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Rereading Madness, Sexuality, and Political Dissent in the Major Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Abstract

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There are few critical projects that coextensively explore madness and sexuality in the major plays of Tennessee Williams, and those that do employ a biographical frame that shifts attention away from the texts themselves. Yet a political dialectic *between* madness and sexuality lies at the core of many of the playwright's texts. My Honors Thesis will argue that the function of the relationship between madness and sexuality in the major works of Tennessee Williams is an explicitly political one, a subversive critique of the exclusionary, homophobic ideology of postwar America. In order to avoid the often erroneous conclusions drawn from references to the playwright's personal life, the analyses of my project will be quite consciously the product of strict critical development. My theoretical apparatus in handling this relationship will borrow from Michel Foucault's *History of Madness*; the texts I have selected for study are *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958).

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Introduction

> "Tom McGuane, who actually met Tennessee in Key West (I was never so lucky), told me he was very conscious he was in the presence of one of the last of the heavyweights. When everything is smaller and coarser now in the 'arts' about us—especially American Hollywood—I hear certain cynics decrying Tennessee, that everything he wrote was 'in drag,' after all. So be it. I'll take in drag or whatever they want to call it. It's the real stuff to me."[1]
>
> -- Barry Hannah

> "Would it be possible to read Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* as a history of homosexuality that dared not speak its name? [Foucault] clearly indicates the necessity of writing a history of sexuality as an obligatory sequel to *Madness and Civilization*, a continuation without which the earlier work could not be considered complete. *The study of madness and the analysis of sexuality form, in Foucault's vision, two fragments of the same inquiry*."[2]
>
> -- Didier Eribon

Few names in American literature loom larger than Tennessee Williams, and perhaps no postwar American writer can claim to have transformed popular culture as dramatically as he did. Until somewhat recently, drama critics were reluctant to grant Williams's major plays canonical status alongside *Death of a Salesman, The Iceman Cometh,* and *The Crucible*; now many are recognizing that Williams's dedication to his craft rivaled Miller's and O'Neill's, and that his tenacity in subverting social and political hegemonies even exceeded theirs. David Savran determines in his comparative study of gender in Miller and Williams that the former's dramatic work ultimately endorses hegemonic constructions of gender and sexuality while the latter's consistently upends them. Also unlike Miller's plays, Williams's have held up exceptionally well to popular

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[1] Barry Hannah. "Memories of Tennessee Williams." *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 48, 1995.

[2] Didier Eribon. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 265; my emphasis.

tastes, often revived, and ardently defended by next-generation artists like Pedro Almodovar and Barry Hannah who grew up with the playwright's work. Although *A Streetcar Named Desire*'s premiere stunned audiences in 1947, no one in the Ethel Barrymore Theater could have predicted that Blanche's swooning would remain central to the cultural lexicon of Broadway, and that Marlon Brando's swagger would go on to become the Platonic ideal of Hollywood masculinity, over a half-century later.

Although there is no shortage of critical projects that explore madness and queer sexuality in Williams's work (Jacqueline O'Connor's *Dramatizing Dementia*, Michael Paller's *Gentlemen Callers*, Robert Corber's *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, to name a few), no work exists that considers madness and sexuality *coextensively*—that explores the dialectic *between* madness and sexuality lying at the core of so many of the playwright's texts. My Honors Thesis will argue that the function of the relationship between madness and queer sexuality in the major works of Tennessee Williams is to launch an explicitly political criticism against the exclusionary, homophobic ideology of the postwar period. My theoretical apparatus in handling this relationship will owe much to the bevy of insights offered in Michel Foucault's landmark study *History of Madness*.

Why Foucault? As Didier Eribon observes, Foucault's formulation of madness more than that of any other philosopher stresses "other exclusions, notably those related to sexuality."[3] Foucault's sensitivity to the "constantly shifting, continually obstinate forms of repression," that factor into the social construction of mad subjectivity bears directly on a period in American history that rendered sexual dissent a mental illness and political dissent a high crime. What Eribon considers to be the primary object of

[3] Ibid., 265.

Foucault's work—"the topic of 'abnormality,' of the historical construction of the 'abnormal' individual" –is also William's primary object. Critics have long considered Tennessee to be the preeminent "poet of the damned," the playwright most adept at spinning the tales of outsiders and criminals into blockbusting dramatic works of astonishing beauty and unspeakable horror. The three works on which this study will focus are *A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* and *Suddenly Last Summer.* Were the scope of this inquiry but a little wider I would have also devoted sustained attention to their Hollywood adaptations directed by Elia Kazan, Richard Brooks, and Joseph Mankiewicz, respectively. These are films that deserve their own extensive study, but through their occasional mention I hope to convey to the reader the pervasive cultural influence, and in some cases the thematic mediation, that these productions signified.

The chapter on *A Streetcar Named Desire* considers the madness of Blanche DuBois alongside the manifold instances of refracted queerness that the text generates. My argument implicates Allan Grey in the formation of the Blanche's madness and contends that *Streetcar* critiques the postwar American body politic that vigorously endorsed the heteronormative sexual mode while subsuming the rest under the banners of perversity and *madness.* In rendering the tragic narrative of Blanche DuBois, Williams attends to the social processes and scenes of exclusion and exteriorization that Foucault considers central to the production of mad subjectivity. I take the dialectic between madness and queer sexuality in *Streetcar* also to indict the practices of postwar American

psychiatry, which sought to expand the notion of mental illness to describe merely "distasteful or otherwise unacceptable behaviors."[4]

My analysis of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* attends to Brick, working toward a diagnosis of his psychological condition and a resolution to the problem of the text's willful ambiguity that has stymied critics for decades. My argument reads *Cat*'s "hesitation" in naming sexuality not as an indication of the playwright's own securities, but rather as a refusal to appease those who would name and defang homosexuality in the interest of liberal politics. Departing from previous critical approaches that comprehend Brick as a character in the midst of an "existential quandary," or "homosexual panic," I argue instead that Brick suffers from what Foucault calls *melancholy*—a disorder of the spirit marked by impotence, idleness, and an attachment to a melancholic point. I interpret Brick's homophobic defense as a way to pivot *away* from homosexuality as a social "illness" of the public sphere, as well as a way for Brick to maintain control of the privileges that the American culture has afforded his heterosexual, authentically masculine existence.

Lastly I consider the discourses of madness and sexuality at work in Williams's one-act play *Suddenly Last Summer.* I attempt to follow Michael Paller's lead in directing critics to reevaluate the flaws and virtues of Sebastian Venable's character, and to reconsider the accusations of homophobia leveled at the play more generally. Rather than reveal a political critique that bears specifically on the postwar period, in this chapter my goal is to neutralize the play's reputation as a sensational reiteration of homophobic tropes by foregrounding the play's direct acknowledgment of homosexual themes and the

[4] Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis.* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 181) 54-56.

distance between Sebastian's homosexuality and the aspects of the play traditionally deemed offensive. In doing so I link Williams's treatment of Sebastian's madness and homosexuality to the social and ideological constructs of the Renaissance, arguing that any political or philosophical critique mounted in *Suddenly Last Summer* unfolds according to a timeline that dramatically eclipses the limits of the postwar American scene.

In a brief conclusion, I attempt to summarize the trends that surface most often in Williams's meditations on madness and sexuality, as well as draw these mediations back toward Foucault's historical narrative of homosexuality. I recapitulate the vitality of Williams's political critiques and argue that his dedication to humanizing and lending a voice to marginal social groups remains one of the most resounding social gestures in twentieth-century American drama.

Poems a Dead Boy Wrote:
Rereading Madness and Queerness in *Streetcar*

At first glance it would seem that we know a great deal, perhaps too much, about *A Streetcar Named Desire*. We know that its legacy is to offer one of twentieth-century American literature's clearest examinations of the conflict between society and the individual. We know that the play won both the Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, confirming Southern playwright Tennessee Williams as an eminent force on Broadway. We know that *Streetcar* featured an unusually poetic style that distinguished Williams from contemporaries Arthur Miller and William Inge, and that its initial production—a meeting of the minds between an established director, a playwright on the rise, and an unsurpassed cast— was prodigious enough to be ushered into the annals of Broadway legend almost instantaneously. We know also the anecdotes and the apocrypha—the fiendish directorial tactics of Kazan, the outrageous behavior of Brando, and the struggle of mentally unstable actress Vivien Leigh to distinguish herself later in life from Blanche DuBois. These are narratives that enhance the spectacle of *Streetcar*; they are blinding and irresistible points of light that illuminate the legend of the play while threatening to obscure a vision of the play itself. It seems appropriate to say that we do not *know Streetcar* as well as we *remember* it. Like many of Williams' texts, *Streetcar* delights in blending the romantic with the real, and for reasons like those mentioned, so do we when we recall its history.

So much so, in fact, that we are liable to forget that the structural demand of *Streetcar* is ruthless and tragic: Blanche and Stanley, each the other's destroyer (or, to

borrow Blanche's term, "executioner") must duel for the soul in the midst, Stella.[5] With Blanche DuBois Williams crafts his most lucid and compelling representation of madness—lucid because *Streetcar* showcased a playwright at the height of his observational talents; compelling because, over the course of the play, the spectator gains the ability to comprehend Blanche as she loses the ability to comprehend herself. Critics were initially inclined to interpret *Streetcar* mythologically, as a "descent" narrative, a "quest myth" both romantic and realist in manner, whereby the viewer follows Blanche DuBois from hope to despair, from the family plantation Belle Reve ("beautiful dream") to the "nightmare-world" or "underworld" of her insanity, whereby she is "elevated to mythic stature, to the position of a goddess [imprisoned] in a lower world."[6] Such a reading has appealed especially to critics obligated to interpret the play's unremittingly grim and occasionally subversive social content in a conventionally literary way. Yet locating Greek tragedy as the chief dramatic referent to *Streetcar'*s cocktail of madness, desire, and violence is a critical gesture that non-confrontationally recognizes the play's stark renderings of violence and (homo-) sexuality without fully engaging their realist and political valences.

Streetcar's "mythical" and "symbolic" discourses nevertheless articulate an important distinction as to Williams' dramatic technique. To name *Streetcar* "mythic," "symbolic," or even "magic" would not be incorrect, but certainly misleading, due to the fact that its mythological and magical elements are not ends, but rather *means* of conveyance. In order to handle subject matter as sensitive as nonheteronormative

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[5] Vivien Leigh, perf. *A Streetcar Named Desire.* Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner Bros., 1951.
[6] Judith J. Thompson, *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002) 25-7.

sexuality and brutal domestic violence in 1947, Williams tailored an approach that would mollify explicit themes otherwise bound to be received as perverse by audiences. Williams relates the design of such a strategy in a passage seized often by Williams critics and which appears in his 1954 short story "Hard Candy":

> The grossly naturalistic details of a life, contained in the enormously wide context of that life, are softened and qualified by it, but when you attempt to set those details down in a tale, *some measure of obscurity or indirection* is called for to provide the same, or even approximate, softening effect that existence in time gives to those gross elements in the life itself."[7]

Williams' tactical deployment of obscurity and indirection—what John Clum re-terms "mystery" and "evasion"—is therefore the negotiated cost to present "gross elements" in 1947 without overwhelming his audience or completely forfeiting thematic candor.[8] These techniques compose a reverse-strategy designed to neutralize the contempt with which postwar audiences had been trained to confront homosexuality. Cleverly integrated into and symbiotic with this strategy are the *mysterious* and *mythological* tendencies, whereby Williams softens certain "gross elements" through the filter of Blanche DuBois's mental fantasia. Thus, like Blanche, Tennessee Williams cannot utter the "gross" truth without some degree of mystery, ambiguity, or evasiveness; Romanticism becomes madness, too, then—a kind of madness motivated by a need to escape from that *other* madness: reality.

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[7] Tennessee Williams, "Hard Candy." *Collected Stories* (New York, 1985) 337; emphasis mine.

[8] John M. Clum, "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams. *Displacing Homophobia.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989) 154.

