Moon Lake in Love: The Queer, Poetic Imaginarium of Tennessee Williams

by

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Abstract

In the same year that Tennessee Williams's first major commercially successful play, *The Glass Menagerie*, entered what has become its longstanding place of honour in the American dramatic imagination, in the 1944 essay "The History of a Play (With Parentheses)," Williams wrote the words which describe a significant aspect of his Romantic theory of art: "I think of writing as something more organic than words, something closer to being and action" (24). This dissertation considers aesthetic questions of style related to political affect in the intense world of Tennessee Williams's prose and drama. My argument is that Williams is a Queer Romantic writer, whose works throughout his career articulate sustained political resistance to sexuality-based restrictions of the White-supremacist, heteronormative, and capitalist patriarchy of the American twentieth century. The force in language animating Williams's writing is also the charge driving his vulnerable characters in their existential efforts to assert independent identities against constraint. My concept of queerness in Williams refers largely to the struggle for personal freedom in desire and creative expression, including expressions of self-identity, partially according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's foundational definition of queerness. Due to the psychoanalytic sense of the self as being constructed, in part, as a relational, narrative-project, the experience of the body-self as it is restricted through imposed sexual definitions, which influences relationships with language, has socio-political consequences—a phenomenon in evidence for the Williams characters who queerly attempt to shift dominant narratives. Repeatedly in Williams, a character's freedom is confined, and non-conformist characters experience danger within the socio-political world of the play. There is also a correlation in Williams between a restriction on expression and a limit on love, so that a sex/gender-based confinement in the narrative results in injuries to both expressions of the self and love. My exploration of the queer character in Williams, especially the character's homeless displacement, draws from the genres of poetry, prose, plays, screenplays/films, personal essays, and memoir as I investigate Williams's considerations of imagination, poetry and poetic expression, cultural stereotypes, shared narratives, and art pertaining to situations of social justice, in which Queer Romanticism is revolutionary possibility.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to George Toles, one of my favourite writers and the artist and teacher I will always look up to. Thank you for generously sharing so many careful worlds of close reflection and curious renewal.

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"All close relationships are later turned into poems." -Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs*

I. Sexuality Contextualized: At Home in Queer Love

Early in his career in a letter to his agent Audrey Wood, Tennessee Williams summarized the thematic content of his drama: "I have only one major theme for all my work which is the destructive impact of society on the sensitive, nonconformist individual" (qtd. in Leverich 332-33). The non-conformist in Williams is a queer character in the sense of being a non-normative figure who disturbs the strictly sanctioned sexual order of the political world of twentieth-century America. This character appears throughout Williams's canon as a fugitive figure, a homeless character, an itinerant traveller, or someone on the move. This figure has left home, is between homes, or is in search and in need of a home. Home in the narrative is synonymous with safety, and Williams crafts situations in which home might be realized through a loving union between key characters, except when the connection is interrupted by an extreme restriction related to sexuality. While Williams is preoccupied with sex, much of his interest relates to questions of the hypocrisy and absurdity of a sex-obsessed culture with its Puritanical mores and punishments that cannot admit the range and impetus of its fascination. While Williams would be pleased to not only be nostalgically remembered as the romantic writer of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), as people can now openly dish about what Tom was really doing down on the waterfront, he would be disappointed to think that people thought his drama to be exclusively about sex. In Williams, sexuality is the means by which a non-conformist character who represents a troubling and potentially revolutionary queer freedom is assailed in the culture. The character who either threatens to break or does break the political rules of the restrictive, White-

supremacist, heteronormative, and capitalist patriarchy governing the social order—by loving or attempting to love out of bounds—is imperilled in the work. However, while they are gravely politically confined, the characters also fight for the freedom to transgress in a poetic of queer resistance.

