elsie” is devastating, because it identifies individual and class in a way that leaves no room for the saving difference of selfhood” (Gilbert 150). By explicitly naming the poem after Elise, Williams attempts to

establish her as an exception to the generalizations he makes of other groups of people. She becomes a figure of interest saddled with the weight of the generic and the particular.

Naming Elsie grants her a level of import and humanity, it distinguishes her as particular rather than generic like the other groups listed. However, Williams contradicts her humanity with the phrase “some Elsie,” which undercuts her particularity with firm generality. But “some Elsie” also warrants more description than other generalizations because she is at once “some” and “Elsie.” Williams highlights her particularity with similar tact;

... some Elsie—  
 voluptuous water  
 expressing with broken

brain the truth about us—  
 her great  
 ungainly hips and flopping breasts

addressed to cheap  
 jewelry  
 and rich young men with fine eyes

as if the earth under our feet  
 were  
 an excrement of some sky (“To Elsie” 218)

We might characterize Elsie’s blunt description as an example of Williams’s defamiliarization. Readers are better able to defamiliarize themselves with Elsie if they view her through Williams’s vulgar descriptions. Elsie’s “ungainly hips and flopping breasts” are not so much a spectacle to Williams in the sense that they seem absurd, rather he seems to view them with as much interest and reverence that he reserves for the typical.

Ever one to toy with perceptions of the mundane as opposed to the particular—going so far as to suggest that there might be mundane particulars—Williams grants Elsie the same objective consideration that he does his famous wheelbarrow and chickens. His description of

her is reminiscent of “Pastoral” from *Al Que Quiere!* wherein the speaker insists that “the old man who goes about / gathering dog-lime” and “walks in the gutter / without looking up” is “more majestic” than “the Episcopal minister” (“Pastoral” 71). The pastoral poem is an established poetic genre that idealizes rural life in a way that makes it appear effortless and tranquil. Williams’s “Pastoral” rejects the authoritative image of the Episcopal minister and praises, instead, the old man collecting manure. Williams has no difficulty presenting common people in a way that affords them a level of dignity and majesty, as evidenced in “Pastoral.” Elsie’s case diverges from the old man’s when Williams focuses his consideration of her so that it is more than mere physical observation. Elsie is the central focus of “To Elsie,” her tawdry desires, her physical flaws, her broken mind, are all on display.

Williams seeks to present Elise to his readers under the guise of defamiliarization by bringing his readers into contact with Elise so that they may appreciate her simplicity rather than pity or objectify her, but, as several critics have noted, he misses the mark. His “portrait brutally physicalizes Elsie, reducing her to a mute symptom of cultural degradation,” it undercuts any efforts made for an objective reading simply because it does not allow Elsie agency (Gilbert 150). The “old man” of Williams’s “Pastoral” is granted a level of agency because the speaker does not seek to step beyond the role of unattached observer. However, in “To Elsie,” Elsie is robbed of selfhood because Williams reduces her identity in the poem to “some Elsie,” an utterly mundane prop used for poetic device.

Williams is unexceptional in his pre-stroke treatment of disabled figures. His objectification of Elsie, whether intentional or not, falls easily into the general category of disabled literary characters, or those characters that “usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles,

eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (Thompson 9). Although Elsie, nominally, does not remain on the margins of Williams's poem, her actual presence in the poem certainly can be called marginal because she does not appear in the majority of the poem. Her presence, too, is uncomplicated. In fact, Williams chooses Elsie precisely because she *is* uncomplicated. Her bodily configuration is nothing *but* spectacle—"her great / ungainly hips and flopping breasts" are hard to forget and employed, in some part, for shock value ("To Elsie" 218). Williams embraces the trope of the disabled figure because it is a convenient image for his poem. He does not seek to understand Elsie since the mere fact that he does not understand her or relate to her is key to the poem's purpose.

Objectification of disability, though, should come as no surprise, and we can easily attribute Elsie's characterization to historical attitudes towards disability. Simply labeling "To Elsie" as a product of a different time, one where disability was a burden and a spectacle, though, oversimplifies the nature of Williams's relationship to disability prior to his stroke. Surprisingly, the practice of medicine allies itself well with the composition of poetry. Williams's choice of an objective style of defamiliarization, too, lends itself both to his poetry and to his medical practice. Many of his pre-stroke poems, "To Elsie" and "Pastoral" included, read "like medical discourse... aim[ing] to remain utterly objective, to report just the facts and leave the observer, whether poet or doctor, as far outside the frame as possible" (Marsh 51). Utter objectivity ought to lead to representations that do not rob a subject of his or her agency. Williams seems to stand in his own way. He attempts to offer an objective representation of Elsie that does not make her into a spectacle, but because he fundamentally rejects her agency and self-hood by reducing her to "some Elsie" he does more to make a spectacle of her than any other force in the poem.

## The Form

“The Desert Music,” Williams’s long poem, follows an unnamed speaker as he travels between two cities—Juárez and El Paso—by way of an interjurisdictional bridge. The speaker’s fragmented recollection of his activities in both cities—stopping at a bar, watching a strip dancer, going to dinner, and meeting an “inhuman shapelessness”—are punctuated by the constant presence of music and the speaker’s unease. Prior to his stroke in 1951, Williams agreed to a speaking arrangement at Harvard, promising a new long poem to read at the event. In spite of the stroke, Williams insisted on keeping his commitment to Harvard and set to work on the poem that would become “The Desert Music” as soon as he was physically able. This first stroke left him with temporary paralysis, but physical therapy restored his mobility almost completely. Williams recalls in a letter to Srinivas Rayaprol that composing the poem was a struggle both physically and creatively, complaining that “I have slaved at this poem for weeks” (Williams, 29 May 1951). Regarding the speaking engagement he reflects, “As I look back on it now I am amazed I could go through with it. I was anything but sure of myself” (Williams, 14 September 1951). This insecurity is uncharacteristic for the poet prior to his stroke, but here we can see that it stems directly from his newly disabled embodiment. The stroke brought him face to face with a mortal reality—one that demanded he consider the future of his medical practice, his own age, and his relevance as a poet. The impact, though not physically permanent, was profound nonetheless.

In “The Desert Music,” the speaker identifies himself as “William / Carlos Williams, the poet,” thus inviting a confessional reading of the poem (“The Desert Music” 282). While my

analysis will lean heavily on that invitation, it will not assume that what is true for Williams is also true for the speaker of the poem. Similarly, while I will draw on factual pieces of Williams's life (letters referencing both the event that inspired this poem and Williams's disability) I will not assume that the poem is an element of historical or autobiographical fact. Rather, my analysis seeks to explore the interwoven examples of disability within "The Desert Music" and to draw a set of conclusions about the relationship between the poet, his embodiment, and his practice of poetry. The autobiographical events that prompted the composition of "The Desert Music" lend themselves to critical discussion because they situate Williams at a point in his life when he is forced to adopt a new perspective. "The Desert Music" may or may not be autobiographical, but it does present an unexpected divergence in Williams's poetics that can and should be explored with disability aesthetics in mind.

"The Desert Music" presents a number of complex relationships between poet and poem and body and consciousness. To begin making sense of these relationships Williams builds on one central image, that of a disabled embodiment figured simply as a "form":

—the dance begins: to end about a form  
 propped motionless—on the bridge  
 between Juárez and El Paso—unrecognizable  
 in the semi-dark ("The Desert Music" 273)

I would suggest that this "form / propped motionless" may be understood as an avatar for the Williams who has become disabled, while the speaker takes the role of Williams prior to his stroke. Critic Glenn Sheldon posits that the poem is dependent on what I will hereafter refer to simply as the form, which represents Williams's "poetic identity," and serves as a catalyst for Williams's poetic rebirth (Sheldon 49). Rebirth that, he argues, comes from Williams's late-in-life decision to reevaluate his poetry and his personal relationship to that poetry. "The Desert Music" becomes a proving ground for that reevaluation because

it works as an imperfect communication of an imperfect perception of what it means to be a poet... , as well as a self-evaluation of Williams's identity as a poet (or, more accurately, identities—as a poet, doctor, Hispanic American, and American). (46)

Sheldon pinpoints the urgency in “The Desert Music” that is altogether missing from Williams’s pre-stroke poetry and suggests that “The Desert Music” is a “genuine rebirth for [Williams’s] late poetic career,” but fails to offer any insight into why, at this exact moment, Williams desires poetic rebirth. Ironically, the sentence preceding the quotation above is one that recognizes “The Desert Music” as “a departure for the famous poet, then recovering from stroke,” but on the list of identities Sheldon offers, disability is absent (46). Sheldon’s work, of course, does not focus on the representation of Williams’s disability within the poem so it is unfair to criticize it for overlooking disability. However, because my argument is influenced by disability theory, I feel compelled to dwell on the absence of disability as an identity in Sheldon’s listing. Current disability theory “asks that we consider disability... as a component of identity” that carries with it the same literary implications as other identities such as race, class, and gender (Linett 1). Regardless, his argument supports this paper’s reading of the form as an avatar for Williams as he grapples with contesting identities and offers the explanation of *also* grappling with disability as the catalyst that would prompt Williams to write a poem focused on exploring his identities.