Because *Streetcar* had not yet unequivocally established Williams as a commercially viable name, recalling that the author had few qualms bowing to the standard of postwar Broadway, obfuscating sensitive themes in order to increase the appeal of his work, becomes important. *Streetcar* provides a solitary gay character, Allan Grey, merely reported through dialogue and never seen, the first instance of the "invisible queer" trope that Williams will recast in later plays as Peter and Jack Ochello and Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. However, Allan Grey is too peripheral a presence in the text to explain its queerness single-handedly; proposing a solution to the slippery challenge of reading homosexuality in Tennessee Williams, David Savran writes,

> [Williams'] homosexuality is both ubiquitous and elusive, everywhere in his work, and yet nearly impossible to pin down. It structures and informs all of his texts, yet rarely, especially in his plays, produces the unequivocally homosexual character that most critics look for in attempting to identify a homosexual text. Instead, Williams' homosexuality is endlessly refracted in his work: translated, reflected, and transposed.[9]

Savran's claim that homosexuality in Williams is "nearly impossible to pin down" is somewhat pessimistic, considering how his radical reevaluation of its basic condition generates a dynamic range of possibilities. Savran remaps the task of reading queerness in *Streetcar*, charging that it has less to do with representations of homosexuality and more to do with translations and refractions, less to do with homosexual *characters* and more to do with homosexual *affections.*

[9] David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 82.

Savran's conclusion encourages the consideration of two undeniably significant sites of queerness inscribed in *Streetcar* beyond Allan Grey: first, on the perpetually performing body of Blanche DuBois, and second, on the excessively eroticized body of Stanley Kowalski. Blanche, upon comprehending her husband's homosexuality, reacts with the same fear and loathing that the proscriptive rhetoric of postwar institutions of power—among the legion, the U.S. State Department and the American Psychological Association—had standardized. By reproducing this learned policing reflex through speech, Blanche unwittingly drives Grey to suicide, marking her as a woman doomed to madness and to the "underworld" not only, as other critics have argued, because she transgresses her own ethic and commits deliberate cruelty, the "one unforgivable thing," but because the unspeakable homosexuality of the man she "worshipped" becomes a displaced burden to be reinscribed and reconstituted as her own.[10] Stanley Kowalski's animalistic, perversely aggressive sexuality, on the other hand, is pivotal to Williams's critique in two related ways—because it embodies the brutality of the nationally and socially sanctioned forces that subordinated the homosexual, and because it demonstrates the fundamental arbitrariness of the postwar body politic by representing a contemptible mode of sexuality that is nevertheless nationally endorsed due to its (hetero-)normative context. This chapter will propose that homosexuality and mental illness form a dialectic in *Streetcar* that, aside from more clearly illuminating the nature and origin of Blanche's madness, constitutes a radical political critique of the United States' exclusionary stance toward both the categories of the "mad" and the "perverse."

[10] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: New Directions, 2004) 157, 124.

For well over a half-century, the political intentions and institutional critiques embedded in *Streetcar*'s content either have gone unexamined or been considered in passing. Inevitably critics submit to one of a number of broad or diversionary maneuvers, such as those who sentimentalize Williams' sympathy for the outsider, those who defer critical analysis in favor of erroneous analogues to Tennessee's life, or those who overemphasize (or, even worse, attempt to justify) Stanley Kowalski's role in generating the madness of Blanche DuBois. *Streetcar* is a text that hinges on the notion of revelation—still, the meanings of its memories, events, and desires have yet themselves to be fully revealed. Upon close inspection, the predicament posed by *Streetcar* is not that we know too much, *but rather that we do not know enough.* This chapter will attempt to recover a vital and unexplored political component to the play, to penetrate the spectacle in order to approach the play as a text written by a radical on the topics of homosexuality and mental illness during an era that categorically denied the radical, the homosexual, and the mentally ill speech.

Queerness and madness interact in *Streetcar* insofar as they reveal the design of a self-perpetuating, destructive social pattern. This, in the context of Williams criticism, proves to be an uncontroversial claim. In accepting it, one must nevertheless take care not to interpret their interaction primarily as an interrogation of the social, as critics in the latter half of the twentieth century were inclined to do, and which would obscure the purely political motivations behind, and the political content manifest in, a play that is traditionally referred to as "revolutionary." One must also resist the tantalizing tendency of discourse on *Streetcar*'s revolutionary potential to deal more with Williams, Kazan,

and Brando personally than with the play itself.[11] Despite the fact that *Streetcar* heralded a string of Williams plays that articulated an interrelation between homosexuality and mental illness, despite the fact that it endowed the queer and the mad with forms visible to an unprecedented number of Americans, and despite the fact that these achievements were closely contemporaneous with the genesis of the modern gay rights movement and a bold challenge to psychiatric orthodoxy, no critic has forthrightly contended that the tragedy of *Streetcar* indicts the postwar American body politic that vigorously endorsed certain sexual modes (e.g. heterosexual, masculinist, phallocentric) while subsuming the rest under the banners of perversity and *madness.* Strictly speaking, *Streetcar* is political to the degree that it demonstrates through tragedy that madness and homosexuality are politicized and arbitrarily delimited notions; that by merely *seeming* mad— through the display of a nonheteronormative sexuality or the occupation of an unproductive economic position, for instance— one risks accelerating the burden of madness by implicating one's self in the watchfully imposed process of exclusion and confinement.

Few debate Blanche DuBois's status as Williams's swan song on the subject of the struggle between the individual and society, perhaps because Williams indeed intended *Streetcar* to be his final labor as a playwright. She more than any other Williams creation captures the tragic fullness of the "dark unconscious disturbance" inflicted upon the individual whom society has, to use Michel Foucault's term, "excluded"; endeavoring

[11] Williams's personal politics have long vexed his critics due to contradictory remarks the playwright has offered; in an effort to sidestep this irresolvable debate, this project will consider no claim of the author's beyond the simplest and least equivocal: that "all good art is essentially revolutionary." George Whitmore, "George Whitmore Interviews Tennessee Williams," in *Gay Sunshine Interviews,* vol. 1, ed. Winston Leyland (San Fransisco: Gay Sunshine, 1984) 316.

to condense the argument that Foucault advances in his landmark study *History of Madness*, Didier Eribon writes:

> Madness is not a natural reality that had been waiting around for that happy day in the middle of the nineteenth century, when psychiatry would come along… to assign it its truth as "mental illness." Rather, it is only because madness was constructed as a pathological phenomenon at a given historical moment*, only because it was excluded or "exteriorized" from society*, that psychiatry was able to come into existence.[12]

Foucault's emphasis on the exclusion of the individual in the formation of the "mad" identity corresponds with Williams's authorial empathy with the struggles of "outsider" figures and the psychic "disturbance[s]" that they bear. There is between the philosopher and the playwright a similar perspective regarding the burden that social limits impose upon the individual who cannot conform to them reasonably. This perspective will prove crucial in interpreting the political value of the affectivity generated by the tragic tale of Blanche DuBois, which proceeds inevitably toward her "exteriorization," or, confinement.

Blanche, like Stanley, is the product of a uniquely American experience. Her gentility and atavistic style of speech originate from a privileged upbringing in the tradition of the Old South. Unlike Stanley, who is entrenched in a rising immigrant class, Blanche is the product of a cultural setting that has not outlasted the Second World War. "Epic fornications" of the DuBois ancestry—an allusive reference that underwrites the play's ambition to expose a sexual crisis of national proportions—engender its financial

[12] Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) 269.

collapse.[13] Blanche is at the same time blindsided by family deaths: "All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! …You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths—not always."[14] The dissolution of the estate and the demise of the family structure figure the displacement of Blanche in ways indispensable to the plot, yet neither, in the sequence of tragedies of Blanche's life, generates her madness inasmuch as they render it more visible—conjuring specters that have perennially haunted Blanche: the fear of death, the fear of loneliness, the fear of aging, and the deployment of desire to ward off such fears. Williams's propensity as a Southern writer to integrate memory narratives into his plots allows the demons of Blanche DuBois to be unveiled over the course of the play in reverse chronology—beginning with the most unavoidable and apparent embarrassments (the foreclosure of the estate and Blanche's sudden unemployment) and arriving at the most private and concealed traumas (the death of her young husband Allan Grey and her "many intimacies with strangers")—as the action of *Streetcar* presses inexorably forward.[15] Thus, *Streetcar* unfolds along two narrational axes: a laterally oriented, progressive narrative that moves the drama at Elysian Fields, and a vertically oriented, exploratory narrative that Blanche DuBois relates through dialogue. The sequence of events that unfolds in this second narrative discloses the germ of her madness as well as a crucial bit of diegesis, the tale of Allan Grey, that structures the textual dialectic between madness and homosexuality in *Streetcar.* Unfolding almost entirely through Blanche's own words, Grey's tale not only confirms the dramatically central position of her

[13] Williams, 44.
[14] Ibid., 21.
[15] Ibid., 146.

subjectivity, but foreshadows future ways in which she will become a "vessel" for a particular thematic current.

The first version of the story of Allan Grey that Blanche DuBois tells, in response to Stanley's casual inquiry, is exactly five words long: "The boy—the boy died."[16] It marks the first moment in *Streetcar* that finds Blanche literally speechless, before which she has been rambling to Stella compulsively, seemingly in order to calm her badly worn anxiety about New Orleans: "Stella! Stella for Star! I thought you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying? I didn't mean to say that. I meant to be nice about it and say—Oh what a convenient location and such—Ha-a-ha! Precious lamb! You haven't said a *word* to me."[17] Jacqueline O'Connor refers to Blanche's "excess of speech" as a pathology that "underline[s] her forced silence at the end of the play," although Blanche's chattiness, as Stella remarks, has its history: "You never did give me a chance to say much, Blanche. So I just got in the habit of being quiet around you."[18] Stage directions throughout scene one characterize Blanche as "faintly hysterical," "shaking all over," "panting for breath," "nervous," "embarrassed," "frightened," "uneasy," "uncertain," and "apprehensive"; she is easy to startle—a liquor bottle "nearly slips from her grasp," and a screeching cat causes her to "spring up."[19] This constellation of terms already places Blanche ponderously close to madness: her anxiety depends on a relentless forward momentum that halts abruptly as soon as Blanche must

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[16] Ibid., 28.
[17] Ibid., 11.
[18] Jacqueline O'Connor, *Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1997) 62. Williams, 13.
[19] Ibid., 6-27.

stumble over "the boy," a moment that signals the first iteration of the overriding clue as to her 'mad' or 'disturbed' subjectivity—the music of the Varsouviana polka.[20]

Williams uses the Varsouviana, which is not heard again until scene six, as a means to indicate formally the proximity of Blanche's madness. Its first rendition—"The music of polka rises up, faint in the distance"— flowers over the course of the play along with Blanche's dementia into fuller, more threatening incarnations: "The rapid feverish polka tune, the 'Varsouviana,' is heard. The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her…"[21] That the volume and speed of the Varsouviana is adjusted to gauge Blanche's mental condition is significant insofar as it also evokes a theater of memory and the death of her young homosexual husband, Allan Grey; Blanche, in scene six, almost exactly halfway through the play, divulges to her would-be suitor Mitch the story that explains this connection:

> He was a boy just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love… But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking—still that—that thing was there… Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it… the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years… Afterwards, we pretended that nothing had been discovered… We danced the Varsouviana! Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me… A few moments later—a shot! … He'd stuck the revolver into his mouth and fired—so that the back of his head had been—blown away![22]

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[20] Using a musical theme to suggest female psychoses is a curiously standard convention of postwar American culture. Other examples include Curtis Bernahrdt's *Possessed* (1947) and Max Ophuls' *Letter From An Unknown Woman* (1948). It is also worth noting that *Streetcar*'s stage directions indicate that light, as well as music, should be manipulated to convey the disturbed subjective state of Blanche DuBois.
[21] Ibid., 28, 139.
[22] Ibid., 114-115.