It is surprising that for a man who wrote so much about love—for an artist who expressed how he wanted to build an ideal relationship with his audience by saying, "we come to each other gradually, but with love" ("Person-to-Person" 74)—that love as a theme in Williams is not given much critical attention. Instead, love's betrayals or what appears shockingly in the work as a lack of love are given the more frequent, critical views, often described during the past thirty years of theorizing in terms of the various manifestations of desire usually connected to sexual expression. The insightful view of much of Williams's work being centered on the lonely, transgressive figure engaged in a personal battle, fighting the various psychic wars either within the tortured self or between the self and others related to sexuality—which Robert Bray describes as Williams's signature expression of "how the human heart can be betrayed by carnal desires" (Intro., *Vieux Carré* x)— is widely believed to constitute Williams's politics of the flesh. According to John Clum's incisive reading of sexual politics in the work, "Williams's stories and dramas are sagas of solipsism…[in which p]eople may occasionally and briefly break through and connect with others, but their real dramas, passions, are enacted within[,]" with "passions" here standing for internally driven, consumptive projects of desire ("Sacrificial" 31). Clum says that in Williams, "politics is contained within the individual, not in the relationship of the individual and others to the body politic" (32). In his study, *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest* (2012), in partial dialogue with Clum, Michael Hooper argues against Williams as being a widely political writer, expanding on Clum's comment about

the conditions of a solipsistic drama. Hooper notes that Williams's works "approach politics from the end point of dystopian nightmare…[and focus on personal] strategies of survival[,]" which Hooper also says "displace arguments for change or prevention" (221). While Hooper admits, as Clum similarly articulates, that Williams was brave in writing about gay experience, however obliquely he was able to accomplish the task considering the extreme social taboo against free homosexual expression lasting until near the end of Williams's career and life, Hooper still cites Williams's critique on sexual censure as being too "narrow" (223).[1] While Clum is more generous in attributing Williams with a sense of social critique, Clum's intriguing exploration of the limited space Williams offers on the stage in the early dramatic works for direct homosexual expression still interprets the drama as if a significant aspect of the narrative is in hiding.[2] Clum's view is helpful in determining the degree to which gay characters openly express queerness in the work relative to the historical, social limits on Williams's dramatic expression. However, queerness appears in Williams in multiple ways. Broadening the critical context to consider the space Williams devotes to the relational aspects of the development and expression of the self reveals his narrative exploration of queerness as provocative, political

[1] Hooper says that to gain a sense of the political in Williams, one must "pick at the subtext" (24), as personal battles of desire eclipse social critique. Hooper also argues that while "[w]hen we scrutinize Williams's political aspirations, his concerns for humanity, particularly the disadvantaged, become clear, [and] the malaise of modern life [in the work] is sometimes vaguely defined and unclearly resolved" (24). Hooper believes that "a positive sense of community, something more than isolated individuals hunting for the briefest connections, is missing" in Williams's work (222).

[2] In Clum's "The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*," the critic notes the pattern in Williams of several gay characters being dead at the start of the narrative (29). Clum also notes the narrative event in several Williams works of mutilation related to gay characters and says that while "Williams insistently forged a space, however tentative, for the presentation of the homosexual…these homosexuals in Williams's plays and stories always die a grotesque death…[largely] as the victims of rejection by those closest to them" (29). In "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams," Clum argues that while Williams's overt explorations of homosexuality increased as social tolerance permitted a more open cultural conversation, an aspect of Williams still remains closeted in his work. Clum says that Williams attempts to separate homosexual sex from other aspects of his characters, as if homosexuality only means sex to Williams, and this indicates a lack of full integration related both to Williams's own public persona and his characterization of homosexuality in art (162-64).

difference, as part of his exquisite meditation on the human heart as it includes carnality, among other desires.

In "Part One" of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault investigates the irony inherent in any attempt to decide categorical definitions of sexuality (*i.e*., sexual sanctioning, or the manifestation of "sex as discourse" (11)), as the discursive mechanism—what Foucault calls the effect of "modern puritanism" (5)—is produced by the normative categories it pretends to decide. Essentially, Foucault implies that the wild sexual terrain cannot actually be politically defined or contained, and the will to contain sexuality (including, by extension, assigning moral or value-based judgments to sexual behaviour, or determining "legitimate" v. "illegitimate" sexualities) produces the sexualities that the sanctioning hopes to decide, so the categories cannot be certain (3-13). Put another way, theoretical discourse and ideas about sexual differentiation that are supposed to restrain sexual chaos might be driven by chaotic factors that remain hidden in the drive to categorize. In these terms, it is difficult to know much, if anything definitive, about so-called legitimate or illegitimate sexualities. Rationally determining definitive, categorical tenets of one's own sexuality, let alone another person's, thereby becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible. In queer theorist Judith Butler's explanation of Foucault, they say that Foucault illuminates how: "the culturally contradictory enterprise of the mechanism of [sexual] repression is prohibitive and generative at once" (*Gender Trouble* 126). Repression therefore entails that sexualities which do not enter or are not permitted to enter discourse can alter social categorizations and render as "illegitimate" that which is outside the conscious ability or the political will to claim as valid idiosyncratic, shifting, poly-sexualities. Butler's assessment leaves open the question of what might exist prior to (or outside of) the categories. Williams's work addresses this question in terms of queer freedom.