Williams establishes an overarching binary within the poem by way of the “interjurisdictional” location where the poem takes place. Geographically, Juárez and El Paso are cities that straddle the border between the United States and Mexico—with Juárez on the Mexican side and El Paso on the Texan side—divided only by the Rio Grande and international law. To Williams, these cities represent his divided heritage as a Puerto Rican and as an American, thus making them the ideal setting for an exploration in opposing identities. The interjurisdictional bridge provides a middle ground between opposing sides geographically,

thematically, and personally. The form that the speaker finds on the bridge is equally interjurisdictional—belonging to neither Juárez nor El Paso—rather, belonging with the nebulous middle ground, claimed by nothing and indebted to no one. Williams draws on a memory from his visit to these cities in 1950 with his wife, Floss, and friend, Robert McAlmon. The jurisdictions at play in my analysis of the poem are those of non-disabled and disabled embodiment. The interjurisdictional space, the one inhabited by the “form” on the bridge, is one where the speaker and the form both are granted the space to determine their own embodiment. These *jurisdictions* become the setting for the conflict that the speaker must face within the poem.

The conflict can be summarized rather well in the speaker’s interjection, “how shall we get said what must be said?” (“The Desert Music” 274). This question operates on several levels. First, it introduces the collective pronoun, “we,” which refers to the speaker and his friends, but also draws the form into a relationship with the speaker. Second, it introduces the speaker’s feeling of inadequacy at writing poetry. In an attempt to answer the question preemptively, the speaker declares that he will “dance / two and two with him—” (274). “Him” in this excerpt is the “form,” which Williams clarifies in the following line; “him— / sequestered there asleep, / right end up,” thus invoking the form rather than any of the unnamed members of the speaker’s group. By inviting the form into the “dance,” which emerges as the poem itself, the speaker is granting the form agency for the first time: he grants the form the physical ability to participate in the dance and, by extension, the poem. The dance cannot exist without a body to dance it, as W.B. Yeats famously insisted,<sup>4</sup> both the dancer and the dance are one and the same—just as the speaker and the form are one and the same. Until the appearance of this line, the form has not

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<sup>4</sup> W.B. Yeats, “how can we know the dancer from the dance?” (“Among School Children,” 1933).



been granted a human or living embodiment by the speaker. Instead, the speaker calls the form “a sack of rags” and “an inhuman shapelessness” (273-274). He even questions whether it has human appendages—“Is it alive? / —neither a head, / legs nor arms” (273-274). When the speaker declares he will dance “two and two with him” he not only grants the form humanity, but also allows the form access to the development of the dance and to the music incorporated in the poem.

The significance, here, is not so much literary as it is humane. To detail a form and presume its humanity but not explicitly state its humanity is suggestive of a starkly non-disabled perspective. In the opening stanzas of “The Desert Music,” the speaker inhabits the non-disabled gaze, scrutinizing the form on the bridge with little regard for its humanity. However, the speaker’s scrutiny softens, allowing human elements of the man on the bridge to bleed into the narrative—the form is granted a human embodiment and a gender. The speaker’s correlation to the form is not explicit, however, an early draft of the poem confirms the implicit parallel,

... I am the music. A  
kind of imitation.

I am a kind of imitation of  
a sack of rags that hides in itself  
a music (Williams 4)

In this draft version, Williams extends the “sack of rags” imagery to encompass a description of the speaker—the “I”—and to invoke the imagery he uses earlier in the poem to describe the form. This excerpt does not make it to the final draft of the poem, likely because Williams was striving for a simpler and less explicit image. Regardless, its presence in draft form shows Williams’s process towards defining these two embodiments as parallel figures within the poem.

Williams’s use of the verb “imitate” rather than “copy” is significant because of the emphasis the speaker places on imitation and the disdain he shows towards copying, a distinction

I will explain in greater detail below. For now, I only wish to point out that “I am a kind of imitation,” contradicts a later part of the poem that appears in the final draft which asks, “or / am I merely playing the poet?” (Williams 4, “The Desert Music” 281). In the draft, the speaker rises to the imitation he strives for throughout the poem. However, in the published version, the speaker reduces himself to the role of a player and the poem to the role of a play. Whatever Williams’s opinions about the merits of drama might be, “playing the part” hardly hits the mark when the goal is imitation. Williams’s preoccupation with the distinctions between imitation and copying should be read against his use of defamiliarization that favors simple representation of the thing without relying on intangible descriptions. In the case of this poem, the speaker questions whether or not he is truly living up to his own beliefs for poetry or if he is merely “playing” the part—which denotes a level of immaturity, foolishness, and, most critically, copying that imitation does not. The speaker seeks imitation over copying because imitation constitutes a type of art in his approximation—one where the goal is “to place myself (in / my nature) beside nature” (276). By contrast, copying requires little artistic talent because it seeks to produce nothing but shallow facsimile.

The crux of the speaker’s conflict is that he does not think he is capable of being a poet and that he believes he is engaging in a childish charade. Here, we can accept the invitation to consider the speaker and Williams as one and the same in order to recognize the gravity of the speaker’s uncertainty: despite his successful career, Williams’s stroke creates a crisis within the poet’s mind that leaves him to question his merit even though he has had little cause or reason to do so in the past. The speaker’s/Williams’s uncertainty, in other words, points to a feeling of failure that is all the more powerful in the face of Williams’s established success. The speaker’s self-deprecating identification as the “sack of rags” is balanced by his admission that he is an

imitation, a quality that the poem praises. However, the line that actually makes its way into the final published version of the poem (“Or / am I merely playing the poet?”) suggests that the speaker’s doubts take over—leaving him to question whether he has only been deceiving himself about his talent the whole time.

Williams grounds the speaker’s connection with the form through an identification that is also a metaphor, declaring “I am the music” (Williams 4). To understand the importance of this statement, we must first look at what Williams means by “music.” Music, as it first appears in the poem, is the force that animates the form on the bridge and wakens the dance. The music is derived from and depends upon the form in order to exist. The speaker says, “A music / supersedes his composure,” but the “composure” here is not simply a state of calmness, rather it is a state of self-possession, one in which the music supplants the form so that the form *is*, in some capacity, also the music.<sup>5</sup> So, when the speaker declares “I am the music,” he is admitting that he *is*, in some capacity, also the form (4). As the poem progresses, the music becomes a metaphor for *the poem* or the act of writing poetry. The speaker seeks to articulate the music and hopes, by doing so, that he will regain the ability to write poetry, which he feels he has lost.

As a reminder to himself, the speaker’s internal monologue punctuates his observations of the poem’s opening. Shortly after the poem opens, he describes the scene with a sense of urgency as the speaker struggles to grasp the act of writing the poem:

Only the poem.