Blanche, never willing to confront the truth directly, lapses from standard chronology, describing Allan's suicide and the grotesque sight of his corpse before backtracking to reveal the true nature of the events that transpired during the Varsouviana polka:

> It was because—on the dance-floor—unable to stop myself—I'd suddenly said—"I saw! I know! You disgust me…" And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this—kitchen—candle.[23]

Before interpreting the intense reaction that witnessing homosexuality produces in this crucial passage, one must recall the postwar status of homosexuality itself. Details concerning the scope of the American government's anti-homosexual efforts were only beginning to emerge when *Streetcar* premiered on Broadway in 1947. Nevertheless, it marks the year that the Senate Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Department began to compile an interim report defining the destructive threat that federal homosexual employees posed to the state. In 1950, the Republican National Committee Chairman warned in a memo to thousands of party workers, "Sexual perverts… have infiltrated our Government in recent years… [and they are] perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists."[24] In the three-year period from which the report's statistics were drawn (1947 – 1950), the rate of military discharges for homosexuality tripled; elsewhere, hundreds of gay, federally employed civilians were fired on the charge of "moral turpitude." A purposeful, organized purge of homosexual workers gripped the

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[23] Ibid., 115.
[24] John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 37.

government system, as did an even broader public relations campaign that aimed to assassinate the homosexual character. Not only did the interim report disqualify homosexuals from federal employment on the grounds of general moral indecency, but it also contended that intrinsic to the homosexual identity was a "lack of emotional stability" and an irresistible urge "to entice normal individuals to engage in perverted practices," which rendered it a "generally unsuitable" presence.[25]

The fierce anti-radical sentiment of this particular moment fueled the aggression with which the U.S. government condemned homosexuality. By 1950 the FBI, the State Department, armed forces, and local police operated in collusion to wage a campaign of violence and harassment against homosexuals in cities nationwide. Reconsidering RNC Chairman Guy Gabrielson's statement, one may isolate a telling rhetorical maneuver in his assessment of homosexuals—that they are "perhaps as dangerous as the *actual* communists"—as if homosexuality was but a variation on Communism, that it harbored a similarly destructive potential to the American social fabric. Such was the government's understanding: homosexuals in the 1940s did not exist, they "infiltrated"—and just as they did with members of the Communist party, the FBI carried out surveillance and intelligence-gathering operations to monitor the homosexual presence within the borders of the United States. Linking the sexual and social radicalism of the queer identity to the political radicalism of the Communist identity enabled the government to insert homophobic policy into the framework of that era's great, global political struggle. Robert Corber argues that by promoting "the link between homosexuality and Communism in the nation's political imaginary… the discourses of national security

[25] Martin Bauml Duberman, "Hunting Sex Perverts," *Christopher Street,* 5, no. 12 (1982) 46.

sought to contain the increasing visibility of gay men"; David Savran forwards a blunter claim— that "the baiting and brutalization of 'Communists and queers'" for a time simply "dominated the national agenda."[26]

Given the political climate, Blanche DuBois's response to the homosexuality of Allan Grey does not seem unusual or extreme, but quite emblematic of the homophobia that the American government advocated. Homosexuality's ontologically unspeakable state in 1947 circumscribes the language with which it may even be described—the clearest acknowledgment that Blanche (and Williams) are able to utter is nebulous at best: "still—*that thing* was there."[27] Her fear and loathing are instinctive without being personal, and irresistible to the extent that she is "unable to stop [herself]" from castigating Allan, the boy she loved "unendurably" on the dance-floor for all to see.[28] In allowing herself to become a vessel for the cruelty of the American social ethic, Blanche DuBois transgresses her own ethic that forbids deliberate cruelty above all else, which, in conjunction with the suicide of Allan Grey, drives Blanche beyond absolving herself, constituting the trauma that structures her madness as well as accounting for its constituent signs.

Still, the fact that the suicide of a homosexual engenders the madness of Blanche DuBois does not in itself validate the claim that she is a site of queerness. That she *is* a site of queerness is hardly a novel notion to Williams criticism—both John Clum and Alan Sinfield have argued as much. Clum writes that *Streetcar* "depicts in a codified

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[26] Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 64. David Savran. *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 5.
[27] Williams, 114; emphasis mine.
[28] Ibid., 114-115.

fashion a paradigmatic homosexual experience. It is the quintessential closeted gay play and Blanche DuBois is many ways the quintessential gay character in American closet drama. Williams himself was quoted as saying, 'I am Blanche DuBois.'"[29] Sinfield bolsters the comparison: "Williams did not entirely discourage such ideas. He said… that he was hysterical like Blanche, and that 'chance acquaintances, or strangers, have usually been kinder to me than friends.'"[30] These arguments, however, ultimately undermine queer readings of Blanche by deferring to a biographical identification in lieu of a critically developed reading. This project will therefore resist the temptation to insert Williams as an intermediary between the critic and the text, and work within the text itself to defend the undeniably queer aspects of Blanche DuBois.

If Williams does not make Blanche DuBois queer, then who or what does? To address the question one needs only return to the single, unambiguously queer persona in *Streetcar*—Allan Grey. If one accepts that his impact on the madness of Blanche is profound, and if one also accepts Savran's claim that to read queerness in *Streetcar* is to read translations, reflections, and transpositions, then it becomes possible to imagine that one symptom of Blanche's madness may consist in the transposition of and identification with the queerness of her beloved young dead husband. Let us consider what little we know about him: he is a poet; he is "different," possessing a "nervousness," and a "softness"; Stella recalls him as "extremely good looking," "beautiful" even, and "talented."[31] These descriptors do more than suggest a correlation between Blanche and Allan: both pursue literary professions and have erudite dispositions, both are textually

[29] John M. Clum, *Acting Gay.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 150.
[30] Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 187.
[31] Williams, 114-124.

linked to nervousness, softness, and uncertainty, and both are consigned to clandestine sexual behavior in an attempt to sate badly repressed desires. If Allan's profession, demeanor, and taboo sexuality all mirror Blanche's, it follows that his homosexuality—which assumes a profound position in the foreground of Blanche's theater of memory—may affect Blanche's post-Grey psyche according to a comparable pattern of displacement and identification. Pursuing this hypothesis will demonstrate that Allan Grey's homosexuality, refracted through the prism of Blanche's hysteria, persists as an artifact within her, explaining in part both Blanche's quintessentially queer nature and the perverse power of her gaze.

Blanche's fundamental attachment to Allan Grey, undeniable throughout the play, supports the claim that his persona vividly informs her madness. In scene two, for instance, Stanley rummages through Blanche's belongings searching for mortgage papers when he happens upon her old love letters:

> [*He rips off the ribbon and starts to examine them. Blanche snatches them from him, and they cascade to the floor.*]
>
> Blanche:
> Now that you've touched them I'll burn them!
>
> Stanley [*staring, baffled*]:
> What in the hell are they?
>
> Blanche [*on the floor gathering them up*]:
> Poems a dead boy wrote. I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me, but you can't! I'm not young and vulnerable any more. But my young husband was and I—never mind about that! Just give them back to me![32]

[32] Ibid., 42-43.

Blanche "speaks fiercely" in this scene, for the first time rebutting Stanley's aggression with aggression, not circumlocution, momentarily catching him off guard.[33] In Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1953), Vivien Leigh's swooning rendition of the line, "Now that you've touched them I'll burn them!" ranks among the most melodramatically delivered in the film, and the affective resonance of the exchange is not to be undervalued. The scene performs a few crucial functions: first, Stanley's excessive physical power ("seizes," "slams," "shoves it roughly," "snatches them up") as he pillages through Blanche's intimate possessions prefigures the rape that he will commit near the end of the play; second, Blanche's pathological attachment to Allan Grey is made plain—Stanley's mere handling of Allan's love letters visibly weakens Blanche, who after the incident, appears "faint with exhaustion."[34] In terms of the trajectory that Blanche will follow from privacy to exposure, from the "great big place with white columns" to being raped in a cramped two-bedroom flat, this scene performs a necessary and important role.[35]

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the exchange, though, is Blanche's uncanny response—"Poems a dead boy wrote"— to Stanley's nonplussed question, "What in the hell are they?"[36] The line is superficially intelligible—a boy who has since died wrote the poems in question—yet its phrasing destabilizes the intended meaning. Surely, a *dead boy* did not write the poems that Blanche bends down to gather, a living boy did; assigning the active verb "wrote" to "dead boy" entitles the dead boy with agency and sentience; to invert the syntax and say, for instance, "a dead boy wrote

[33] Ibid., 42.
[34] Ibid., 43.
[35] Ibid., 9.
[36] Ibid., 42.

poems" would expose its fallacy. Yet the line profoundly reveals the psychological mechanisms of Blanche's madness, as expressed through language, that conflate the dead with the living, the past with the present, and the fantastic with the real. Allan Grey may be a dead boy, but he remains extant, vivid, corporeal, *active,* inasmuch as his memory is preserved within and reiterated by Blanche DuBois herself. He is, in short, still *writing poetry*, although it longer issues from his own hand, but from Blanche's: by preserving and guarding his memory both materially and psychologically, she forcefully denies his absence. When Stanley seizes the love-letters of Allan Grey, he in effect seizes the intimate presence of Allan Grey *within* Blanche, which provokes the ferocious intensity of her outburst and supports the function of the scene as a metaphor for rape.

Alan Sinfield writes, "Imagining a woman as a gay man, or vice versa, is intrinsically demeaning to neither…Williams' plays bear upon the whole pattern of… analogues and differences in the situations of women and gay men… all of us, gay, straight and other, are trying to manage our genders and sexualities in unpropitious circumstances."[37] Although Sinfield justifies the possibility of reading Blanche as a gay male in terms of Williams's larger project, he acknowledges certain dangers that are nevertheless resolvable. His claim that "transposing [Blanche] too rapidly out of heterosexuality elides an important theme of male violence against women," for instance, is resolvable to the extent that the abuses that women and gay men suffered in the postwar period due to the privileging of the cult of heterosexual masculinity are mutually intelligible; though each phenomenon—violence against women and violence against homosexuals— undoubtedly has a singular history and merits a unique inquiry, reading

[37] Sinfield, 188.

Blanche as a symbol for both utilizes the fact that "female identification [is] among the sites where gay men have constituted themselves," in order to convey a paradigmatic instance of the brutalization of the individual by the hand of a "one hundred percent American" male.[38] David Savran rejects this formulation on several grounds:

> [T]he metamorphosis of Blanche from heterosexual female to homosexual male makes nonsense of Blanche's panic at discovering the homosexuality of her late husband, of Stanley's brutally normative masculinity, and of the carefully gendered specificity of sexual violence… [It] assumes that the gay writer… is in essence unlike the straight writer, who, it would seem, can construct characters who are authentically either heterosexual or homosexual.[39]

That reading Blanche as queer "makes nonsense of her panic" is a criticism not only dispatched by the terms of our argument that link the origins of Blanche's queerness to Allan Grey himself, but also by the history of homosexuality.[40] Savran's following two claims assert the specificity of gendered experience, a problematic notion were one to collapse completely the experiences of women and gay men; however, this is hardly our objective—the distinction bears repeating that Blanche's experience is not *identical* to, but rather *paradigmatic* of, the closeted gay experience; not a replica, but an intelligible instance, of gay subjectivity.

The question remains as to how Blanche literally *expresses* her queerness. The best-known line of the play—"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"—has been adopted as one of the great clarion calls for gay cruising culture. Her dictum, "I

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[38] Ibid., 189. Williams, 134.
[39] Savran, 115-116.
[40] Some of the West's most infamous homophobes, as Eribon capably demonstrates in *Insult*, have been themselves deeply closeted homosexuals. Roy Cohn in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* stands as relatively recent example of efforts by gay writers to dramatize this phenomenon.

don't want realism. I want magic! …I don't tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth" has resonated with gay individuals for whom notions of performance and fantasy accrue deeply personal significance.[41] The elocutionary ballet that Blanche performs throughout *Streetcar* in order to conceal her moral infractions would be comprehensible to gay men, forced to dance around similarly unmentionable acts. In addition, because both homosexuality and subversive female sexuality were bound together and equated to other deviant sexual modes as indicators of mental illness, the borders of Blanche's sexuality resonate with associations polemically ascribed to all understood forms of sexual perversion— anonymous sex, erotomania, and pedophilia, among them.

However, the queerness of Blanche DuBois is never more explicit than when she directs her gaze toward the highly eroticized body of Stanley Kowalski. Indeed, reading the homosexuality of Allan Grey as a refracted presence in the persona of Blanche solves one of the great mysteries of Williams criticism insofar as it accounts for the "extraordinary, even perverse, energy" that Blanche's gaze toward Stanley generates, as well as the perverse energy that Stanley himself provides.[42] As Derek Jarman observes, "The modern Queer was invented by Tennessee Williams. Brando in blue jeans, sneakers, white T-shirt and leather jacket. When you saw that, you knew they were available."[43] Marlon Brando's explosive embodiment of Stanley designated one of the first instances in either American film or theater that an expressly sensual male body functioned as the erotic spectacle, a scandal that helped motivate buzz at the time of the initial production, and which to this day remains a revolutionary contribution to

[41] Williams, 145.
[42] Sinfield, 189.
[43] Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk* (London: Hutchinson, 1992) 55.

American visual narrative. The irony of approaching Stanley from a queer perspective rests with the text's indication that "since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women."[44] As a subject, then, he is unequivocally heterosexual; as an object, however—specifically as an object of Blanche DuBois's look—Stanley becomes complicit in the network of homosexual identifications that structures the play.