The central tragedy of a Williams narrative is often related to errors of sexual over-control, and implicitly Williams suggests the wisdom of approaching sexuality with a healthy dose of levity. It is not that sexuality is seen by Williams as unimportant, or that Williams is overly prescriptive himself in expressing ideal corrections of the system of sexual over-focus. However, Williams intends to open up the questioning field to consider issues of definition, roles, and morality related to sexuality within a complex, emotional affect. While Clum asserts that for Williams, "love can be found in any sexual connection" ("Sacrificial" 30), and Williams often celebrates the playfully bawdy elements of sexuality, as his 1975 published *Memoirs* and many short stories and poems throughout his career especially indicate, unrealized or interrupted love unions appear in the work through extreme separations between sex and love (or fractured relational connections) and are often narrated as tragic situations. Williams does not establish this scenario of separation however due to any inherent problem with sexuality, or any supposed immorality of any sexual character. It is also not that a sexual character or situation cannot contain subtle emotions. Williams does not mean to establish any hierarchies or reinforce binaries between carnality/materiality and spirituality, or sex and love. Instead, Williams contextualizes desire in the work and investigates how political restrictions force nearly every sexual expression into a limiting and limited distortion. The distortion, rather than telling any story of character morality, explains the political scenario that either would erase or does alter or obliterate significant aspects of characters' desires. Although policed with passionate intensity, one's supposed sexual place and/or the system of sexual identification are illuminated by Williams as incomplete containers for the complex human need for safety and connection, as well as shown by him to be overly reductive markers of character definition.

In her excellent and inimitable study, *Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America* (2016), Jaqueline O'Connor provides a framework for discussing Williams's politics by reading him in relation to what she cites as the multiple narratives of law which shaped his social consciousness, as reflected in his vast exposure of the shifting socio-political and legal mores of his era as they focus on sexuality (16-19). While O'Connor notes that in his early years, due largely to what was still his secret homosexuality, Williams occupied a "precarious" place "on the margins" (4), O'Connor's work illuminates Williams's political commentary as becoming increasingly obvious and explicit during his career through an evolving freedom to speak more directly about many of America's biggest socio-political taboos, flashpoints, or open secrets—poverty, homosexuality, female sexuality, White-supremacy, racism, miscegenation, general non-conformity, and violence directed toward the vulnerable figures of the world. O'Connor speaks of Williams as writing out of a back-alley darkness, with intimate knowledge of encounters with servicemen during the WWII period charged with the heat of a gay underworld during a time when all non-procreative sex acts were illegal adding to the erotic tension and sense of danger in the work, relative to degrees of Williams's revelations of so-called transgressive sexuality (63). In this view, Williams narrates "the vulnerability of his own illegal body" (O'Connor 2), which makes the work necessarily political in that speaking about such vulnerability is also subversively speaking against mainstream cultural norms, norms which implicitly demanded silence. The tension between what a character is compelled to hide and what they cannot supress appears in Williams as a strong thematic focus from his earliest commercially successful drama *The Glass Menagerie,* through to the final major work produced in the last year of Williams's life, *A House Not Meant to Stand* (1982). O'Connor might call these tensions that which exists between "the deviant and the orthodox" (5), and there is a unique

figure who recurs in the drama as a vocal symbol of difference who is labelled as deviant within the orthodox political world of the play. It is not merely that a particular type of sexuality is limited in the political world Williams writes to understand and counter, and so his speaking about a queerly transgressive figure becomes an act of resistance. It is that Williams fundamentally challenges and works to deconstruct the boundaries of the coarsely material aspects, laws and other socio-political mores (such as religion) of the culture supposed to govern power arrangements, in a radical inquiry into the various relationships between structural power and the personal, intellectual, physical, emotional, psychological, imaginative-creative, and spiritual manifestations of character.