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:  
to imitate, not to copy nature, not  
to copy nature

---

<sup>5</sup> To simplify, let us co-opt the transitive property where  $a=b$ ,  $b=c$ , thus  $a=c$ . So, if the form=the music and the music=the speaker then the form=the speaker.



write the poem stuck in his throat. “Benumbed fingers” is a peculiar phrase that offers more insight into the window between Williams and the speaker. The form’s appendages are all numb if we take the speaker’s observations of the figure to be true, but only the fingers warrant specific description. This detail is noteworthy when we consider that the speaker makes continued reference to other similarly disabled fingers in the poem. Fingers facilitate haptic interaction with the world—something that Williams depended on greatly for his work as a doctor and as a poet. The loss of his fingers, or the “benumbing” of them to the point that they are unusable is a very present concern for an aging poet faced with temporary paralysis. To lose his fingers to paralysis would also signal a loss of his ability to type and a loss of a mode through which he could come into contact with the world. The recurring finger motif appears several times throughout the poem as a catalyst for the speaker’s self-doubt:

Penny please! Give me penny please, mister.

Don’t give them anything.

. instinctively  
 one has already drawn one’s naked  
 wrist away from those obscene fingers  
 as in the mind a vague apprehension speaks  
 and the music rouses (“The Desert Music” 277)

“Those obscene fingers” belong to a beggar on the street asking for “penny please” as the speaker passes by. The speaker, though, refuses. He is disturbed by, above all else, the state of the beggar’s hand. The speaker’s repulsion to the implied deformity of the beggar’s hand seems to echo Williams’s own sense that, after his 1951 stroke, he might be perceived by others as revolting; this, at least, seems to be the tenor of a remark in a letter written later that year: “[the stroke] wasn’t bad but it was enough to make me want to keep away from strangers” (Williams,

14 September 1951). Because Williams has lived a very public non-disabled life, his disability appears to be a source of social shame.

In the draft version of the poem, the speaker's connection to the "obscene fingers" of the beggar is more explicit. The speaker and the beggar share a brief but memorable exchange towards the end of the poem (the last of their several encounters):

penny please. an insistent touch upon the naked wrist.  
Here! now go away.

Go away! (no come back I am you) (Williams 16)

Whether we read "(no come back I am you)" as the beggar's exclamation or the speaker's exclamation, the exclamation on its own insists on a level of recognition that the two figures are in some way connected and even in some way equals. If we attribute the exclamation to the beggar, we render the reading that the speaker hastens his escape from the beggar when the beggar makes clear their similarities. We can attribute the exclamation to the speaker and render the reading that the speaker seeks to reconcile himself to the beggar despite the shame that drove him to send the beggar away in the first place. Both readings offer a slightly altered interpretation of the interaction but both follow the same general thrust—the speaker is momentarily drawn to the reality of his connection to the beggar and that reality is shameful or alarming to him. The exclamation is an entreaty for the speaker (uttered either by the beggar or the speaker's own conscience) to face the reality of the "form" who appears at the opening of the poem, and whom the speaker seems desperate to ignore. The speaker cannot escape the reality of his connection to disability—not by walking away from the form and not by ignoring the beggar—because he cannot remove himself from his body and still be a poet.

As tempting as it is to assume a direct correlation between Williams and the speaker in this particular aspect of the poem—that is, the speaker's reaction to forms of disability is made

more intelligible through our knowledge of Williams's sudden entry into disability as he neared the age of 70—to do so would be an overreach. We can speculate that the form is repulsive to the speaker because Williams was repulsed by his own paralysis, but the poem does not substantiate this conclusion because the speaker is not explicitly disabled. Even so, the poem's continued emphasis on disabled forms leads to the important question of *why* embodiment features so heavily in the poem. If we read this focus on disability as a poet's internal struggle with the bodily conditions that produce poetry, then the speaker finds the form repulsive because the form is the origin of the music that produces poetry—the same music that the speaker is trying and failing to grasp.

Each instance of deformed fingers in the poem prompts action from the music. As the poem opens, the music awakens the benumbed fingers of the form on the bridge. The speaker's rejection of the "obscene hand" rouses the music, and finally as the poem draws to a close, the appearance of the fingers portends the reawakening of the music that follows. The *music* of "The Desert Music" is tied inexorably to the appearance of deformed and abnormal embodiments. Whether it is the "inhuman shapelessness" that haunts the speaker throughout the poem, the "obscene fingers" of the beggar, or the "old whore" the speaker encounters in a "cheap Mexican joint," the music gravitates towards these stigmatized embodiments ("The Desert Music" 247, 277, 281). When there are no deformed figures to gravitate towards—as when the speaker enters a bar to leave the beggar behind on the street or when the speaker leaves the dancer—the music fades from the poem. The speaker is searching for the music but he cannot seem to fully grasp the idea that the music arises from the deformed embodiments that he appears to spurn. Thus, it seems, the speaker is reluctant to admit the connection between disabled embodiments and the creation of the poem.

In the final moments of the poem, the speaker returns to his near-paranoid state that began the poem, declaring, “I *am* a poet! I / am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed” (“The Desert Music” 284). The speaker’s need to reaffirm and his concurrent feeling of shame exemplify the poet’s mixed reactions to his own inadequacy—an inadequacy that draws to mind Williams’s own perception of his disability as detailed in letters written to friends and colleagues. For the speaker, however, the feeling of inadequacy arises from a failure to accept that the music comes *from* disabled embodiments rather than from the speaker’s own embodiment. Circuitously, the poem engages in the recognition of a disability aesthetic wherein the disabled body, rather than the non-disabled body, becomes the determination of the aesthetic ideal.<sup>6</sup> Because the music seeks out embodiments that are not copying or pretending, the form experiences a level of preference with the music that the speaker’s non-disabled embodiment prevents.

Despite granting humanity to the form at the beginning of the poem, by the end of the poem, the speaker rejects the form a final time—remanding it back to its status of “an inhuman shapelessness” (“The Desert Music” 274). The speaker returns to the spot on the bridge between Juárez and El Paso where the form still rests. He stands “aghast” and observes it:

shapeless or rather returned  
to its original shape, armless, legless,  
headless, packed like the pit of a fruit into  
that obscure corner—or  
a fish to swim against the stream—or  
a child in the womb prepared to imitate life,  
warding its life against  
a birth of awful promise. The music  
guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,  
a numbing ink that stains the  
sea of our minds—to hold us off—shed

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<sup>6</sup> In this context, I am employing Siebers’s definition of disability aesthetic: an aesthetic that “embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result” (Siebers 3).



of a shape close as it can get to no shape,  
a music! a protecting music . (284)

The speaker's revulsion toward the form suggests that he has not garnered any sense of understanding from his encounters over the course of the poem. However, his tactless description of the form makes way for a nuanced consideration of the music. Like a mother's womb, the music becomes a protective barrier around the form to safeguard it against "us"—the speaker, his group, and the reader (insofar as the reader must experience the form through the speaker's consciousness)—that would rather see the figure thrown into the river. The speaker notes at the beginning of the poem that "The law" views the form as "nothing / but a corpse," as a lifeless entity deserving of nothing (274). Here, too, we must recall that the form exists on a bridge where law is divided and neither the United States nor Mexico are responsible for the "corpse" that exists in the nebulous middle ground between their borders.

Perhaps the most compelling line of the penultimate stanza, which follows shortly after the rebirth stanza, is the last:

Now the music volleys through as in  
a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all  
around me. The dance! The verb detaches itself  
seeking to become articulate . ("The Desert Music" 284)

The "verb" in question carries a number of meanings. It may signify the dance—"to dance / two and two with him" for example. However, the verb can also be the noun that performs the action—in other words, the verb may be both the form *and* the speaker. The figurative definition of "verb" states that it is something "typically connoting activeness or the performance of an action;" here a dancer may serve as an instance of the unity of actor and action ("Verb"). Supposing that the verb in question is connected to the form: its search to become articulate indicates a drive for that embodiment to build its own agency—to move of its own volition, to

participate in the dance, to compose the poem. We must understand “articulate” to mean both the ability to speak and the possession of joints and connections. However, if the verb is the speaker, the search to become articulate suggests that the speaker was not capable of articulation prior to this point.