Blanche's initial desire for Stanley is unmistakable. A cool jazz theme provides suggestive accompaniment when the two first meet in Elia Kazan's 1951 film version, as Blanche gazes at the immaculate choreography that Brando as Stanley dedicates to the role. Brando "embodies" Stanley in the literal sense: he showcases the erotic thrill of Stanley's body through the fluid execution of a series of self-consciously physical gestures: removing his jacket single-handedly, scratching his spine with the back of his thumb, striking a match on his boot heel. When a cat startles Blanche, she clings to him, betraying her desire, but the moment nevertheless seems more grounded in fear; how, for instance, can one interpret the scene in light of Blanche's testimony that, "The first time I laid eyes on [Stanley] I thought to myself, 'That man is my executioner!'" However desperate for human contact she may be, Blanche's fear of Stanley greatly overwhelms her sexual desire for him, and that she momentarily clings to him for protection likely serves as a morbidly ironic reversal of the male-female violence that will occur at the end of the play.[45] The sexual desire that inhabits Blanche, seemingly incompatible with the primal fear that Stanley engenders within her, becomes more comprehensible as a

[44] Williams, 24-25.
[45] Jacqueline O'Connor in her discussion seizes upon a similarly morbid and equally pivotal irony—that "in *Streetcar*, Blanche has come looking for asylum, and she has instead come to the place where she is most likely to end up in one." O'Connor, 42.

product of the homosexual gaze of Allan Grey, preserved within and reiterated by Blanche DuBois, yet distinct as a gaze from her own.

One may then more accurately comprehend the gaze of Blanche as the "double gaze" of Blanche/Allan. Yet this remains but a single avenue of desire in a play that consistently demonstrates through its network of desire that all roads lead to Stanley. Stella, who confesses "I can barely stand it when he's away for the night," and who descends the staircase of Elysian Fields back into Stanley's abusive arms, is the most obvious and erotically charged example of Stanley's inexorable "attraction." Also crucial to his sexual appeal is his "alpha" position within *Streetcar*'s hierarchal network of male homosocial relations. The "Poker Night" sequence in particular emphasizes the stark division between the masculine and feminine domains, casting Stanley's brutal violence toward his pregnant wife alongside the "quiet and loving" affirmations that his fellow poker players provide.[46] The gaze between heterosexual men, captured in Kazan's film as friends of Stanley acquaint him to a cold shower, constitutes a third avenue of desire (along with those of Stella and Blanche/Allan) oriented toward Stanley. This excess of desire, amounting to a "triple gaze," justifies the spectacular degree to which he is fetishized—through his implied sexual prowess, his roughed up, working class visage, and his "heartiness with men"— so as to craft multilayered appeals to female, straight male, and gay male desire.[47] William Poteet draws a further connection between Stanley Kowalski and homosexual desire, arguing that the "light, vitality and sexuality from

[46] Ibid., 63.
[47] Ibid., 19, 25. Readers still skeptical of Stanley as a site of projected queer desire may consider the Genetian presence of the young sailor, a role added to Kazan's 1951 film and its first male speaking part, who literally directs Blanche to ride the streetcar named Desire to Elysian Fields and foreshadows both her taste for young men and the body-spectacle of Stanley Kowalski.

the… scenes of Stanley and his hypermasculine friends" contributes the lurid, homoerotic energy conspicuously absent from the "theater of memory" that couches Allan's homosexuality in scenically dim and thematically vague terms.[48]

Although reading Stanley as queer is useful to the extent that it may reveal an intelligible network of desire and clarify the motivations behind his ultra-stylized presentation, the political critique of *Streetcar* treats the heterosexuality of Stanley Kowalski as an inarguable given, a normative and normativizing presence. His position as "king" in the domestic sphere articulates the privileged position of white male heterosexuality in the body politic of the postwar period, and his tyrannical method of rule reflects the United States government's domineering efforts to police sexual and social behavior. Stanley, who is contraposed to Blanche in virtually every way, recognizes her as threat to his way of life in precisely the same manner that the American government recognized homosexuality—that is, as a destructive presence, an aberration, a spreadable disease. The inability of Blanche and Stanley to coexist metonymically conveys the irreconcilable relation between identities *endorsed* and identities *annihilated* by an ideologically affected social standardization. Although in different circumstances Blanche and Stanley might have proved equally formidable foes, as the terms of *Streetcar* stand, Stanley is too powerful, and Blanche too vulnerable, for a fair struggle between the two personae to unfold.

Stanley's political/ideological signification is best expressed through his alignment with the psychiatric establishment, which he enlists in order to have Blanche removed from Elysian Fields permanently. Whereas both Stella and Mitch harbor acute

[48] William Poteet, *Gay Men in Modern Southern Literature: Ritual, Initiation, and the Construction of Masculinity.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006) 23-24.

guilt about committing Blanche, Stanley barely dresses his impatience, telling Blanche, "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old perfume bottles," when, sensing danger, she claims to have forgotten something. [49] The foreboding figures of the Doctor and the Matron signal the intrusion of the institutional authority of psychiatry, which had assimilated normativizing ideological assumptions closely aligned with Stanley's, into the social unit of the household. Thomas Szasz, one of the first and loudest critics of postwar American psychiatry, argued specifically that,

> Psychiatry, masquerading as a medical discipline, had assumed the social function previously performed by religious institutions. As a guarantor of the prevailing social ethos… it sought to redefine deviations from ethical, political, and legal norms by first the invention and then the expansion of the concept of mental illness…. Mental illnesses were invented, declared, through the extension of the metaphor of disease…. Diagnoses [of neurosis, psychosis, and mental illness]—labels applied to distasteful or otherwise unacceptable behavior—served to degrade the persons and classes to whom they were attached.[50]

Thus, psychiatry, in pathologizing merely "unacceptable" or "distasteful" behaviors, reconfigured the boundaries of madness to include social and sexual categories resistant to the ideological demand of postwar America. Psychiatry, in literally *confining* transgressors of the "prevailing social ethos," is in effect conspiratorially re-functioned to serve not citizens, but ideas—not only demonstrating Foucault's thesis that a political state purposefully determines and codifies the value of its madness, but also dictating the sequential process by which an individual may, 1.) embody an anomalous social ethos, 2.) "seem" mad, and by seeming mad, attract the attention of the policing arm of a

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[49] Williams, 176.
[50] Ronald Bayer, *Homosexuality and American Psychiatry: The Politics of Diagnosis.* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981) 54-56.

sovereign authority, so that finally, 3.) the experience of "seeming" mad drives the individual into the realm of madness itself. This process maps in general terms the experience of Blanche DuBois. Although we have argued that Allan Grey's impact on her madness is generative, it is only generative inasmuch as it constitutes the nucleus of her hysteria, which is then, over the course of the play, exposed and antagonized. As Jacques Lacan famously averred—not all who would go mad, do go mad; madness, in making its own architecture visible, demands that both internal and external forces combine to exert an intractable amount of pressure on the individual.[51]

Psychiatric confinement is thus the most convenient and effective recourse through which Stanley may exercise his patriarchal authority over Blanche. The political value of her annihilation is complex and polyvalent: in it, Williams juxtaposes the abuses endured by the feminine, homosexual, erudite, sensitive, and displaced, alongside the privileges afforded to the masculine, heterosexual, bourgeois, brutalized, and modern. The terms of her tragedy are both universal— she is but one casualty of the falsely pathologizing assumptions of American law and medicine—and highly specific, with respect to the story of her dead husband, Allan Grey. Although Grey's invisibility and suicide likely satisfied censorship czars expecting queer characters to face punishment, leading many critics to comprehend Grey as an unfortunate iteration of the "tragic queer" type popularized by mid-century Hollywood entertainments, his contribution to Williams's political critique in *Streetcar* is nevertheless an antihomophobic one. Both his fate and Blanche's complete the tragic circularity of Williams's critique, whereby the

[51] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits.* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 176.

trained instinct of aversion destroys the victim and guarantees the destruction of the perpetrator.

As Blanche's prospects grow increasingly grim, her fantasies grow increasingly beautiful: "[W]hen I die, I'm going to die on the sea… I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard—at noon—in the blaze of summer—and into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes!"[52] In *Streetcar*'s final scene, Blanche "hold[s] tight" to the arm of the doctor just as in scene one she held tight to the arm of Stanley.[53] Neither man remotely deserves her affection, yet the authority of each must go unchallenged. Critics have referred to Blanche's fate—a lifetime exposed to the medical horrors of a mental institution— as one worse than death, which renders her immortalized parting line to the Doctor all the more poignant. The silent leave-taking of Blanche DuBois in scene eleven was in 1947 the most widely published still of the production, and remains one of the defining images of American drama—perhaps because *Streetcar*'s denouement so devastatingly condemns one of twentieth-century American culture's defining and most avoidable human tragedies. The poetry and spectacle of *Streetcar* has for far too long neutralized its political wattage. The critic stands to benefit who recalls Arthur Miller's words: "*Streetcar* is a cry of pain; forgetting that is to forget the play."[54]

[52] Williams, 170.
[53] Ibid., 178.
[54] Ibid., xiv.

Melancholy and Mystery in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, another Williams-Kazan collaboration, premiered on Broadway to rave reviews in April, 1955. It was the first unqualified smash Williams had penned since *Streetcar* and would be the last of his career. Critical consensus deemed the play not only superlative for a playwright of Tennessee's stature, but also unusually confrontational. Walter Kerr, in his otherwise glowing review for the *New York Herald Tribune,* does not hesitate to call its speech "blistering, nerve-scraping… urgent and ugly," its profanity "gratuitous," and its dramatic meaning "mislaid or deliberately hidden."[55] Kerr's last objection, that *Cat* presents a problem and offers no solution, has become the work's the most persistent accusation, one that has stalled some critics from offering definitive readings and led others toward wildly divergent interpretations. Because the dramatic "problem" of *Cat* hinges upon a core interrogative complaint that lacks an unambiguous answer (*Is Brick gay?*), *Cat* criticism has transformed into a rather useless comedy of guessing, of inferring and suspecting, the aim of which has been to resolve an infuriating piece of willful textual indeterminacy. In following this line, *Cat* critics have effortlessly duplicated the paranoid, frenzied character of their constituent play, as well as ignored its most fundamental lessons: that mendacity does not consist in any one person but rather in relations between persons, that mystery is an irreducible characteristic of the human experience, and that the compulsive urge to expose a secret will rarely yield the truth.

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[55] Walter F. Kerr. "*Cat on A Hot Tin Roof:* A Secret is Half-Told in Fountains of Words." *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams.* Ed. George. W. Crandell. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996) 118-9.

What *Cat* criticism *has* exposed—almost as neatly as the play itself—are the injurious psychological effects produced by the overbearing and potentially destructive urge of the American social body *to know* –and not only to know, but to know *for sure*. Critics, not unlike the Pollitts, *must know for sure* whether or not Brick is homosexual. When philosopher Eve Sedgwick attends to the double bind of the social construct of the "closet," she argues that closeted gay identity is more vulnerable to intrusive, presumptuous, and meddlesome discourses, while openly gay identity is punished for a degree of visibility inevitably received as excessive. Contradictions such as these, which have indelibly marked the politics of gay exposure, spring from the inordinately obsessive level of scrutiny to which the social body subjects its sexual minorities. Efforts of the American government to vilify homosexuality through associations with mental illness and radical politics foregrounded its value as a presence to be exposed, "rooted out," diagnosed, and eliminated. David Savran writes that the Cold War political hegemony "authorized an unprecedented level of surveillance of social and sexual practices," and that homophobic fervor in particular enabled Congress "to police the most private corners of persons' lives."[56] Often, then, an individual's most personal and intimate affairs were precisely the ones that institutions of power sought most desperately to expose, intensifying the already politically paranoid atmosphere that has become the legacy of the postwar period. An operative contradiction was set in place: where homosexuality is concerned, one must know; knowing, one wishes one hadn't found out. More often than not, reasons for "knowing" in 1955 were purely self-interested: knowing satisfied one's own suspicion and curiosity, it turned the ostensibly queer subject into a

[56] David Savran. *Communists Cowboys and Queers.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 86.

vulnerable and sexualized object, it turned knowledge of intimate experience into a sordid spectacle for public consumption, and finally, it lured nationally sanctioned responses of condescension and unease, if not outright violence and abuse. At best, Cold War discourse on homosexuality was "sympathetic to the 'problem' of homosexuality," "written in the language of remorse."[57] The liberal response to homosexuality, featured in texts like Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy* (1953), treats its homosexually coded subjects as odd, sensitive, and somewhat pathetic, before mandating they "return" to heterosexuality—a motif that Richard Brooks's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) would later incorporate against the Southern playwright's vigorous objections.