Sex in Williams is explicit, and his questions tear open the closet of humanity's violations. It is obvious that Williams was discussing sex's meanings, and his position was an interesting one as a queer man, pre-Stonewall, initially writing during a time when homosexuality was technically still illegal in every American state.[3] Williams's works ask questions related to the terrors of queer confinement—something he knew well, having been labelled and horribly teased by schoolmates for being a "sissy" (*i.e.*, the term often used to shame people considered effeminate within a binary sex and gender system, where one is sexually and gender-coded as male), shamed within an aggressively codified, binary, heterosexual system in his childhood home, and beaten when homosexual encounters turned violent ("Facts" 65). The cultural permission to speak openly about his own sexual experience

[3] Fifteen American states still have not repealed sodomy law statutes as of July, 2023. While the first legislation to repeal sodomy laws and ostensibly make homosexuality legal was in Illinois in 1963, the American Supreme Court ruling making punishment of sodomy and all non-procreative sex acts unconstitutional was not official until 2003, with Brown v. Texas. The Brown v. Texas precedent is currently susceptible to overturn, along the lines of the recent Roe v Wade decision. In discussing the private/public tensions for Williams between the "open secret" of his personal homosexuality and his early and more oblique, dramatic sexual references, David Savran notes that Williams first came out publicly on "The David Frost Show" in 1970, "just six months after the [1969] Stonewall riot" (81).

did not occur until later in his life. In *Memoirs*, Williams writes candidly about his first sexual experience and then of coming out homosexually shortly after in his late twenties in New Orleans, or of losing his first love, Kip Kiernan, due to Kiernan's fear of "turning… homosexual" if he continued to see Williams (56). Williams clearly explores the relationship between sexuality and power from his earliest short stories in the 1930s through to his final family dramas in the 1980s. Williams wrote self-consciously about the cultural apparatuses of power structuring relationships and connoting value, including closely surveying their crushing, dehumanizing effects, often related to troubled or thwarted love relationships. In the work where he refers to sexuality (which is nearly all of it), Williams writes about the "destructive impacts" (qtd. in Leverich 332-33) as confinements of sexuality as they manifest as grave injuries to being, leading to dangerous and sometimes fatal estrangements, or interruptions in one's experiences of safety in self and love relationships.

Significantly, in the political sphere of Williams's drama, queer love (including but definitely not limited to sexual love) is the ultimate transgression. Love is what Williams's imperilled characters fight for and need, but, except in rare situations, love appears in the work as a trace that cannot be fully possessed, contained, understood, or even named. In Erich Fromm's psychoanalytic terms expressed in *The Art of Loving* (1956), Fromm states that humans are often anxious and in despair until they merge in some way with or are joined by a beloved-other through human connection (8-9). From Fromm's perspective, besides love providing necessary and rudimentary mammalian safety, loving and being loved are the highest human functions due to the fact that love clarifies and potentially allows for a full expression of a being toward psychic wholeness, as much as this ideal realization is possible. One's being cannot be fully expressed, Fromm says, unless the expression is received by someone capable of regarding

and appreciating it, and also of reciprocating it, so that two become not one exactly, but each wholly individual through the third figure of the relationship (23)—two individuals realized through one unit of love, or a sort of holy human trinity. Characters seek material safety through close union in Williams's work, but, importantly, they also seek self-knowledge and the full expression of their character, which includes wants and needs related to the complexity of desire, including a relationship with language and creative expression. For Williams, himself a restless and itinerant figure, a loving union is the extent of safety and a realization of home in the shelter of a sympathetic other. However, there are existential constraints of political design that inhibit safety and self-realization, and these are what queerness in Williams radically resists. Queer love and queer expression in Williams symbolize the unsanctioned freedom of being in and of love. As Denis De Rougement exclaims in *Love in the Western World*: "Love is freedom itself" (6). Love is free and everywhere it is bound, and this is the message of Williams's drama. Queer love in Williams is often illegal, hunted, injured, banished, maimed, and sometimes killed. Love is confined in Williams through confinements of the sexualized body, in forms of political censure leading to madness or death, and externally imposed restrictions on sexuality are the ultimate danger in Williams's dramatic world.