Deconstructing this line in the context of Williams’s life adds an additional layer to what is already dense with intent. Allowing, for a moment, the conceit of assuming Williams and the speaker are equivalent, the search for articulation stretches beyond a desire to write poetry again. Williams’s physical inarticulation, unlike the speaker’s, *is* believable because his stroke in 1951 rendered him paralyzed for a short period of time. Beyond the general desire to regain all of his mobility, Williams sought the same sort of articulation the speaker seeks in the poem. Intellectually, Williams felt that he could not articulate his thoughts after his stroke. He believed, at least for a short period of time, that the damage done to him physically was indicative of his capacity and ability as a poet. In either case—physical or intellectual—Williams believed himself to be inarticulate, and, we may suppose, to “detach” himself from a disabled embodiment would allow him to confidently write poetry again.

The poem’s depictions of encounters with the music, I am arguing, may be aligned with the rather real reactions that may result when humans are faced with crises of embodiment—reactions of dysphoria, of disassociation, of disavowing a body that one does not feel one belongs in. Williams’s solution to his crisis of embodiment—his sudden and unexpected disability—resides in the poem, which operates as a proving ground to explore his relationship to his embodiment and to his identity as a poet. Of course, we can only speculate about this poem’s reflections of Williams’s perception of his paralysis. Collected letters over the remaining decade of Williams’s life suggest that the poet continued to struggle with his embodiment as his strokes

became more numerous and his paralysis more extreme. The search for articulation is prompted by “The dance!,” an expostulation brimming with relief and surprise, that drives the poem toward its climax.

“The Desert Music”’s search for articulation (both in communication and mobility) is split evenly between the speaker and the form. The speaker, having spent the duration of the poem at odds with his own bodymind, detaches himself from his embodiment and retreats inward. His search for poetry culminates in the rejection of an embodiment altogether and a reflection on the “wonders of the brain” to produce poetry. The form rejects its embodiment, too, and become shapeless—in that shapelessness it finds articulation because it is not bound by external preconceptions. In this instance, though, shapeless is not intended as a derogatory observation, rather it is intended to emphasize the form’s agency over itself. Without being tied to an embodiment that the speaker finds repulsive, the form can partake in the dance as an articulate entity. The dance, as discussed above, cannot exist without a body to dance in. So, how do we reconcile detachment to the dance? The speaker’s reflection offers us an answer: “the wonders of the brain” (“The Desert Music” 284). The wonders of the brain allow the dance to be shared by the speaker and the form: to understand the mind as a part of bodymind, reject Cartesian dualism and invest the mind with physicality, is to animate the shapelessness with thought and feeling. The form, in other words, still exists as a physical entity, but it is no longer restricted to the words and phrases the speaker attributes to it. Similarly, the speaker rejects the embodiment that could not grow closer to the music and is reborn into the realization that the mind that produces the poem is also a part of embodiment. For “only to a logical mind does this reluctant primal mass seem undefined or uninformed; for Williams it is ‘form,’ a work of art, a poet” (Marzán 257). Once the speaker rejects the confines of embodiment, he is able to

recognize the merit of the form as the source of both the music and the poem. The logical mind, the one tied to embodiment, cannot see the art within the form, both poetic form and the “form propped motionless on the bridge.” But the speaker (and Williams), once detached from “logical” thinking, can view the form as the poem and see it as an unfamiliar and poetic entity unto itself.

## Imitation and Copying

Imitation and copy appear to be similar terms, but in Williams's hand a crucial difference exists between them, and this difference informs Williams's poetry. To copy is to produce something identical to or nearly identical to something that already exists. To imitate is to take something as a model and use it as the basis for creating something new.<sup>7</sup> Williams's style of defamiliarization lends itself to imitation which is likely why the speaker of the poem places such emphasis on the distinction between the two. Williams uses defamiliarization to make the reader experience something familiar as if for the first time; imitation serves a similar purpose because it uses what already exists to create something new. Copying, on the other hand, merely reproduces something that has been done before and does not seek to make anything new at all. The speaker reminds us that the goal of poetry is imitation;

—to place myself (in  
my nature) beside nature

—to imitate  
nature (for to copy nature would be a  
shameful thing) (“The Desert Music” 276)

Imitating nature implies, too, that the poet must imitate *how* nature creates, that is by “using [nature's] illogical idea of order, identifiable patterns yet with spontaneous, unexplained variations that justify themselves in the total harmony, a mixture of counted measures and breaks from the pattern, a dance” (Marzán 245). The speaker's struggle to imitate nature, then, is caused by his failure to completely embrace the disorder, variation, and imperfection with which nature creates.

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<sup>7</sup> Recall the deceptive simplicity of “The Red Wheelbarrow” as a touchstone for Williams's defamiliarization.

To some extent, the physical form<sup>8</sup> of “The Desert Music” can be interpreted as Williams’s attempt to imitate nature. Since the poem is endlessly preoccupied with the question of its own composition, we should not forget to consider how that poem appears to us on the page. “The Desert Music” is a visually fragmented poem, containing short, almost lyrical lines, longer prose sections, and periodic appearances of Williams’s “variable foot” or “triadic line.” Critic Neil Myers suggests that the poem’s “implicit struggle between self-doubt and the effort towards new attitudes and forms comes directly from [Williams’s] shock” following his stroke (Myers 38). Myers goes on to suggest that the poem’s fragmented form is Williams’s attempt to put the idea of imitating nature into practice. Given that nature creates illogically, the seeming disorder of “The Desert Music,” comes into focus, instead, as an effort to imitate nature’s spontaneity and variation. Like nature, also, there is an inherent pattern to “The Desert Music.” Myers notes; “its structure is firmly circular. The opening lines announce directly that the poem “begins” where it will “end,” thus defining its own inherent logic (40). Myer’s argument posits, and I am inclined to agree, that “The Desert Music” operates as Williams’s personal effort to imitate nature. Williams perceives nature’s creative force as something infinitely complicated and apparently disorganized but also as an overarching universal force capable of bringing even the most fragmented of things to a complete and satisfying conclusion.

The speaker’s encounter with a “worn-out trouper from / the States” sparks the first real discussion of imitation and copying within the poem:

So we drink until the next turn—a strip tease.

Do you mean it? Wow! Look at her.

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<sup>8</sup> Form, here, is *not* the “inhuman shapelessness” from previous discussions. Rather, it is the poetic “form” or shape a poem takes by way of its line and visual appearance on the page.

You'd have to be  
 pretty drunk to get any kick out of that.  
 She's no Mexican. Some worn-out trouper from  
 the States. Look at those breasts

There is a fascination  
 seeing her shake  
 the beaded sequins from  
 a string about her hips

She gyrates but it's  
 not what you think,  
 one does not laugh  
 to watch her belly. ("The Desert Music" 279)

Like the form and the beggar before her, the woman acts as a catalyst for the music.

Interestingly, though, the speaker does not recoil from this form—instead he is mesmerized by her. He observes towards the end of her show that “she fits / the music” (280). The dancer’s relationship to the music mirrors that of the speaker’s desired relationship to the music. The speaker observes that the dancer is “part of another tune,” suggesting that the music she fits is not the same music that every other patron at the bar can hear. Instead it is a music unique to the speaker and the forms he encounters in the poem—the music that is created by nature, the music that justifies itself by way of its refusal to conform. Everything about the dancer is fake, the way she pretends to be Mexican, the way she pretends to be pretty, the way she pretends to care—yet, the speaker sees through the dancer’s façade and recognizes that she does not pretend to herself:

in her mockery of virtue  
 she becomes unaccountably virtuous .  
 though she in no  
 way pretends it . (280)

The dancer accomplishes what the speaker is unable to, she embraces herself without concern for what others think of her—she may be an imitation of something prettier or more desirable, but she does not confuse that imitation with herself. She does not copy:

She  
 at least knows she's  
 part of another tune,  
 knows her customers,  
 has the same  
 opinion of them as I  
 have. That gives her  
 one up . . . one up  
 following the lying  
 music . . . (280)

When the speaker recognizes that she “knows she’s / part of another tune,” he is forced into another moment of doubt. He and his companion promptly leave the bar and the speaker questions, “am I merely playing the poet?” (281). The speaker’s doubt is born from his poetic musings on the dancer’s body—musings that his companion questions “What the hell / are you grinning / to yourself about? Not / at *her*?”—that feel to him as if he is once again a poet. The “lying” music, causes the speaker to doubt his own truth, rather than the truth of the dancer. She becomes “an alter image to [the speaker’s] own duplicity” because she is not copying nature (Marzán 250). The speaker’s poetic failing—something only akin to playing the part—is an unsettling contrast to the confident imitation of the dancer.