Given his options, it is not so surprising that Williams was disinterested in adhering to either conservative or liberal conventions of homosexual characterization and narrative. What is surprising is that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has lured the ire of liberals far more than that of conservatives due to Williams's failure to properly "address" homosexuality, an indication to some of his "mixed signals" regarding his own sexuality.[58] John Clum advances the charge that, "[Williams] wants to offer the truth of human experience without facile conclusions or pat definitions. Fair enough. But he seems to worry about such things when homosexuality rears its problematic head."[59] Critics who follow Clum's line believe that Williams's narrative strategies are devious because they enable him to retain deniability that he is in fact dealing with homosexuality at all. Ignoring the fact that these strategies were precisely the ones that enabled Williams

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[57] Savran, 87.
[58] John Clum. "Something Cloudy, Something Clear: Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams." *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture.* Ed. Ronald Butters, John Clum, and Michael Moon. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989) 158.
[59] Clum, 161.

to stage homosexuality in a virulently homophobic period in the first place, Clum's conclusions suffer from bewildering anachronism. In *Homosexuality in Cold War America,* Robert Corber debunks the logic behind these and likeminded claims:

> According to [a number of critics], whereas Williams did not hesitate to deal openly with gay male experience in his short stories and poetry, he refused to do so in his plays because they reached a broader audience and might expose his homosexuality to public scrutiny… What is particularly disturbing about this view is that it does not adequately consider the place of the closet in postwar gay male experience and thus seriously misrepresents Williams's hesitation to acknowledge his homosexuality publicly… We need to avoid concluding that gay men who, like Williams, were unwilling to come out of the closet publicly suffered from internalized homophobia.[60]

As Corber acknowledges, to condemn Williams's hesitation is to offer a post-Stonewall reading of a pre-Stonewall text. It is to assume that Williams—rather than being acutely aware of the very real institutional limitations in place regarding homosexual representation—was so naïve and desperate for public approval that he would go out of his way as a writer to veil homosexuality at the expense of his craft. Finally, it is to forget that Williams in his prime was quite famously "the consummate Broadway playwright who knew well the politics setting commercialism against artistic integrity."[61]

There is far less dubious way to read *Cat*'s "hesitation"—not as a symptom of its author's psychosexual insecurities, but as a critical statement in and of itself, an uncompromising and politically incorrect centerpiece to the text's detonation of the pious social conventions governing taboo sexuality and public exposure. Critics and audiences

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[60] Robert J. Corber. *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 115-116.
[61] John S. Bak. "'Sneakin and spyin' from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick, and Homosexual Existentialism." *Theatre Journal.* (Washington: May 2004. Vol. 56, Iss. 2) 235.

who mistake their overwhelming desire to know Brick's sexuality as the playwright's desire to conceal it have obscured a levelheaded approach to the text. *Cat*, as Williams was only too willing to remind his audiences, is not *only* about homosexuality. In fact, it may not even be *chiefly* about homosexuality. Any kind of similarly transgressive sexual behavior could essentially stand in for Brick's homosexual "problem" and uphold the play's structural integrity. What the play does achieve, what it portrays in even greater detail than the homosexual experience, are the networks of barriers erected across the social and familial structures of American culture that forestall communication and prevent the utterance and circulation of the truth. These barriers, extant both within and between individuals, have forced a stalemate in the Pollitt family that Williams probes deeply but refuses to resolve, and about which he remains finally pessimistic.

It is certainly true that *Cat* is opaque where *Streetcar* is expressive, and that *Cat* withholds as routinely as *Streetcar* divulges. Yet these qualities, far from inhibiting or obscuring representations of madness, instead work to describe them—as surely as the playwright's expressive and wordy style in *Streetcar* serves to characterize the madness of Blanche DuBois. *Cat* is beyond the shadow of a doubt a "mad" play—probably the maddest that Tennessee ever wrote if one takes the term primarily to mean something like "absurd," "illogical," or "daft." In fact, when speaking of madness in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* we might more precisely be speaking of two madnesses: that of Brick, and that of the play. Brick's madness, although not granted the same level of subjective depth as Blanche Dubois', is nevertheless the heart of the narrative. Dean Shackelford contends simply, "Everything which occurs centers around Brick," before adding that, as was the case with Stella's desire for Stanley, "the central focus on Maggie's desire for sexual

fulfillment with Brick places the male body before the audience's gaze."[62] Through the dynamic splintering of perspectives, Williams offers his spectators the kind of contradictory challenges that set apart his best work— to identify, for example, with Brick's privileged position as a subject in the narrative, and at the same time to desire Brick's body on behalf of another subjectivity that renders Brick its object. The subversive potential of homoerotic subjectivity in 1955 (especially in the form of a "big beautiful athlete husband") needs hardly be overstated; equally crucial to understanding Brick is the fact that the psychological opacity that his name suggests, intensified by suicidal alcoholism and depression, has ruptured Brick's psyche to the degree that he merely carves out the path of least resistance between his own visions (which he has largely given up on) and the visions others provide for him (which he largely ignores).

Still, "mad" is a not a term often used to characterize Brick. Likewise, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is not treated as a play chiefly about madness, or as an exploration of mad subjectivity, to the extent that *A Streetcar Named Desire* and even *Suddenly, Last Summer* are. *Cat*'s legacy is instead to be Williams's most politically controversial play, his most realistically stylized social probe, composed of "urgent and ugly" sounds, a departure from the expressionist, poetic mode of previous plays but containing the same number of sexual thrills. Williams in addition refrains from coloring the play according to any single subjectivity (such as Blanche's in *Streetcar*), a decision that radically de-centers the play's perspective and as a result distances the spectator from committing to any single identification. These realities make the business of pinning down *Cat* extraordinarily, deliberately difficult; they at the same time have deceived critics into

[62] Dean Shackelford. "The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*." *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* (1998) 106.

believing that *Cat* does not explore psychological disturbance on the individual level as strikingly as, for instance, *Streetcar* does.

Much like *Streetcar, Cat* derives suspense from the protracted revelation of past events, and in this case those events concern Brick, the prodigal Pollitt son and professional athlete who has sunken into alcoholism and psychological malaise. Critics have psychoanalyzed Brick's depression according to a number of frameworks, the most common tracing a line from Freud's Oedipal drama, through Sartre's notion of the existential hero, to Eve Sedgwick's theory of homosexual panic. Douglas Arrell's article "Homosexual Panic in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*" would have it that,

> Brick's recognition that his close football friendship with Skipper might be homosexual collides with his assumption that homosexuals are a specific despised minority group. According to Williams's stage direction, in this scene '[Brick's] heart is accelerated; his forehead sweat-beaded; his breath becomes more rapid and his voice hoarse'. He exemplifies a man in a state of what Sedgwick calls 'homosexual panic.'[63]

Arrell admits that the "obviousness" of this claim may render it "uninteresting" to some—and it is fair to say that, considering that homophobia constituted the reigning ideology in 1955, the usefulness of his argument has its limits.[64] A more troubling problem, however, emerges when one attempts to characterize Brick as a subject in the midst of a "panic." It is safe to say that the stage direction that Arrell uses badly indicates Brick's temperament, which is defined throughout the play not by panic, but by "charm," "detachment," "a cool air."[65] Even Maggie, the figure in the play who understands Brick

[63] Douglas Arrell. "Homosexual Panic in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*." *Modern Drama,* 51:1 (Spring 2008) 63.
[64] Arrell, 63.
[65] Tennessee Williams. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.* (New Directions: New York, 2004) 19.

most keenly, admits in spite of herself, "You look so cool, so cool, so enviably cool."[66] These descriptors, in conjunction with other leitmotifs (like Brick's cravings for peace and silence), emphasize that he is a placid, removed individual who only very occasionally, "when disturbed… shows that at some deeper level he is far from peaceful."[67] While Sedgwick's concept of homosexual panic may clarify the intensity of Brick's homophobic diatribes, it does not explain the erstwhile tendencies and psychological defenses that imprison him—indeed, that dominate his psychological landscape—which he has taken up in order to shield himself from responsibility and scrutiny. Applications of existentialist philosophy, on the other hand, break down upon the determination that "The existentialist hero faces the truth with unflinching honesty; he or she acts freely and decisively… Brick is someone who cannot face the truth about himself."[68]

All this is to propose that a new framework is necessary if one is to understand the nature of Brick's madness any more thoroughly than previous critics have. However, before advancing a Foucauldian solution to the problem of Brick's madness—namely, the philosopher's definition of *melancholy* – as the ideal theoretical model for filling this gap, a brief outline of Brick's textual backstory will serve the interests of the argument to follow. Brick Pollitt, progeny of the wealthiest planter in Mississippi, attends Ole Miss where he nimbly passes through the traditional rites and initiations of heterosexual masculinity, pledging a fraternity and playing for the college football team. There Brick forms a professional and ambiguously personal relationship with fellow teammate

[66] Williams, 30.
[67] Ibid., 19.
[68] Arrell, 62.

Skipper, with whom Brick becomes famous for "those long, long!—high, high!—passes that—couldn't be intercepted," and a romantic relationship with Maggie.[69] However, as Maggie recalls, "[W]hen we double-dated at college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along…to make a good public impression."[70] After graduation, Brick and Skipper advance to the pro-leagues for one season, prolonging their glory days, after which Brick marries Maggie and maintains a sex life characterized by "indifference," "absolute confidence and perfect calm," before being "cut short, long before the natural time."[71] When Brick suffers a spinal injury, the athletic and personal dimensions of his relationship with Skipper begin to unravel, as does his marriage to Maggie. One night while drunk Skipper and Maggie go to bed with each other to "feel a little bit closer to [Brick]," at which point Maggie demands that Skipper acknowledge his homosexual attraction to Brick, "destroy[ing] him," and precipitating Skipper's alcoholism, drug addiction, and resultant death. Skipper's fate then seals the deterioration of Brick and Maggie's marriage and triggers Brick's lapse into alcoholism and depression.

This is the state of things as the curtain rises on the Pollitt plantation gallery, where Brick and Maggie have returned to celebrate Big Daddy's birthday. Williams is careful to observe in the first scene that while "at some deeper level [Brick] is far from peaceful," "his liquor hasn't started tearing him down outside," underlining the discrepancy between Brick's disturbed interior and irresistible exterior. Foucault,

[69] Williams, 124.
[70] Ibid., 59.
[71] Ibid., 30.

addressing the challenge of approaching melancholy with respect to other forms of madness, writes,

> Melancholy cannot be treated as a paralysis, apoplexy, vertigo, or convulsion. In truth it cannot even be analysed as simple dementia either, even though delirious melancholy supposes a similar disorder in the movement of the spirits; mechanical upsets do explain delirium (an error which is common to all forms of madness…) but not its particular quality, the color of the sadness and fear that gives melancholy its unique landscape.[72]

Foucault's conditions ensure that an analysis of Brick's madness will differ significantly from that of Blanche's, their only correspondence consisting in a shared stake in the psychological error of delirium. His formulation also contradicts critics who take Williams' remark that Brick is a figure in the midst of "moral paralysis," to completely explain the dimensions of his character, in doing so pegging him as little more than a "self-hating queer." Instead, Foucault indicates that the constitutive quality of melancholy resides in its particular "color," which he defines primarily in relation to three crucial symptoms: impotence, idleness (or, a state of arrest), and a continuous delirium revolving around a single object referred to as the *melancholic point*.[73]

We might begin our analysis of Brick's melancholy by attending to this first symptom—that of impotence. Brick's refusal to go to bed with Maggie is the central dramatic problem of Act One, delivering to audiences the kind of vivid, voyeuristic spectacle for which Williams had become famous. Childlessness reveals their sexual dysfunction to the rest of the Pollitt clan, especially when juxtaposed against Mae and Gooper's ostentatious brood: "Think of it, Brick, they've got five of them and number six

[72] Michel Foucault. *History of Madness.* (Routledge: New York, 2009) 266.
[73] Ibid., 267-9.

is coming. They've brought the whole bunch down here like animals to display at a county fair."[74] Brick's impotence does not stem only from his asexual disposition, but also from his broader lack of physical skill. Stage directions indicate that Brick "hobbles" and that his ankle is to be "broken, plastered, and bound," the incident behind which Maggie harshly recounts: "*Clarksdale Register* carried a nice little item about it, human interest story about a well-known former athlete stagin' a one-man track meet on the Glorious Hill High School athletic field last night, but was slightly out of condition and didn't clear the first hurdle!"[75] Brick's transformation from professional athlete to a drunk bumbling about after hours at Glorious Hill is a manifold symptom of impotence, however wistfully Brick himself may frame the scene, and the reality that Brick has additionally sacrificed his livelihood as a professional sports announcer should not be overlooked in contributing to his impotent brand of masculinity.