II. Queer Romanticism: Definition and The Style of Liminality

Williams would probably not refer to himself as a queer writer. This is not because the epithet was used during his era as a slur against difference—including especially sexual difference (particularly homosexuality) until the 1990s when the term "queer" was widely reappropriated as a rebellious honour badge against the oppressively heteronormative[4]--

[4] Michael Bronski in *A Queer History of the United States* (2011) says that:

> [q]eer,' originally…[meant] 'odd' or 'quaint,' [and] acquired the meaning of 'bad' and 'worthless' in the early eighteenth century. Since the 1920s, mainstream British and U.S. vernacular has used 'queer' negatively to describe homosexuals, although within the homosexual community it was always a purely

as Williams alongside his closest writerly contemporary, Carson McCullers,[5] had been playing with the term's meaning since the 1940s. Instead, since Williams is generally anarchically defiant against upholding categorical definitions, and as I read Williams as quintessentially queer, I must define the structure of queerness that ironically contains my project and also expresses itself in Williams. I say "ironic" because the definition used here pertains to freedom from the imposition of rigid coding, as much as this freedom is possible. At least it entails a freedom from being utterly determined by strict and narrow conceptions of sexual expression that leave out nuance, and this relative freedom extends to other types of expression, such as creative expression, in what can exist as a rich and a truthful ambiguity preserved at the risk of not meaning. In Christopher Bigsby's words, there is a "sense of incompletion" or mystery in Williams (34). Bigsby quotes Williams from Williams's "Critics Say 'Evasion,' Writers Say 'Mystery'" essay in which Williams quotes his own explanation of character from the stage directions from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955): "To define too closely is to accept 'facile definitions which make a play just a play, not a snare for human experience.' [And Bigsby reasons t]hat incompletion is vital to…[Williams's] work" (34). The chaos of relational

> descriptive term…In the late 1990s, the grassroots political action group Queer Nation popularized and reclaimed 'queer' so successfully (xvii).

that it eventually became an umbrella term for 2SLGBTQIA+.

[5] In Carson McCullers's first major novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), she centres much of the action in a small-town diner called the New York Café where characters grapple with feeling safe with their place in their bodies and world. The diner is presided over by the charitable owner, Biff, a character who symbolizes revolutionary, queer possibility. Queerness in McCullers is related to the possibility of freely expressing loving connection to one's self and others. Biff remains awake at night doing crossword puzzles, contemplating his customers, trying to determine their needs. Biff is often seen just prior to dawn in the restaurant, with the customers sitting in various booths during the liminal period when "[t]he mutual distrust between the men who were just awakened and those who were ending a long night gave everyone a feeling of estrangement" (27). Biff is a weird character, a man with large, hairy-forearms usually folded resolutely in front of his barrel chest, and with "a beard as dark and heavy that the lower part of his face looks as though it were moulded of iron" (11) who proudly confesses, "I like freaks," who enjoys bathing and being perfumed, who wears his mother's ring on his pinky finger, and who enjoys the pretty decoration in his apartment (13). This queer character functions for McCullers as the heart-centre of the novel, and the New York café is the ideal heart-centre of America. Other explorations of queerness occur in McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946).

experience that Williams so faithfully records is contained by a poetic weaving that prevents an over-simplification of character and allows for the emotional resonances of the drama to form the cohering structures of the plays, in what Williams calls his unsparing uncovering of the "truth of a character" ("Critics" 76). Character expression, especially sexual expression, in Williams is complex, just as his politics are layered so extensively that some critics might claim that they are convoluted. "It is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that I think needs to be stated" ("POV" 111) is Williams's decree on the topic of character complexity. In this light, rigidly coded sex and gender definitions are extremely limiting and possibly even false explanations of a character.

The indeterminable or ambiguous aspects of a character in Williams pertains to a character's potential to retain something of their own identity in an evasion of strict, categorical (sexual) definition. Reading Williams's characters in terms of their liminality can be to situate them within the richly weird tenets of the grotesque.[6] According to Geoffrey Harpham's definition of the grotesque in *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (revised 2006):

> If the grotesque can be compared to anything, it is paradox. Paradox is a way of turning language against itself by asserting both terms of a contradiction at once…Because it breaks the rules, paradox can penetrate to new and unexpected realms of experience, discovering relationships syntax generally obscures. (23)

While not every character or situation in Williams is framed by the literary or dramatic grotesque, many characters and dramatic situations fit the description, and reading Williams in terms of the grotesque can increase the depth of understanding of his work. This form appears

[6] See Chapter Two of this dissertation, including footnote 22 for a discussion of Philip C. Kolin, Jacqueline O'Connor, Brian Parker, and Annette J. Saddik's consideration of the grotesque in Williams.