Recall that the speaker invited the form into a dance at the beginning of the poem. The woman’s occupation as a dancer is no mere coincidence. Rather, her imitation of nature stands as a model for the poem. The speaker, although somewhat distanced from the dancer, maintains his awe at her “virtue.” Unlike the speaker who worries that he is “playing” pretend, the dancer does not pretend at all. Instead, her “mockery” becomes something of an imitation that makes her “virtuous.” The dancer, whose profession generally disqualifies her from virtue, is, in fact, the most virtuous person in the bar because she engages with the dance on her own terms, allowing just as much of herself to be a part of it as needed to create an imitation, never going far enough to become a copy. Like the figure of Elise before her, the dancer is subject to the speaker’s



perceptions of her appearance. The “worn-out trouper’s” hips and breasts, her heavy footing, her “everything” which hangs forward in some grotesque display, are reminiscent of Elsie’s ungainly appearance. Though, here, the speaker seems to appreciate the dancer’s “mockery of virtue” more so than he did Elsie’s lumbering presence.

The dancer’s imitation avoids copying because she is as aware as the speaker that she is not classically beautiful. Instead, she embraces her unmusical body and hears her own music.

The dancer reminds the speaker that he *is* pretending:

In the street it hit  
me in the face as we started to walk again. Or  
am I merely playing the poet? Do I merely invent  
it out of whole cloth? I thought . (“The Desert Music” 281)

Pretending is as much a failure to poetry as copying—the dancer leads him to ask, “Do I merely invent.” Invention as with copying and pretending is not the imitation that the speaker strives for, he knows this, he recognizes it because he sees the dancer’s imitation and responds by questioning his own—ultimately concluding that his own work is not imitation. The dancer has no explicit physical disability; this, perhaps, is why the speaker is more willing to stay and watch her than he was with the form or the beggar. However, his sense of composure with her deteriorates just as it did with the form and the beggar because she, too, reminds him that he is not as competent in his poetry as he would like to be. Unlike the dancer, the speaker feels shame for his inadequacies as a poet and, faced with the dancer’s confidence, this shame redounds on the speaker. The dancer’s ease with her imitation unsettles the speaker because he cannot find that ease within himself as a poet. When the speaker leaves, he does so because the dancer has forced him to confront his failure at imitation.

### The Music

In “The Desert Music,” the music *is* the poem. The music inhabits the poem just as surely as the speaker and the form do. Music appears first with the form in the poem’s opening; it acts as the catalyst to awaken the figure and the dance. The “dance” and the “music” are nearly synonymous—but not completely so. The music is the driving force that allows one to compose the poem, while the dance is the poem once it has been written. The poem begins with a dance. The dance and the music are literally and figuratively the origin of the poem. Thus, the opening line, “—the dance begins:” serves as an invocation for the poem to follow and a statement of the relationship between the dance and the poem (“The Desert Music” 273). Following the invocation, the *poem* begins with the lines, “to end about a form / propped motionless” (273). The poem’s first image—a motionless form on a bridge—will also be its closing image: “There it sat / in the projecting angle of the bridge flange” (284). Thus, the poem is bookended by the form, while everything within the poem is dependent on the music that originates from the form and other anonymous embodiments.

After discovering the bundled form asleep on the bridge with its knees drawn up to its belly, the speaker notes that the form responds to a strain of music that is “hallooing to us / across a great distance” (“The Desert Music” 274). This music “wakens the dance / who blows upon his benumbed fingers!” (274). Music has set in motion a “dance” around the form, and this is what “the poem” must capture; only the poem can “get said what must / be said” about the form (274). The question of calling the police to look into the form’s condition is raised and

dismissed, for “[t]he law is based on murder and confinement” (275). Instead, the form is attended to by “insensate music” (275).

The term “insensate,” meaning “destitute of physical sense or feeling; without sensation, ‘senseless’, inanimate,” is ambiguous here (“Insensate”). Prior to this description, the speaker observes that the music is animated, that it is capable of awakening a form that was believed to be dead—this is a music with agency and with purpose. The music may not have a physical embodiment, but it is not without sense. The speaker’s use of an ill-fitting term for the music stems, perhaps, from the revelation that the music stirs in him, “an agony of self-realization / bound into a whole” (275). Just as the music stirs the form, it also stirs the speaker into a fit of uncertainty. The force that binds self-realization into the “whole” of the speaker, and perhaps Williams, is the music, “that which surrounds us” (275). The music is the thread that ties the speaker to the form on the bridge; it facilitates the action that forces moments of self-realization wherein the speaker identifies *as* the form.

In order to distance himself from his unsettling self-realization, the speaker leaves the form on the bridge. As soon as he walks away from the form, the music swells: the speaker calls it “subdued, distant, half / heard,” but the music is strong enough to engulf the speaker all the same (“The Desert Music” 275). This time, though, the music is not insensate, rather the music is “a music of survival” (275). Whether it is the speaker’s survival or the form’s survival is not specified, but we can infer that it is both the form’s survival alone on the bridge and the speaker’s survival as a poet. While the speaker cannot grasp the music fully, his tie to the figure means that he is tied, also, to the music and thus the music is as much a protective force for him as it is for the figure. As the speaker leaves the place where he first encounters the form, the

music fades away. The second time the music makes an appearance it is responding to “a vague apprehension”:

instinctively

one hand has already drawn one’s naked  
wrist away from those obscene fingers  
as in the mind a vague apprehension speaks  
and the music rouses . (277)

The beggar with “obscene fingers”—or the manifestation of the speaker’s fears discussed previously—are the foundation of his “vague apprehension” which prompts the music in action. In this stanza, the music appears either as a protective force for the beggar or as a reminder to the speaker of the form that he walked away from before. In either case, the music reappears when the speaker is faced with an opportunity to address and, perhaps, relate to a deformed embodiment. However, the speaker turns from the beggar—he has not yet come to accept his connection to the beggar—and the music is subsequently “cut off as / the bar door closes” (277). Where the music’s relationship to the form and the beggar may have been less clear before, here—when the music is stopped so abruptly—the relationship is clear. The music cannot appear without a form to prompt its arrival; moreover, it is tied to the things that the speaker finds repulsive and undesirable. Again, the speaker’s overarching conflict surfaces. In order to regain his confidence as a poet, he must embrace the forms that disgust him. The music drives the poem and creates the dance that *is* the poem, but in order to write the poem, the speaker must overcome his propensity to spurn people who are atypically embodied.

Recalling the earlier discussion of the speaker’s final encounter with the beggar—the beggar has asked for “penny please” and the speaker has responded, “Go away! (no come back I am you)” —we know that the music accompanies the beggar’s plea for money. Unlike the draft version, though, the published poem lacks the jarring addition of “I am you,” that seems to jolt

the speaker into recognition of the parallel between himself and the embodiments he encounters. What does remain is the speaker's frustration with the music that only grows in intensity after the beggar leaves him. Although the explicit parallel is cut from the published poem, the implicit feelings of unease that the encounter elicits in the speaker remain. To escape this unease, the speaker walks further from the street in search of "relief from that changeless, endless / inescapable and insistent music" that follows the forms he encounters ("The Desert Music" 284). Peter Middleton posits that the music "represents consciousness in sonic rather than visual terms, as if every thought and feeling arose as audible words and sounds, an inner world of sound whose relation to the outer vibrant soundscape like that of the border town is fractured, uneasy and yet pressing" (Middleton 173). Although Middleton's analysis positions the music as the unifying factor between incongruous places—two border cities—his reasoning can be extended to encompass the unification of incongruous embodiments. The fractured, pressing uneasiness need not apply only to Williams's desire to find unity between his Puerto Rican heritage and his American heritage. It can also apply more physically to the desire for unity between consciousness and body. The inescapable music, then, becomes the speaker's own internal conflict manifesting itself through the music.