Brick's crutch is the central metaphor for his impotent condition and the text suggests that Williams delighted in writing scenes exploiting its symbolic value. The first dramatic crescendo of Act One unfolds when Maggie provokes Brick by withholding it:

Margaret:
Lean on me.

Brick:
No, just give me my crutch.

Margaret:
Lean on my shoulder.

Brick:
I don't want to lean on your shoulder, I want my crutch!

[74] Williams, 19.
[75] Ibid., 22.

{*This is spoken like sudden lightning.*}

Are you going to give me my crutch or do I have to get down on my knees on the floor and—

Margaret:
Here, here, take it, take it![76]

Brick's submissiveness seems only to embolden Maggie, who ventures several brazen attempts to ensnare him. Williams routinely evokes her most masculine features: "[S]ometimes [her voice] drops low as a boy's and you have a sudden image of her playing boy's games as a child," and Maggie herself attests her agility: "I love to run with dogs through chilly woods, run, run leap over obstructions…"[77] The contrasts are self-evident: Maggie is brassy and resilient, whereas Brick is withdrawn and misanthropic; Maggie is "determined to win" her stake in life while Brick is resigned to having lost his; Maggie is manly while Brick is emasculated; Maggie leaps over obstructions, Brick crashes into them.

Foucault writes, "In melancholy, the spirits are carried away by an agitation, but a weak agitation that lacks power or violence, a sort of impotent upset… the spirits do not wander far on the new paths they create and their agitation dies down rapidly."[78] Brick's outburst, which Williams likens to "sudden lightning," falters just as suddenly to a rather pathetic plea—a kind of "impotent upset" of itself. Brick ultimately lacks force even when antagonized, the polar opposite of brutes like Stanley Kowalski who use excessive force to settle the slightest domestic squabbles. Brick's attempts to strike Maggie never connect—the first "shatters the gemlike lamp on the table," the second "misses," and

[76] Ibid., 32-3.
[77] Ibid., 21, 37.
[78] Foucault, 266.

neither deters Maggie's ferocious speech: "But Brick?!—*Skipper is dead! I'm alive!* Maggie the cat is—*alive! I am alive, alive!*"[79] Brick's body and spirit are too enervated to follow through with genuine acts of violence; although Brick approaches frenzy, he "never attains" it as Foucault stipulates in his formulation of the melancholic. Brick has relinquished his investment in human affairs to the extent that provocation cannot mount his overwhelming indifference; his disposition is informed by a madness "always at the limits of its own impotence."[80]

One overriding consequence of Brick's indifference to present matters is an inflated investment in the irretrievable past. When Gooper's daughter Dixie asks Brick why he was found jumping hurdles, he responds, "Because I used to jump them, and people like to do what they used to do, even after they've stopped being able to do it."[81] Brick's desire to restage former scenes of athletic glory works in tandem with his blatant disregard for planning a future in producing a portrait of psychological arrest. Brick's definition of an alcoholic suggests a further connection between that particular compulsion and his nostalgic preoccupations: "A drinking man's someone who wants to forget he isn't still young an' believing."[82] As opposed to mania, Foucault writes that melancholy causes one to be "entirely taken up with reflection, to the extent that his imagination remains idle and at rest," and that melancholy's concomitant delirium is accordingly "always pacific."[83] In addition to enabling idle reflection, Brick's alcoholic tendency bears on Foucault's notion of the melancholic as "pacific," offering a way for

[79] Williams, 61.
[80] Foucault, 266-7.
[81] Williams, 62.
[82] Ibid., 114.
[83] Foucault, 269, 657.

him to control and experience "a click that I get in my head that makes me peaceful."[84] Brick consumes alcohol, then, not only to ease the pain of nostalgia but also to pursue mental "peace" and defend fleetingly against the whirlwind of "blistering, nerve-scraping," sounds swirling around him in the gallery of the Pollitt estate.

The last principal symptom of Brick's melancholy involves the matter at the crux of the play—the nature of Brick's attachment to Skipper. Skipper contribution to Brick's madness is to be what Foucault dubs the "melancholic point," the object around which melancholy revolves, and just as Foucault theorizes, Brick endows this object alone with "unreasonable proportions." When cornered by Maggie about his relationship with Skipper, Brick declares, "One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true!—I had friendship with Skipper.—You are naming it dirty!"[85] Maggie appeals to Brick's transcendent vision of his "one great good true" friendship with her a vision of her own—"It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends… You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes!"—which finally enrages Brick due to its homosexual suggestions.[86] Brick's melancholia does not rest solely with the fact that his relationship with Skipper is no longer available to him, but also with his inability to acknowledge publicly the erotic and (possibly) sexual dimensions of that relationship. Bridging the gap between this insurmountable psychological reality and a coherent reading of Brick as a closeted gay man is the task that *Cat* critics have longed to accomplish definitively; however, even if this were possible (which it isn't), reading Brick as closeted should no longer constitute

[84] Williams, 100.
[85] Ibid., 59.
[86] Ibid., 58-9.

the fruit of a given critical analysis, but rather prompt further inquiry into the political and social dynamics that hem Brick into an unwinnable situation.

The most striking connection between the madnesses of Blanche DuBois and Brick Pollitt is that both arise from tragic encounters with homosexuality. Guilt possesses Blanche and Brick, affects what Foucault might call the "color" of their deliria; sexual dimensions notwithstanding, they view themselves as hopelessly implicated in the suicidal trajectories of loved ones, Allan and Skipper. Unlike Blanche, however, Brick's situation as husband and heir apparent in an affluent, normative social context insulates him from the prospect of institutionalization. Maggie, particularly eager to secure her own conjugal interests, shields Brick from this outcome: "You don't take dope. Otherwise you're a perfect candidate for Rainbow Hill, Baby, and that's where they aim to ship you—over my dead body! …Nothing would please them better. Then Brother Man could get a-hold of the purse strings… Son-of-a-bitch!"[87] Perhaps the starkest distinction between the mad subjectivities of Blanche and Brick lies between the remorse Blanche feels over her homophobic act and the fury Brick unleashes when accused of harboring desire for Skipper. Brick's systematic disavowals are as impenetrable as his name would indicate; they are the only reactions Maggie and Big Daddy can lure from him, and they are the only acceptable responses Brick is seemingly able to offer to a culture that relishes nationally in the gesture of "*J'accuse!*"

What empowers Brick's homophobic defense? What makes it logical? To start, were Brick to admit to homosexual desire, he would still, according to the American Psychological Association, qualify as mentally ill. Depression and alcoholism are

[87] Ibid., 21.

debilitating mental illnesses to be sure, but they were not in 1955 subject to the spectrum of reactions—from social exclusion to verbal hostility to physical violence—that homosexuality baited. Further, the desire of the American social body to "root out" homosexual individuals destabilized the boundaries between private and public spheres of knowledge, making the problem of homosexuality an exceptionally hard one to contain. Brick likely fears these designated reactions to homophobia all the more because he is intimately acquainted with them. In Act II, he boasts to Big Daddy,

> Don't you know how people *feel* about things like that? How, how *disgusted* they are by things like that? Why, at Ole Miss when it was discovered a pledge to our fraternity, Skipper's and mine, did a, *attempted* to do a, unnatural thing with—
>
> We not only dropped him like a hot rock!—We told him to git off the campus, and he did, he got!—All the way to—[…] –North Africa, last I heard![88]

Unfolding the extended dialogue between Brick and Big Daddy in Act II according to a series of brilliant reversals, Williams defies the liberal expectation that would have Brick surrender, admit his horrifying secret to Big Daddy, who then might offer his son some measured tones of pity and fatherly advice. Instead, the vitriol between them steadily increases, spurred on by Brick's fierce homophobia and Big Daddy's ineffectual pleas for tolerance. Finally, it is not Brick who admits to a homosexual history, but rather Big Daddy ("I knocked around in my time…"), panicking Brick even further:

> Brick:
> Why can't exceptional friendship, *real, real, deep, deep friendship!* Between two men be respected as something clean and decent without being thought of as—
>
> Big Daddy:
> It can, it is, for God's sake.

[88] Ibid., 121.

Brick:
--*Fairies…*

{*In his utterance of this word, we gauge the wide and profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel.*}[89]

Before tackling the profound implications of this pithy exchange, we might first consider two other crucial deployments of the word "conventional" in the text. The first appears in a stage direction describing Reverend Tooker: "Suddenly Reverend Tooker appears in the gallery doors… sincere as a bird call blown on a hunter's whistle, the living embodiment of the pious conventional lie."[90] Maggie provides the second: "I don't know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody's good. The rich or the well-to-do can afford to respect moral patterns, conventional moral patterns, but I could never afford to, yeah, but—I'm honest!"[91] Big Daddy's free use of obscenity violates the conventionality that Reverend Tooker symbolizes and imposes on the speech of the play, climaxing with the line, "Fuck the goddam preacher!" when Big Mama tries to censor him.[92] Maggie shares Big Daddy's disinterest in conventional morality, shrugging it off as both a futile enterprise and an indulgence of the upper classes. The text indicates, then, that while both Maggie and Big Daddy have dedicated their energies toward success in social, familial, and financial structures, they at the same time have cultivated a healthy mistrust in the rules and behaviors that those same structures designate.

One cannot say the same for Brick. The material conditions of his existence immediately sets him apart from Big Daddy and Maggie, who each have struggled to

[89] Ibid., 122.
[90] Ibid., 118.
[91] Ibid., 61.
[92] Ibid., 78.

leave behind humble beginnings. Brick, on the other hand, exists in a world that "crowned" him instantly; in addition to being wealthy and educated, he is entirely compatible with the authentic masculine ideal that American ideology lionized in the postwar period. Few images evoke quintessential American masculinity more clearly than that of the football hero with his college sweetheart in tow. Maggie sees Brick as a "superior creature," a "godlike being," because that is the value that social and political ideologies bestow upon his exemplary mode of masculinity.[93] The singular advantages that Brick gains as a result of his kingly status in the sphere of "conventional mores" informs the extent to which he desperately clings to these conventions. In short, Brick places good faith in the ideology that has extended it to him in kind.

For Brick to admit to homosexuality, then, would be for him to sacrifice virtually every advantage with which the conventional world has wooed him. For Brick, seeming heterosexual and seeming homosexual is the difference between being "superior," "godlike," and being among the ranks of "queers," and "fucking sissies," being within convention and without, being the object of desire and the object of disgust.[94] The fall that Brick envisions from heterosexuality to homosexuality is potentially a life-ending one, a possibility as terrifying (as it was to Skipper) as suicide; just its verbal presence makes Brick flinch: "Big daddy, you, you—*shock* me! Talkin' so—casually! –about a thing like that…"[95] Brick's devotion to moral cleanliness and purity (Maggie at one point calls him an "ass-aching Puritan") is a defensive pathology that in conjunction with homophobic discourse enables him to vigorously, if unconvincingly, deny accusations of

[93] Ibid., 57.
[94] Ibid., 120.
[95] Ibid., 121.

homosexuality.[96] Lacking the resilience of Maggie and Big Daddy, figures whose experiences in the world have taught them shrewd survival instincts, Brick is either unable or unwilling to forfeit his social rank in order to establish a sovereign masculinity outside the boundaries of what American ideology considers normal. Either way, it must be said that a quality of Brick's madness is to be aware of his own dilemma; it is probably this private awareness that galvanizes Brick's helplessness and drives him to depression and addiction in the first place.