prominently in his Expressionistic style symbolizing aspects of character that cannot be exactly bound by language, except, as Williams demonstrates, through poetic affect with its reliance on silence, mystery, and ambiguity as the partial language of the unconscious, or dream, imagination, and play. Harpham says that the category of the grotesque refers to the space between art and what is outside of art (Preface, 1982 edition xxvii-xxviii), so that the dramatic expressions of Williams's plastic theatre become his reaching to capture what he would call a moment of truth that cannot be truly contained (because it is fleeting) except through a representation in art. The grotesque admits the impossibility of direct representation. The grotesque can also be viewed as a bridge between the psychoanalytic, selfing-projects that Williams fashions for a character and the limits on the character's self-realization—as the characters appear in various distorted dimensions in their attempts at ordering chaos. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams lengthily explains his motivation in a passage of stage directions: "I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis" (116-117). Harpham describes the concept of the grotesque as containing: "Margins, paradoxes, mixed forms, disorder…[both] norm and exception" (Preface xviii-xix). What exists in the margins might leap for a moment into the centre of a Williams drama in accordance with an emotional truth. Williams's dramas function intricately on several ontological levels at once, which makes it challenging to say anything definitive about the works because their signals are seemingly endless. Yet, Williams creates the narrative cradle to momentarily hold the emotional expressions of character that he knows to be constantly leaping out of bounds, except when they can be housed in art. Similar relationships between character expressions and the centre and the

margins also exist in works with non-grotesque characters and narrative situations, as Williams's queer defiance related to categorical norms.

Williams's revolutionary expression, or what influential sexuality and gender Williams critic, David Savran, in his investigation of the sexual politics in Williams might call his "surrealist theatre of extravagant and polymorphous desires" (78), occurs decades prior to a theory of queerness became consolidated in literary critical circles. The rich history of Queer Theory's starting point is situated within the philosophical fabric of literary studies, and literature and drama are excellent places to explore queer themes. Since Foucault revolutionized literary criticism in the 1980s, the unavoidable boon is the thorny awareness that more than signalling one's mere sexual preferences, domestic habitation patterns, or tax status, sexuality as an epistemological field has long functioned culturally to structure meaning systems and connote moral value. Queer Theory's approach to textual understanding (*i.e.,* what initially grew from Foucault and early Second Wave Feminist and Post-structuralist critique) became an altered frame for creative inquiry within literary criticism and cultural studies. Following this paradigm shift, what had not been as openly permissible in social or academic discourse, including considerations of sexuality as knowledge, radicalized and complicated engagements in textual analysis. Drawing initially on Foucault, Marxist, and early Feminist critique and writing in the early, critical terms that would form part of the basis of eventual Queer Theory, or what developed in 1980s New York near the end of Williams's life, queer theorist pioneer, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, calls out in her first book-length, thematic study the various ways that "sexual understandings" invisibly structure power relationships (*Epistemology* xiii). Sedgwick's reference was mostly to the nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries' capitalist economy,

although other economies, timeframes, and socio-religious and political meaning systems are implicated. In her later, continued project, Sedgwick writes:

> the placement of the [arbitrary and sexual] boundaries in a particular society affects not merely the definitions of those terms themselves—sexual/nonsexual, masculine/feminine—but also the appointment of forms of power that are not obviously sexual. These include controls over the means of production and reproduction of goods, persons, and meaning. (*Between Men* 22)

That a vast cultural obsession with drawing such demarcations based on limitations or permissions within sexuality—leading to the false dichotomies and hierarchies that appear within a binary sexual system—is often unrecognized in decisions of power and how arbitrary, misguided, stultifying, and unjust these decisions can be is much of what Queer Theory continues to elucidate, and these questions form the basis of Williams's politics of sexuality.

In her assessment of the impossibility of accurately defining (or even extensively knowing) a being through a sexual identification system, Sedgwick declares that sexual identity cannot signal what it has long pretended to, since ambiguity, changeability, and the generally more ephemeral and elusive aspects of any phenomenological sexual experience cannot be decided or expressed through fixed images, be they heteronormative, homosexual, or otherwise.[7] Meanings in the realms of self-definition and desire cannot be so easily contained by tidy, sexual categories, and imposed assumptions can be often wrong and dangerous. Sedgwick uses the term

[7] See Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and "Preface" in *Tendencies* (1992) for a complete discussion. In her 2008 revised preface to *Epistemology*, Sedgwick explains queerness related to identity:

> So what is queer about?...[I]t's this resistance to treating homo/heterosexual categorization – still so very volatile an act – as a done deal, a transparent, empirical fact about any person.…[T]he specificity, materiality, and variety of sexual practices, along with their diverse meanings for individual lives, can be done better justice in a context where the impoverished abstractions that claim to define sexuality can be treated as non-authoritative. The dividing up of all sexual acts – indeed all persons – under the "opposite" categories of "homo" and "hetero" is not a natural given but a historical process, still incomplete today and ultimately impossible but characterized by potent contradictions and explosive effects. (xvi)

"queer" in referencing "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning [that remain] when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signal monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8). In this view, most strict, social systems established to organize sexuality will be in error, in the strong possibility that they are based on a false premise related to sexual meaning. A tenet of Sedgwick's concept of queerness is that it refers in part to moral justice connected to pleasure within any cultural system, beginning with the relative freedom to define one's own experience, including one's sense of self, and desire in relationships, which has implications for identity (*Tendencies* 8-9).

III. A Queer Poetic

In Williams, it is often a poet/artist who is called sexually transgressive, or it is a marginal character of unorthodox expressions who faces danger. The character is a liminal figure, a freakish outcast, or an exaggerated or grotesque character who is politically queer in defiance of normative, sexual categories as they pertain to identity. This character is censured and exiled, or forced into madness, or maimed or murdered in symbolic acts occurring in a religious context or justified through a religious appeal that culturally masks sexual control. The sacrifice of the character symbolizes the limit of the social world, whose coarse confinements the character attempts to escape. According to my working definition, which articulates queerness in Sedgwick's terms as it pertains to the relative freedom (or the desire and need for freedom) in and of self-identity, Williams's work exemplifies queer expression. While compared to the nineteenth-century literature Sedgwick reviews in formulating her queer project of literary analysis, with her queer criticism being largely grounded in an interrogation of language, the queer themes in Williams are not in hiding. They are overt, yet hiddenness is a strong Williams

theme. The overarching sense in his work of deeply questioning what a character is forced to hide in tension with a character's need and desire to freely express leads to a type of poetic anarchy that carries relevance in contemporary, queer interrogations of cultural confinements.

The room in the Southern American Gothic genre housing Williams is a place where his non-essentializing voice asks the questions queer theorists began to openly discuss critically decades after his literary outcries implored the world to compassionately reimagine possibilities for figures trapped in heteronormative, capitalist patriarchy. In her forward to *Tendencies* (1993), Sedgwick articulates her language frame:

> The word "queer" itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root-*twerkw,* which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*…The immemorial current that *queer* represents is anti-separatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange. (xii)

The strangeness in Williams is my interest, something that while being produced by normative categories (and so variable depending on the political project of the time) is still a catchment for the non-normative. It is that which, if it does not entirely elude the limits of naming, perhaps at least wants to maintain some freedom to express itself with a desire that can never be sufficiently named or finally limited. While queerness can refer to sex and gender expression, sexuality is only an aspect of a broader affective experience connected to self, desire, and often also to pleasure and loving, but not entirely constitutive of character in the ways a restrictively categorical (and implicitly sexual) definition would determine. Queerness is also related to fields of excessive, affective, and playful potential in language, in definition, and in variable expressions of being. In Williams, the playful potential is also language based, with sexuality symbolizing the primary governor of expression in tension with the character's poetic

expression. In Williams, the annihilation or liberation of a character depends on whether the excessive character is punished by a censuring culture, or whether a character is able to gain acceptance, and, effectively, even pleasurably, integrate excesses.

IV. Love as Structure

Sedgwick is clear at the outset of describing her critical, queer framework in her project *Between Men* (1980) that she uses the term "desire" rather than "love" "to mark the erotic emphasis [in what she terms male homosociality, which is close male relationships generally] because, in literary critical and related discourse, 'love' is more easily used to name a particular emotion, and 'desire' to name a structure" (2). Sedgwick describes desire's structure as "the affective social force, the glue…that shapes an important relationship" (2). It is easy to imagine the various affinities or nodes of connection that might be charged with various types of desire in all sociality, including a desire that contains love, among other feelings. Fromm calls the same force of affinity and connection "love" and says, "the achievement of interpersonal union [which he calls "love"]…is the most powerful striving…It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force which keeps the human race together" (17). Fromm here is not speaking of romance or purely of sexual connection, just as when Williams writes of love it is as a drive, a fundamental need for connection, a life-saving force. Desire in Williams's sense is also correlated with Sedgwick's theorization, in what she says in *Between Men* of the drive to connect: "How far this force is properly sexual…will be an active question" (2). The question is also active in Williams and is in fact sometimes central to his work. There are senses in Williams in which love and desire are separate. However, also in Williams, desire and love are often potentially synonymous; they are both structural containers for fundamental human wants and needs, both acting as personal and social forces, and they variably express degrees of erotic/sexual behavior.