Middleton goes on to define the use of sound in the poem; "sound permeates the body and the body continually radiates its sounds into the surrounding world," allowing for the music to be a part of the speaker as well as the disabled embodiments (Middleton 173). The fact that the dancer has her own music and that the music follows the beggar and the form only underscores the idea that music resonates from these bodies out into the world and that the speaker, a poet searching for inspiration, reacts to this sound. The music volleys back at the

speaker as sound radiating back from a body into the surrounding world, and the speaker must engage with it and with the form from which it radiates:

Oh, come on. What's that?  
 But what's THAT? the music! the  
*music!* as when Casals struck  
 and held a deep cello tone  
 and I am speechless. ("The Desert Music" 283-284)

Sheldon suggests that "this evocation of Casals is... Williams's search for artistic genealogy" (Sheldon 51). It is no secret that Williams sought to establish an American poetic tradition unto itself, but at this point in the poet's career, it was apparent that he had already done so. That Williams must turn to the artistic canon for a connection to another tradition suggests that he felt the need to establish his authority over his genre once again. Until this point, the music has avoided definition—in the sense that the speaker could not articulate how the music sounded, only that it sounded insistent or insensate. Just as the speaker defined the form by way of the dance, so too does he define the poem by way of the music. The speaker's familiarity with the music and his admiration for Casals causes him to stop and consider the music. Using Casals as a touchstone seems to console the speaker and allows him to embrace the music more fully than he had previously. The music brings him face to face with the form from the opening of the poem in a reconciliation that he has studiously avoided.

In this reconciliation—what the speaker characterizes as "a lonely moment"—the music returns:

Now the music volleys as in  
 a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all  
 about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself  
 seeking to become articulate . ("The Desert Music" 284)

Affirming that he has “heard” the music is significant. The speaker has consistently avoided direct contact (the sort of contact on which Williams’s style of defamiliarization insists) with elements of the poem. To hear the music is to admit to engagement with the form. The dance stirs to life as the music surrounds the speaker. Once the speaker allows himself to embrace the music and the form from which it originates, he can finally experience the dance—that is, he can finally reconcile himself to the poetry of a different embodiment, whether that embodiment is different from the speaker’s own or, for Williams, different from what it once was.

The surrounding music is something altogether different from what the speaker anticipates. As he has observed earlier, the music, which surrounds the form, is a “protecting music:”

There it sat  
 in the projecting angle of the bridge flange  
 as I stood aghast and looked at it—  
 in the half-light: shapeless or rather returned  
 to its original shape, armless, legless,  
 headless, packed like the pit of a fruit into  
 that obscure corner—or  
 a fish to swim against the stream—or  
 a child in the womb prepared to imitate life,  
 warding its life against  
 a birth of awful promise. The music  
 guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,  
 a benumbing ink that stains the  
 sea of our minds—to hold us off—shed  
 of a shape close as it can get to no shape,  
 a music! a protecting music . (“The Desert Music” 284)

Although the poem espouses the speaker’s need to accept the figure in order to regain his ability to write poetry, the music separates the speaker from the form. The “protecting” music becomes a mother’s womb and the form is reborn from the music, reborn into an imitation of life. Rebirth, though, establishes yet another level of distance between the form and the speaker. For the

speaker to be reborn he must detach himself from his preconceptions about the world—those same preconceptions that have left him feeling uneasy and unsettled in the presence of the form, the beggar, and the dancer. To accomplish this, he needs to defamiliarize himself with his embodiment and allow the same sort of detachment that the form allows.

Musical resolution develops, finally, into a transcendent departure from embodiment. The form, as the speaker describes it, appears to fold in on itself within the protection of the music so that it is as “close as it can get to no shape” (“The Desert Music” 284). By choosing shapelessness, the form takes control of, or gains articulation over its expression. It is, effectively, reborn through the music into an abstraction that defies the speaker’s definition. The speaker’s shift from irritably calling the music “inescapable” to appreciating the music’s powers of protection suggests his own desire to be reborn, like the form, through the music. The speaker reflects, finally, on the form, the music, and the “wonders” that produce poetry:

And I could not help thinking  
of the wonders of the brain that  
hears that music and of our  
skill sometimes to record it. (284)

This reflection may seem relatively simple, coming as it does at the end of a poem dense with complex relationships, themes, metaphors, and unnamed entities; however, it manages to offer a resolution to the conflict with which the poem began. The speaker’s initial question of how he might find it in himself to compose another poem eventuates his own rebirth. The speaker’s rebirth parallels the form’s rebirth, but it does not directly *mirror* the form’s rebirth. The form is reborn into a state of abstraction, where it is not bound by its shape, while the speaker is reborn into a moment of realization where he settles into the understanding that if he, too, accepts a state of abstraction or, at least, does not hold so tightly to non-disabled embodiment, the music will follow him.



## Conclusion

Viet Thanh Nguyen writes in his book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, about the experience of minorities in recorded memory and history:

Disremembering is not simply the failure to remember. Disremembering is the unethical and paradoxical mode of forgetting at the same time as remembering, or, from the perspective of the other who is disremembered, of being simultaneously seen and not seen. Disremembering allows someone to see right through the *other*. (Nguyen 63)

Nguyen writes about the experience of Vietnamese people during and after the Vietnam war, but his theory about memory is applicable beyond the memory of war. Disremembering is a concept with which minority groups are intimately acquainted. Even in academic scholarship, disremembering casts a shadow on figures that have been recorded for posterity without mention to key aspects of their lives. William Carlos Williams was a disabled poet: he produced several books of poetry after becoming paralyzed which constitute a body of disabled poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Williams's disability has been disremembered from critical discussion. This focused forgetting can be explained by any number of reasons—a result of negative social responses to disability in the mid to late-1900s, a holdover from New Criticism, an effort to spare Williams shame, a dearth of discussions of disability and literature until only a few decades ago—but its reality remains, and with it, a question about how to address the case of Williams's disremembering.

Disremembering brings to bear a number of ethical conflicts, not least of which is the suppression of minority inclusion in the literary canons of the global north—a canon that has

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Rudman, American poet and literary critic, says about Williams's post-stroke work; "Part of the pleasure of reading through Williams' work is watching him develop and, miraculously, leap to even higher ground, "beyond poetry," after he has suffered a stroke (Rudman 35).

appeared, throughout history, to be predominantly Caucasian, cis-male, heterosexual, neurotypical, and non-disabled. The erasure of any part of an individual's identity is unethical, especially when that individual is a historical figure or a creator of culture. Representation in literature signals to the greater population that variations of human difference are worthy of public acceptance. Remembering Williams as a poet with disabilities and his late poetry as intimately related to those disabilities sets a precedent for including disability into literary canons and into culture—two places where disability has been alarmingly absent.

An effort to remember Williams's disability should not simply be an attempt to right a perceived wrong in his biographical record. The fact of his paralysis is no secret—though I hesitate to insist on Williams's inclusion in a disability canon because he never publicly identified as a member of the disability community. Undoubtedly, this had to do with the stigmas associated with disability in the 1950s. Indeed, Williams's recorded efforts to appear "normal" undermine any possibility that he would appreciate the association with disability. Rather, efforts to remember Williams's disability should focus on situating Williams's post-stroke poetry into disability literature canon. Williams may not have intended disability aesthetics for his work, but the evidence of disability-oriented considerations of embodiment and poetry in poems like "The Desert Music" remain.

The speaker's conflict with the form and his transcendent experience with the poem's music prompts us to consider the importance of varied embodiment in the composition and execution of poetry. The form in "The Desert Music" stands apart from other examples of disability and human variation in Williams's poetry because the form, while never granted the level of recognition given to a figure like Elsie (who is allowed a name), has more agency than other figures of disability. Elsie operates as a device to convey an end that does not fully concern

her. Her presence in “To Elsie” is situational and could, to some extent, be replaced with a different example of human variation without much alteration to the poem overall. The form, however, is the foundation of and the driving force in “The Desert Music”; it holds a degree of power over the speaker through its mere presence. Without going so far as to assume an airtight correlation between Williams’s stroke and the shift in disability representation in his work, we can, at the very least, recognize Williams’s apparent interest in divergent embodiment after 1951. Admitting Williams’s disabled body into literature—the body of the “form”—allows for an overlooked, but quite compelling, discussion of a poet’s relationship to embodiment.