Williams's frankest acknowledgment of Brick's dilemma is also his most honest attempt to convey the mission of the play as a whole:

> The thing they're discussing… is the admissible thing that Skipper died to disavow between them. The fact that if it had existed it had to be disavowed to "keep face" in the world they lived in, may be at the heart of the "mendacity" that Brick drinks to kill his disgust with. It may be the root of his collapse. Or maybe it is only a single manifestation of it, not even the most important… Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of a character in life, even in one's own character to himself.[97]

Williams in this passage seems to prophesize the criticism that will come to haunt his play—that *Cat* is reluctant to convey its own discoveries, that it falls short as a social probe, that it does not offer a solution to its problem. The play is *not* the solution of a problem, but rather the exposition of a problem; the irony is self-evident in the fact that the very problem that Williams exposes in *Cat* is that of *exposure*—especially *exposure* in relation to conventional morality, which affects the conditions under which Williams can even mount his criticism. One may now begin to comprehend the dizzying array of

[96] Ibid., 23.
[97] Ibid., 116.

the structural contradictions that factor into the "madness" of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as a text. Its characters are gridlocked before the play begins; they will be gridlocked after it ends. It is a family drama composed of people who are ultimately self-interested, a psychological drama about a psychosis that is never adequately explained, a political drama whose intrigue produces no obvious heir, and a drama of "blistering, nerve-scraping" language that concludes with Brick's sentiment, "I don't say anything. I guess there's nothing to say."[98] *Cat* is tantalizing because of what it refuses to say—its political statement also lies therein. While Williams invites his audience to interpret the facts, to clarify the mystery, he makes the task a fool's gambit. *Cat*'s ambiguity is final. The playwright's refusal to confirm Brick's homosexuality consciously manipulates the reflex of the American public to identify and root out homosexuality, while denying them the condescending pleasures of liberal pity in recognizing it. Leaving Brick's sexuality in question encourages the audience to treat sexuality not as a puzzle to neatly be solved, but as a mystery to be explored. It presses us to resist the notion that we can read sexuality as plainly as we think we can; it cautions us to be sure that we want to know what we think we do.

[98] Ibid., 173.

Homophobia and Just Punishment in *Suddenly Last Summer*

Suddenly Last Summer premiered Off-Broadway in 1958 as half of the double-bill *Garden District*, paired with another Williams one-act, *Something Unspoken*. Immediately *Suddenly Last Summer* "garnered almost all the attention," and elicited the strongest reviews that Williams had received since *A Streetcar Named Desire* over a decade earlier.[99] Allegedly the playwright chose to produce *Garden District* beyond the confines of Broadway because he felt that unleashing *Suddenly Last Summer* on Broadway audiences would have meant being "critically tarred and feathered and ridden on a fence rail out of the New York theatre."[100] His tremulousness, while understandable given *Suddenly*'s roster of graphic, controversial themes, proved unnecessary upon the play's highly successful premiere. Gore Vidal soon expanded Williams's text into a feature length screenplay for Joseph Mankiewicz's *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), produced by Sam Spiegel, and starring Elizabeth Taylor, Katharine Hepburn, and Montgomery Clift. The play itself remains a popular choice for theatrical revival.

Yet there are huge, monolithic problems with *Suddenly Last Summer*, problems that have led critics to consider it to be Williams's "most homophobic" play, his "sickest" play, one that is sensational at the expense of thematic integrity. Characterizing *Suddenly*'s legacy within Williams criticism, Michael Paller writes,

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[99] Michael Paller. *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Broadway Drama.* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 145.
[100] Arthurt Gelb. "Williams Explains His Move Off Broadway." *New York Times* (December 16, 1958).

> For critics or directors interested in Williams's images of homosexuality, the play is what *The Merchant of Venice* is to Jewish critics of Shakespeare or *The Taming of the Shrew* to feminist Shakespeareans. At least the "offensive" characters in these other plays actually appear onstage and may be able, with directorial intervention, to make a case for themselves…
>
> Williams, however, seems to give sympathetic directors and critics no such chance. Sebastian Venable is offstage and dead and there is no denying his predatory nature or his sickening end."[101]

Suddenly's detractors accuse Williams of reifying homophobic notions of homosexuality through the monstrous figure of Sebastian Venable, around whom the play revolves. Sebastian is another in a line of dead queers that haunt Williams's work; like Allan Grey in *Streetcar* and Skipper in *Cat,* Sebastian's presence dominates entire scenes (and in Mankewicz's film, extended monologues and set-pieces) though his character lacks a voice and a recognizable form. Robert Gross writes that with the figure of Sebastian, "Williams creates a body that is more powerful than any other body in the play, since it is not limited to a single embodiment, but can suffuse the bodies and desires of others," a claim that echoes Savran's argument that to read homosexuality in Williams is to read refractions, transpositions.[102]

As Paller points out, Sebastian's dramatic formlessness denies directors and actors the opportunity to humanize his position. Williams's narrative strategies ensure that Sebastian is the monster that we imagine, not the one that we witness. Didier Eribon props up this discourse of monstrousness surrounding Sebastian Venable, writing in *Insult* that "Certain characters from the movies would become fetish objects for gay

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[101] Paller, 145-6.
[102] Robert Gross. "Consuming Hart: Sublimity and Gay Poetics in "Suddenly Last Summer." *Theater Journal,* Vol. 47, No. 2, Gay and Lesbian Queeries (May, 1995) 240.

men… even when they were simply portrayed as monsters. (…think of Mankiewicz's *Suddenly Last Summer*.) Even if the reason behind their monstrousness was not clearly in evidence, for gay and lesbian eyes there were clues that allowed the enigma to be deciphered."[103] These critical formulations, however, Eribon's in particular, assume a mutually reinforcing relation between monstrosity and homosexuality that *Suddenly Last Summer* does not fully endorse as a text. Eribon's suggestion that homosexuality, however coded, is the "reason behind" Sebastian's monstrousness, denies the fact that there are other, overriding qualities about Sebastian that make him a monstrous figure. It assumes that the bourgeois trend of postwar Hollywood cinema to represent queers as monstrous or evil will hold true for a ferocious one-act play inaugurated at the York Theatre on First Avenue—a play that Williams deemed too salacious for Broadway, let alone the hallowed lanes of Hollywood.

Add all this to the fact that the play radically departs from the probing social/sexual realism of previous hits like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, moving toward decidedly darker, stranger, more mythical territory. Gothic convention factors widely into the expressionist realization of the play, most visibly through the set, "as unrealistic as the décor of a dramatic ballet," which integrates a Victorian Gothic mansion with "a fantastic garden… like a tropical jungle or forest in the prehistoric age," containing "massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out."[104] Violet Venable emerges, clasping a "silver knobbed cane," followed by the young, handsome Dr. Cukrowicz. Her entrance into the garden, exaggerated even further in the film version

[103] Didier Eribon. *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 149-50.
[104] Tennessee Williams. *Four Plays.* (Penguin: New York, 1976) 9.

through the use of a descending elevator-like chamber, foregrounds the Gothic dialectic between "overrefinement and wildness," between the decadence of civilization and the savagery of the natural world. Such stark distinctions abound in the text; from the play's opening moments, Tennessee derives menace and suspense from the classically Gothic premise that very beautiful and very terrible scenes will unfold in close proximity to one another, perhaps even simultaneously.

How then, in the midst of these threatening, grotesque images, are we to comprehend Sebastian's homosexuality? Is it meant to be beautiful, terrible, or something else entirely? And what of madness in *Suddenly Last Summer?* The play reintroduces with a vengeance the psychiatric discourse that Williams deployed to remarkable effect in *Streetcar*, and like that play, *Suddenly* reveals the tangled politics and interests guiding psychiatric diagnosis and the process of institutionalization. The play's most imperiled character, Catharine Holly, risks being committed and lobotomized because of the testimonies of Mrs. Venable, who considers Catharine a "vandal" and a "lunatic."[105] Catharine, the only witness to Sebastian's death in Cabeza de Lobo, seems to have been driven mad by the event: "They couldn't shut her up in Cabeza de Lobo or at the clinic in Paris," Mrs. Venable relates venomously, "She babbled, babbled!—smashing my son's reputation."[106] However, as the play progresses and Catharine's role as the vulnerable woman in the Gothic drama steadily garners sympathy, Mrs. Venable's pathological desire to preserve the memory of her son begins to call her own mental stability into question. Finally there is Sebastian, whose delirious, God-seeking "madness" is perhaps the most difficult in the play to determine, due to its narrative distance from the viewer in

[105] Williams, 26-7.
[106] Ibid., 27.

terms of both space and time. The circumstance of Sebastian's death in Cabeza de Lobo is the revelation toward which the play inevitably builds; what this revelation *enables*, however, is a definitive answer to the question: Who precisely is mad, and why? Until the final moments of the play, "madness" is a shifting quantity, a mystery, and it is the solution of this mystery that propels the narrative of *Suddenly Last Summer*.

The statement bears repeating— *Suddenly Last Summer* solves its own mystery, audaciously, in high Gothic style. Compared to the indirect, ambiguous discourse in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer* is strikingly forthright with even its riskiest, most graphic themes. Sebastian Venable may even be Williams's morbid response to gay critics who clamored for a definitively homosexual figure: *you wanted a gay character, you got one.* One might expect critics at least to acknowledge the freeness and lack of indirect discourse with which Williams handles and presents his homosexual themes (no familiar talk of "*that thing"* in *Suddenly Last Summer*), but as Paller recognizes, the detailed portrayal of Sebastian's homosexuality is precisely the aspect of the play to which they most strenuously object:

> Oddly, where critics blame Williams in other plays of indirectness and too firm an attachment to the closet, in *Suddenly Last Summer* it is not his closetedness that so discomfits them, it is his willingness to describe such down-and-dirty, and usually unspeakable, earthy appetites—not neat, not clean, not polite; neither 'positive' nor 'correct'.[107]

Such objections are not altogether unwarranted considering that Sebastian exhibits many characteristics polemically ascribed to male homosexuals— elitism, fastidiousness, vanity, superiority, unchecked sexual habits, a self-obsessed lifestyle, among them; as

[107] Paller, 147.

Paller notes, Sebastian is not a "positive" or a politically "correct" queer character, yet he is a recognizably queer character all the same—and quite a formidable one. Mrs. Venable's declaration that "everything was planned and designed in Sebastian's life," indicates the agency and absolute control he maintained up until the very end, separating him from the likes of Brick and Allan Grey, queer figures caught helplessly in the midst of paralyzing crises. Whereas Brick and Allan lacked the ability to assert heir homosexual identities in the public sphere, Sebastian does so easily and successfully, attracting "a perfect little court of young and beautiful people around him always, wherever he was."[108] Sebastian is in many ways a queer variation on Stanley Kowalski: equally obsessed with bodily pleasures, equally empowered in domestic social contexts, equally blind to the wishes and feelings of others. Like Stanley, Sebastian is alternately powerful, seductive, and horrible; no mere stereotype accurately describes the dimensions of either character. Paller responds to critics who consider Sebastian a vile homosexual caricature with the possibility that one can read Sebastian equally coherently as "an usually 'positive image of a gay man… [who] has a desire to live life at its furthest edge, to engage it at its most sensual extreme, to be himself no matter what anyone else might think."[109]

Homosexuality does not drive Sebastian mad, as it does Skipper, Brick, and Blanche. Sebastian's madness instead springs from his close encounter with the godly, devouring force he witnesses in the Encantadas. For a one-act play, *Suddenly Last Summer* interacts with an immensely complex back-story, one that has many versions. Even if Mrs. Venable's version of Sebastian's history is not entirely trustworthy, her

[108] Williams, 22.
[109] Ibid., 147.

framing of events conveys many crucial qualities regarding her relationship to her son, and her son's relationship with life. She tells Dr. Cukrowicz that Sebastian was a poet, "unknown outside of a small coterie," bound posthumously for "future recognition."[110] Each summer they traveled lavishly together through Europe, a period during which Sebastian would produce a poem. He was "a snob about personal charm in people," "insisted upon good looks in people around him," but lived a celibate life "as strictly as if he'd vowed to."[111] Mrs. Venable's insistence that Sebastian was chaste allows her to denounce Catharine's version of events (which indicts Sebastian's homosexuality) as "a hideous attack on my son's moral character"; it is also one of her most obvious lies.[112] Catharine later divulges what Mrs. Venable would have cut out of her brain—that Sebastian possessed an uncontrollably voracious sexual appetite, and that he used Catharine and his own mother to procure male lovers for himself.

At other times it becomes difficult to tell whether Mrs. Venable is describing Sebastian's vanity or merely inscribing her own vanity onto his memory, such as when she claims, "I was actually the only one in his life that satisfied the demands he made of people."[113] This is revealed as a delusion in Scene Four, when Catharine explains that Sebastian turned his back on his mother in the last months of his life because a "slight stroke" affecting one side of her face had rendered her an ineffective lure for male lovers and thus an unsuitable travel companion. This rebuke, along with Sebastian's death, seems to trigger a psychotic break in Mrs. Venable that compels her to guard the legacy

[110] Ibid., 11-13.
[111] Ibid., 22-25.
[112] Ibid., 24.
[113] Ibid., 25.

of her son and displace her rage onto Catherine, using "every last ounce and inch of my little, leftover strength," in doing so.[114]

Mrs. Venable's anecdotes nevertheless relate Sebastian's character as vitally as Catherine's do. In Scene One, Mrs. Venable tells Dr. Cukrowicz that Sebastian was looking for God, and that he found Him in the spectacle of flesh-eating birds in the Encantadas descending on sea turtles dashing to the water: "They were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles… tearing the undersides open and rending and eating their flesh…[Sebastian] spent that whole blazing equatorial day in the crow's-nest of the schooner watching this thing…when he came down the rigging he said 'Well, now I've seen Him!'"[115] After the incident Sebastian assumes, like Hamlet, a kind of antic disposition, becoming "delirious," "fever[ish]," and prone to impulsive bouts: "In the Himalayas he almost entered a Buddhist monastery… He'd promised those sly Buddhist monks that he would give up the world and himself and all his worldly possessions."[116] The spectacle at the Encantadas transforms Sebastian, disposes him to a disorder of the spirit dredged up by weightier philosophical issues than Allan's public castigation or Brick's foiled college romance. The eternal quality of the philosophical answers Sebastian seeks, as well as the deliberately prehistoric setting of his encounters with the Sublime, suggests what the text continually endorses—that Sebastian's madness exists in a state of temporal dislocation.