In literary criticism, disability representation is often relegated to discussions of the metaphorical use of disability in a text to explore *some other* theme. According to Linett, modernism, in particular, is dependent on “physical disabilities as a means to question ideas about sexuality, intimacy, communication, knowledge, and subjectivity more broadly, and to reflect on the formal experimentation crucial to modernist praxis” (Linett 3). While this is certainly true of many modernist works that include reference to and characters with disability, it engages with only one aspect of disability in modernist canon. Linett’s framework overlooks the potentiality for a modernism that engages in disability aesthetic not through metaphor but through experiential exploration of physical disability—she states: “Modernism’s representations of the relations between bodily aspects and subjectivity do not generally succeed in showing how a mobility impairment, deafness, blindness, or deformity might actually affect human subjectivity” (7). I grant that Williams is an isolated case in modernist canon; however, I do not grant that modernism entirely misunderstands “disability’s effect on the bodymind” (7). “The Desert Music” stands, perhaps alone, as evidence that modernism *can* represent the relationship between bodymind and subjectivity since the poem operates as an extensive exploration of

embodiment as it applies to one's self and one's art. Although Williams leans heavily into the modernist trend of focusing on the mind's experience of the external world—"the verb detaches itself / seeking to become articulate"—he does so through the *lens* of disability rather than at the expense of disability. Williams's exploration of bodymind is one that grants the disabled experience agency within the poem.<sup>10</sup>

As a basis for understanding disability in modernist literature overall, Linett's approach falls short of recognizing works wherein disability is not a metaphor but a hermeneutic. The distinction between the two is key. In Linett's analysis, disability is a vehicle for another concept since it is a convenient image of deformity and variation that serves some ulterior artistic purpose. With this treatment of disability, the person with disability is merely a caricature devoid of agency or import. In Williams's post-stroke work, disability is a hermeneutic that allows Williams to explore concepts of identity and poetic inspiration from an entirely new perspective. With Williams's treatment of disability, the perspective of disability provides a new lens of analysis for a given set of themes. The metaphor *uses* disability to discuss a concept while the hermeneutic allows disability to guide how one interacts with the concept. Disability aesthetics and modernist aesthetics need not be at odds with one another, they can and should be allowed to coalesce.

"The Desert Music" prompts us to consider what it is about a normal body that leads us to believe it is inherently truthful or ideal. The form shows us that even when reduced to the lowest possible circumstances, a body can still produce music. Similarly, the dancer illustrates

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<sup>10</sup> Keep in mind, though, that "agency" should be read within the historic context of the 1950s and should not assume a 21<sup>st</sup> century connotation. Instead, take "agency" to be the difference between the "form" in "The Desert Music" and Elsie in "To Elsie."

the need to push aside societal expectations and inhabit the body comfortably. The body, in both cases, is not qualified as “fully functional” or “desirable”; rather, the body is a vessel (in whatever form that vessel may take) that generates meaning and carries the mind forward. The speaker offers us a look into the mind of a non-disabled person attempting to discover why people with atypical bodies are content to live in those bodies. What he discovers is that the state of the body has little to do with the body’s ability to produce music; rather the bodies that produce music are those that have accepted their variation and have refused to sacrifice that acceptance to please someone or something besides the self. The dance and the music (which represent the poem and composition of the poem) can encompass any vocation or activity in which an individual chooses to participate. Those unable to accept themselves will have difficulties performing those vocations and activities, while those who have accepted themselves will participate without barriers.

Stephen Kuusisto, an American poet and essayist on disability aesthetics, makes an interesting observation about the inclusion of the disabled body in literature. In his essay “Why I’m a Crippled Poet,” he writes, “I’m a poet who not only admits the defective body into literature—I think the imagination is starving for what that damned body knows” (Kuusisto 254). Perhaps ironically, Kuusisto also observes that the established discipline of literary criticism (that which follows the New Critical approach to literature) seems to demand that all “‘great’ poetry comes from the grandest of all human resources—the dis-embodied mind” (253).<sup>11</sup> His tongue in cheek summary characterizes the established mode of thinking about disability in

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<sup>11</sup> Kuusisto’s “dis-embodied mind” is somewhat different from the rejection of embodiment that Williams explores in “The Desert Music.” Kuusisto’s dis-embodied mind references the tendency to ignore the physical or neurological conditions of a poem’s composition—that is to say, if a poet is disabled or if a poet is depressed these traits should not be discussed in relation to the poem. Williams’s rejection of embodiment is a personal reconciliation of two incongruous parts of his identity.

literature—*don't*. This detached mode of literary scholarship aims to focus on the meaning of the words on a page; a poem can and should stand alone and apart from its poet. However, this approach does not leave room for the possibility that when (not *if*) a poet writes, the product of that writing will also be the product of his time, his experience, and his embodiment. Kuusisto urges us to think about what we gain when we admit the disabled body into literature.

Although Williams may not want to be remembered as a disabled poet, his post-stroke poetry *should* be remembered as disability poetry because it addresses embodiment and poetry directly. Disabled embodiments urge readers and critics alike to challenge preconceptions about form and identity and offer perspective and experience that diverges from the known. Williams sought to convey “the thing itself” as purely and simply as possible. To some extent, that effort is enhanced by disability because non-standard embodiment allows an individual to encounter some mundane object as if they have never seen it before. Atypical embodiment alters how we view and interact with the world around us. When someone becomes disabled, like Williams, late in life, they undergo a sort of re-introduction to the world. Williams sought that same experience throughout his poetic career and finally experienced it for himself through disability. The resulting work is a work that understands or, at the very least, seeks to understand the intricacies of what it means to live in a body and how, ultimately, that body reflects on an individual’s creative work.

## Appendix

### “The Desert Music”

—the dance begins: to end about a form  
 propped motionless—on the bridge  
 between Juárez and El Paso—unrecognizable  
 in the semi-dark

Wait!

The others waited while you inspected it,  
 on the very walk itself .

Is it alive?

—neither a head,  
 legs nor arms!

It isn't a sack of rags someone  
 has abandoned here . torpid against  
 the flange of the supporting girder . ?

an inhuman shapelessness,  
 knees hugged tight up into the belly

Egg-shaped!

What a place to sleep!  
 on the International Boundary. Where else,  
 interjurisdictional, not to be disturbed?

How shall we get said what must be said?

Only the poem.

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:  
 to imitate, not to copy nature, not  
 to copy nature

NOT, prostrate, to copy nature  
 but a dance! to dance  
 two and two with him—  
 sequestered there asleep,  
 right end up!

A music  
 supersedes his composure, hallooing to us  
 across a great distance . . .

wakens the dance  
 who blows upon his benumbed fingers!

Only the poem  
 only the made poem, to get said what must  
 be said, not to copy nature, sticks  
 in our throats . . .

The law? The law gives us nothing  
 but a corpse, wrapped in a dirty mantle.  
 The law is based on murder and confinement,  
 long delayed,  
 but this, following the insensate music,  
 is based on the dance:

an agony of self-realization.  
 bound into a whole  
 by that which surrounds us . . .

I cannot escape

I cannot vomit it up

Only the poem!

Only the made poem, the verb calls it  
 into being.

—it looks too small for a man.  
 A woman. Or a very shriveled old man.  
 Maybe dead. They probably inspect the place  
 and will cart it away later . . .

Heave it into the river,  
 A good thing.

Leaving California to return east, the fertile desert,  
 (were it to get water)  
 surrounded us, a music of survival, subdued, distant, half  
 heard; we were engulfed  
 by it as in the early evening, seeing the wind lift  
 and drive the sand, we





What makes Texans so tall?  
 We saw a woman this morning in a mink cape  
 six feet if she was an inch. What a woman!  
 Probably a Broadway figure.

—tell you what else we saw: about a million  
 sparrows screaming their heads off  
 in the trees of that small park where  
 the buses stop, sanctuary,  
 I suppose,  
 from the wind driving the sand in that way  
 about the city .

Texas rain they call it

—and those two alligators in the fountain .

There were four

I saw only two

They were looking  
 right at you all the time .

Penny please! Give me a penny please, mister.

Don't give them anything.

. instinctively  
 one has already drawn one's naked  
 wrist away from those obscene fingers  
 as in the mind a vague apprehension speaks  
 and the music rouses .

Let's get in here.  
 a music! cut off as  
 the bar door closes behind us.

We've got  
 another half hour.

—returned to the street,  
 the pressure moves from booth to booth along  
 the curb. Opposite, no less insistent  
 the better stores are wide open. Come in

and look around. You don't have to buy: hats,  
riding boots, blankets .

Look at the way,  
slung from her neck with a shawl, that young  
Indian woman carries her baby!

—a stream of Spanish,  
as she brushes by, intense, wide-  
eyed in eager talk with her boy husband

—three half-grown girls, one of them eating a  
pomegranate. Laughing.

and the serious tourist,  
man and wife, middle-aged, middle-western,  
their arms loaded with loot, whispering  
together—still looking for bargains .

and the aniline  
red and green candy at the little booth  
tended by the old Indian woman.

Do you suppose anyone actually  
buys—and eats the stuff?

My feet are beginning to ache me.

We still got a few minutes.  
Let's try here. They had the mayor  
up last month for taking \$3000 a week from  
the whorehouses of the city. Not much left  
for the girls. There's a show on.

Only a few tables  
occupied. A conventional orchestra—this  
place livens up later—playing the usual local  
jing-a-jing—a boy and girl team, she  
confidential with someone  
off stage. Laughing: just finishing the act.

So we drink until the next turn—a strip tease.

Do you mean it? Wow! Look at her.

You'd have to be  
pretty drunk to get any kick out of that.

She's no Mexican. Some worn-out trouper from  
the States. Look at those breasts

There is a fascination  
seeing her shake  
the beaded sequins from  
a string about her hips

She gyrates but it's  
not what you think,  
one does not laugh  
to watch her belly.

One is moved but not  
at the dull show. The  
guitarist yawns. She  
cannot even sing. She

has about her painted  
hardihood a screen  
of pretty doves which  
flutter their wings.

Her cold eyes perfunc-  
torily moan but do not  
smile. Yet they bill  
and coo by grace of  
a certain candor. She

is heavy on her feet.  
That's good. She  
bends forward leaning  
on the table of the  
balding man sitting

upright, alone, so that  
everything hangs for-  
ward.

What the hell  
are you grinning  
to yourself about? Not  
at *her*?

The music!  
I like her. She fits

the music .

Why don't these Indians get over this nauseating prattle  
about their souls and their loves and sing us something  
else for a change?

This place is rank  
with it. She  
at least knows she's  
part of another tune,  
knows her customers,  
has the same  
opinion of them as I  
have. That gives her  
one up . . . one up  
following the lying  
music . . .

There is another music. The bright-colored candy  
of her nakedness lifts her unexpectedly  
to partake of its tune . . .

the virgin of her mind . . . Andromeda of those rocks,  
greens and reds . . . those unearthly  
in her mockery of virtue  
she becomes unaccountably virtuous . . .  
way pretends it . . . though she in no

Let's get out of this.

In the street it hit  
me in the face as we started to walk again. Or  
am I merely playing the poet? Do I merely invent  
it out of whole cloth? I thought . . .

What in the form of an old whore in  
a cheap Mexican joint in Juárez, her bare  
can wagging crazily can be  
so refreshing to me, raise to my ear  
so sweet a tune, built of such slime?

Here we are. They'll be along any minute.  
The bar is at the right of the entrance,  
a few tabled opposite which you have to pass  
to get to the dining room, beyond.

A foursome, two oversize Americans, no longer young, got up as cowboys, hats and all, are drunk and carrying on with their gals, drunk also,

especially one inciting her man, the biggest, *Yip ee!* to dance in the narrow space, oblivious to everything—she is insatiable and he is trying

stumblingly to keep up with her. Give it the gun, pardner! *Yip ee!* We pushed by them to our table, seven of us. Seated about the room

were quiet family groups, some with children, eating. Rather a better class than you notice on the streets. So here we are. You

can see through into the kitchen where one of the cooks, his shirt sleeves rolled up, an apron over the well-pressed pants of a street

suit, black hair neatly parted, a tall good-looking man, is working absorbed, before a chopping block

Old Fashioneds all around?

So this is William Carlos Williams, the poet .

Floss and I had half consumed out quartered hearts of lettuce before we noticed the others hadn't touched theirs . You seem quite normal. Can you tell me? Why does one want to write a poem?

Because it's there to be written.

Oh. A matter of inspiration then?

Of necessity.

Oh. But what sets it off?

I am that he whose brains  
are scattered  
aimlessly

—and so,  
the hour done, the quail eaten, we were on  
our way back to El Paso.

Good night. Good  
night and thank you . No. Thank you. We're  
going to walk .

—and so, on the naked wrist, we feel again  
those insistent fingers .

Penny please, mister.  
Penny please. Give me a penny.

Here! now go away.

—but the music, the music has reawakened  
as we leave the busier parts of the street  
and come again to the bridge in the semi-dark,  
pay our fee and begin again to cross .  
seeing the lights along the mountains back of El  
Paso and pause to watch the boys calling out  
to us to throw more coins to them standing  
in the shallow water . so that's  
where the incentive lay, with the annoyance  
of those surprising fingers.

So you're a poet?  
a good thing to be got rid of—half drunk,  
a free dinner under your belt, even though you  
get typhoid—and to have met people you  
can at least talk to .

relief from that changeless, endless  
inescapable and insistent music . . .

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)

What's that?

Oh, some on.

But what's THAT?

the music! the  
*music!* as when Casals struck  
and held a deep cello tone  
and I am speechless

There it sat  
in the projecting angle of the bridge flange  
as I stood aghast and looked at it—  
in the half-light: shapeless or rather returned  
to its original shape, armless, legless,  
headless, packed like the pit of a fruit into  
that obscure corner—or  
a fish to swim against the stream—or  
a child in the womb prepared to imitate life,  
warding its life against  
a birth of awful promise. The music  
guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,  
a numbing ink that stains the  
sea of our minds—to hold us off—shed  
of a shape close as it can get to no shape,  
a music! a protecting music

*I am a poet!* I

am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed.

Now the music volleys through as in  
a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all  
about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself  
seeking to become articulate

And I could not help thinking  
of the wonders of the brain that  
hears that music and of our  
skill sometimes to record it.



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## ACADEMIC VITA

Kathryn Lynn Mayberry  
[kqm5577@psu.edu](mailto:kqm5577@psu.edu)

### Education

- The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA Graduated May 4, 2019
- Bachelor of Arts in English and History
- Schreyer Honors College
- Paterno Fellows, College of the Liberal Arts, Pennsylvania State University
  - Honors Program including advanced academic coursework, thesis, internship, ethics study, and service commitment.
- Rock Ethics Institute Honors Thesis and Research Fellow August 2018 – May 2019
  - Research fellowship for honors thesis projects concerned with ethical issues.

### Work Experience

- Youth Services Staff, North Wales Area Library May 2019 – Present
- Desk Assistant, Penn State University Libraries 2016 – May 2019
- Circulation Intern, North Wales Area Library 2015 – May 2019
- Consumer Services Representative, K'NEX a Division of Basic Fun Seasonal 2015 – 2019

### Activities

- Participant, Penn State Undergraduate Exhibition Spring 2019
  - Finding William Carlos Williams in the Archives: Summer 2018 Archival Thesis Research
- Presenter, History Department Undergraduate Research Conference Spring 2017, Fall 2018
  - “With Such High Zest:” Wilfred Owen and the Soldier Poets’ Response
  - The Fascist State as a Hedgehog: Ezra Pound and Italian Cultural Nationalism
- Volunteer, Camp Abilities PA at West Chester University May 2015 – Present
  - Tandem biking coach and on-site tandem mechanic for visually impaired athletes
- Member, National History Honor Society, Phi Alpha Theta Spring 2017 - Present
  - Epsilon-Upsilon Chapter

### Honors

- Best History 302W Paper Award Spring 2019
- Bayard D. Kunkle Scholarship Fall 2018 – Spring 2019
- Rock Ethics Institute Honors Thesis Award Fall 2018 – Spring 2019
- Erickson Discovery Grant Summer 2018
- Dean’s List Spring 2016 – Present