For Sebastian, then, as it was for Hamlet, *the time is out of joint*. Mrs. Venable shows Dr. Cukrowicz two photographs of Sebastian, taken twenty years apart, and

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[114] Ibid., 12-3.
[115] Ibid., 16-19.
[116] Ibid., 20.

boasts: "The photograph looks older but not the subject. It takes character to refuse to grow old, Doctor—successfully to refuse to."[117] Sebastian seems to bear no evolving relationship with the passing of time. Williams instead forges a connection to bygone eras, not only through the prehistoric exoticism of the Encantadas, but also through connections to the Renaissance—first with the photograph of Sebastian "in a Renaissance pageboy's costume," and later with Mrs. Venable's description of their existence as "[a] life that'd hardly been known in the world since the great Renaissance princes."[118] Williams seems to frame Sebastian's decadent, princely existence within the ideological apparatus of that era, as a representative of what Foucault calls the "erudite libertinage," the "whole culture of lyrical homosexuality," famously tolerated by the Renaissance.[119] One can ground not only Sebastian's sexuality, but also his madness, in the prevailing social ideologies of the Renaissance. Foucault, accounting for the most durable experiences of "madness" circulated in that era, lists four— madness through literary identification, madness of vain presumption, madness of just punishment, and madness of desperate passion.

The logic behind the *madness of just punishment* will unlock many previously indecipherable qualities of Sebastian's disorder. This madness, like Sebastian's, is a "disorder of the spirit," specifically one that chastises "the disorder of the heart."[120] Foucault continues,

> But it has other powers: the punishment it inflicts multiplies of its own accord, in that as it progresses it reveals the truth. The justice of this form of madness lies

[117] Ibid., 23.
[118] Ibid., 26.
[119] Michel Foucault. *The History of Madness.* (Routledge: New York, 2009) 88.
[120] Foucault, 37.

> precisely in its capacity to unveil the truth. Its truthfulness lies in the fact that in the vain delirium of his hallucinations, the guilty party already feels what will be for all eternity the pain of his punishment.[121]

The truth that Sebastian's madness unveils is the reality that "God shows a savage face to people and shouts some fierce things at them, it's all we see or hear of Him."[122] Sebastian's encounter with a wrathful, devouring God on the shore of the Encantadas beholds a madness that "speaks its own meaning through the strange visions revealing the hidden truth," visions in which "the cries of madness speak for the conscience."[123] Sebastian's horror at witnessing the flesh-eating birds is simultaneously his horror at his own devouring instincts, and the terrible knowledge that he himself will be devoured. Sebastian finds God in what he considers to be the only true absolute in the universe—the process of consuming, of devouring. Startled by this epiphany, Sebastian escapes to the Himalayas to adhere to a selfless Buddhist lifestyle, sacrificing "the world and himself and all his worldly possessions"—but Mrs. Venable inevitably sucks him away from that enterprise: "In less than a month he got up off the filthy grass mat and threw the rice bowl away," she reassures Dr. Cukrowicz."[124]

If Sebastian's madness bears at all upon his homosexuality, it is through their mutual reification through the ideology of the Renaissance. The significance of the period to both madness and sexuality is mark the historical moment at which "homosexuality… little by little… was forced to take its place in the stratifications of madness" –no longer

[121] Ibid., 37.
[122] Williams, 20.
[123] Foucault, 37.
[124] Williams, 20-21.

an acceptable expression of reasoned love.[125] If Sebastian's textual linkages to the Renaissance inform the presentation his sexuality and madness, and if his madness can be understood on the non-traditional timeline that the text suggests, it follows that Sebastian's encounter with a devouring God was in part to witness "confiscation of sexual ethics" of the modern age, and by extension the annihilation of the marginal identity groups that would become substitute terms for the "mad." If, in short, Williams mounts a political critique in *Suddenly Last Summer*, it is one that unfolds according to an expansive timeline, one that tracks homosexuality's trajectory from the decadent ranks of the erudite libertinage to the lowest depths of madness.

Sebastian's madness multiplies as he redoubles his devouring efforts toward the end of his life. After casting aside his incapacitated mother in favor of a shapelier travel companion, he returns to his familiar European odysseys of sexual conquests: "Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds… Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that's how he talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu."[126] Although one reasonably expects (and a more conventional theatrical structure would demand) Sebastian to develop in such a way that would reflect his philosophical enlightenment, Catharine reminds the viewer, "*He! –accepted! –all!* As—how! –things! –are! …He thought it unfitting to ever take any action about anything whatsoever!"[127] Sebastian's knowledge of the cannibalizing processes of the world and the self do not prevent him from participating actively in such processes. When his punishment arrives, Sebastian knows there is no escape. He allows himself to be cannibalized by a band of young naked

[125] Foucault, 88.
[126] Williams, 39.
[127] Ibid., 88-89.

children, as Catharine looks on: "They had *devoured* parts of him…Torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs."[128]

Critics have erroneously interpreted Sebastian's fate to represent the wages of homosexuality. One reviewer concludes, "Man may be consumed by his own inversion;" another writes, "It is clear that Sebastian's punishment fits his crime."[129] Robert J. Gross argues that such readings "ignore the structural and imagistic complexities of the play in favor of a simplistic reading," and it is likely this brand of simplistic reading that has in turn spawned the exaggerated claims of homophobia leveled at Williams over the representation of Sebastian Venable.[130] As Paller contends, "Sebastian is a monster not because he is homosexual, but because he is a selfish exploiter."[131] Sebastian's monstrousness and madness have little to do with his sexual orientation and everything to do with his savage philosophies that privilege self-absorption and the mistreatment of others. God punishes Sebastian with cannibalization because Sebastian himself built a life around the devouring process; with respect to this overarching pattern, any discourse of homosexuality is merely incidental.

Is *Suddenly Last Summer* a homophobic play? As Paller writes, "Unless one is looking very hard to find them, there is neither homophobic discourse nor indirect language in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Indeed, the play is not primarily about any image of homosexuality at all." Gay critics who dismiss Sebastian Venable as a homophobic stereotype dismiss one of the most capable queer characters in Williams's oeuvre; they

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[128] Ibid., 92.
[129] Paul J. Hurley, "*Suddenly Last Summer* as Morality Play." *Modern Drama* 8 (1966) 393; Roger Boxill, *Tennessee Williams* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988) 125.
[130] Gross, 240.
[131] Paller, 149.

also misapprehend Sebastian's homosexuality to be the determining cause of his generally despicable nature. Critics must properly attribute Sebastian's flaws to his narcissistic philosophy and allow for the possibility that Williams mounts claims about *humanity*, not just homosexuality, through the figure of the homosexual. As Paller stresses, Sebastian is neither a "positive" nor "correct" gay character; he is instead another signal of Williams's refusal to bend to the liberal politics of gay representation. To those who accused the playwright after *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* of holding back, of obscuring the homosexual personage, Williams delivered with *Suddenly Last Summer* a fearsome and entirely unorthodox rebuttal. To the rest, Williams offered as strong a Gothic yarn as he ever did—dredging up centuries worth of submerged sexual and psychological histories and fashioning it into a Gothic tale that follows its subject from the throne of decadence to the bowels of madness.

Conclusion: *On Madness*

Williams and Foucault, both gay and mentally ill men, both fascinated by sexuality and madness, maintained a personal investment throughout their lives in the vexed subjective experience of the "outsider;" it is the one subject that critics agree never failed to hold their attention. There is between the theorist and the playwright a shared understanding of the damage that social limits impose upon the individual who cannot conform to them reasonably. Foucault, in his archeological manner, excavates a *history* of abnormality (or, as he terms it, 'Unreason'), while Williams, in his poetic manner, probes through literary narrative its dynamic and mysterious nature.

Foucault, in order to trace the history of the experiences, acts, and personages that have come to constitute the social phenomenon of 'madness' formulates two categories—Reason and Unreason. The division between Reason and Unreason designates the point at which society begins to *exteriorize* the individual from its ranks, through methods of confinement, banishment, and correction, which have over time led to the multidisciplinary institutionalization of madness. The corruption that guided the deployment of institutionalization in the postwar period is perhaps the most damning and consistently demonstrated facet in Williams's critique of postwar social ideology. Williams routinely associates psychiatric confinement with death itself, a savage rebuke to the "correctional" function that the psychiatric establishment was said to perform.

From the seventeenth century onward, social types subsumed under the category of Unreason have included, according to Foucault, "the venereal, the debauched, the dissolute, blasphemers, homosexuals, alchemists, and libertines," a veritable "strange

parade," assembled together under the banner of madness.[132] In an interview conducted after the publication of *La Volonte de savoir*, Michel Foucault explains, "In the 1870s psychiatrists… began either to incarcerate homosexuals in asylums or attempted to cure them. In the future we'll all see them in a global kinship with the insane, suffering from sickness of the sexual instinct."[133] He suggests that the appearance of a homosexual literature at the end of the 19th-century was in fact a response to psychiatric theories that rendered homosexuality something to be "cured." By the 1890s, an exchange between homosexual culture and psychiatric discourse not only had occurred, but had been occurring for centuries. Instead, what sets this historical moment apart is that it represents the point at which homosexuality *begins to transcend its own confinement*, by cultivating a literary tradition, by making itself visible, and by assuming a subjective voice. From the silence, then, comes a kind of madness peculiar enough to hold the attention of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, the first "cries" of a contemporarily recognizable homosexual identity.[19]

Strictly within the context of American political history, *Streetcar* is one such "cry;" *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is another. Williams's efforts to insert homosexual subjectivity into the annals of American drama unfold contemporaneously with the efforts of the government to silence sexual and political radicals of all stripes. The playwright's unique, alchemical ability to spin transgressive material into critical and commercial gold demonstrates the seductive nature and remarkable power of the playwright's talent. The great trick that Williams would again and again perform was his

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[132] Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness.* (Routledge: New York, 2009) 101.
[133] Michel Foucault, "The End of the Monarchy of Sex." *Foucault Live.* (*Le Nouvel Observateur,* March 12-21 1977) 217-18.

ability to expose and unfold elements that were taboo—unprecedentedly so, in terms of the running moral standard of postwar Broadway—into works unanimously praised for their *beauty.* His singular writing style single-handedly revitalized and made fashionable again the poetic sensibility in a period of American drama dominated by realist giants like Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Miller, who terms the period's relation to realism an "addiction," remembers, "Williams' speech was pleasant to hear… shaped by a literary sensibility, and the audience was nevertheless passionately grateful for it, strange as it sounded on this first hearing."[134] Williams' strategy was not to replace realism with magic, the tactic of his heroine Blanche DuBois, but rather to place realist settings, characters, and events along a trajectory that aspired to dizzying, mythical heights.

Nor, as I hope this project has proven, does Williams sacrifice the political sophistication of Miller and O'Neill for the sake of personal poetics. Time and again the playwright embedded uncompromising political statements in his work that defied both conservative and liberal expectation. His politics, like his writing style, was of a singular nature, and his contribution to the postwar discourses of madness and sexuality was above all to stress the psychological disturbance that the exclusionary ideology of postwar America imposed on marginal social/sexual identities. In some instances this meant humanizing the kind of outsider figures Americans were taught to fear; in others it meant stubbornly resisting the invasive reflexes of the American social body to fixate on and root out sexual difference. With these three plays, Williams provided the confined, the forgotten, and the reviled contingents of America with mesmerizingly lucid voices.

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[134] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire.* (New York: New Directions, 2004) iv.

These voices were among the first of their kind, crafted by the last of the heavyweights. They are voices that still echo throughout the kingdoms of American literature.

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