Love in Fromm's sense is the ultimate or ideal container for character expression, and expression contains or is driven by various desires. Just as love is structure in Fromm and desire is structure in Sedgwick, Williams uses love and desire as the necessary structural drives moving his characters through their worlds.

Love and desire are both active, necessary forces in Williams and when they are pulled apart, or appear in the drama to be separate, the division is a politically enforced injustice. The sense of injustice Williams lights on pertains in part to the unnecessary injury of self-denial that a character forced into limited expression experiences. Eroticism (as one aspect of desire) in Williams, if it is not overt, can be a latent force or charge, and, except in the satires where eroticism is freedom, it sometimes shockingly appears in substitute of other important aspects of human connection. However, Eros is also an animating force in language that is politically limited or denied to a character's peril The danger of any polarized situation is what Williams wants to illuminate. Ultimate existential security in Williams includes a sense of full safety in and of the self which includes the body, ideally facilitating freedom of personal expression. Desire and love (or body and spirit, matter and mind, *etc*.) have been historically treated critically in Williams as if he in fact opposes them, with the opposition creating the internal torture for a character torn between two strong attachments. However, desire in Williams is connected to the sexual being and body, but it is not usually sexual in the typical sense understood by the social structure that categorizes being according to sexual definition, which assumes expectations of desire. If desire and love are treated as or manifest as separate in Williams, then this occurs as an existential wound for the character, representing a cultural wound that Williams intends his drama to ideally suture back together through inclusive,

searching language that respects the complex, variable, and even playful possibility inherent in any character or relationship situation.

VI. Safety in Poetic Possibility, The Narrative Self, and Methodology

The title of my dissertation is *Moon Lake in Love: The Queer, Poetic Imaginarium of Tennessee Williams*, but I could have easily also called Williams's world his "Queer Romantic" Imaginarium. "Queer Romanticism"-–a term that I have not before heard used in reference to Williams—is the term I decided on to describe what consistently appears in the work as a possibility in language, particularly poetic or artistic expression. This is also a possibility related to the exposure and ideal dismantling of popular, cultural narratives (composed as they are of various stereotypes), ideally toward a relative freedom of expression, as characters attempt to understand and articulate an individual existence against constraint. In my dissertation of four chapters, I demonstrate how relative freedom for a Williams character—something mostly hoped for and aimed at rather than gained—is connected to desires related to material safety, or attaining a safe home, or forms of relational expression, including degrees of erotic desire, or the need for loving connection within safe relationships, including family relationships. The expression as it exists (or seeks to further manifest) is relatively free precisely as it resists the limiting confinements of political, identity-based definitions, particularly related to sexuality. I explore Williams's dramatic and literary considerations of what I here will call a truth (or truths) of language, poetry, and narratives that are or become, in a sense, self or life-sustaining. And, when, more broadly, a sense of art is what is being articulated by Williams to be the vital force, I explore how art in Williams becomes a sort of second life in compensation for losses incurred through character misunderstandings and estrangements that, if they do not lead to maiming, ostracization, madness or exile for a character, can sometimes be fatal. What in my dissertation I

refer to as Williams's poetic freedom (*i.e*., the relative freedom he gives his characters as they grapple with their self-assertions) often appears in his work akin to erotic freedom (in the animating sense), and writing and poetry in works such as the short stories "One Arm" (1948) and "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin" (1950), or the major dramas *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Night of the Iguana* (1961), and latently in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), are eroticized within degrees of vitality. Eroticism also manifests in the work related to sexuality *per se.* However, while a character's relationship with sexuality is variable, the character's drive and efforts to be free from sexuality-based definitions strictly imposed by the socio-sexual world is constant, as this would allow the character a safety and fidelity in expansive or complex personal expression. Sexual definition in Williams is the primary danger that his characters queerly resist, as they search to assert identity and shift their narrative-traps of social definition.

Throughout his work and in the works scrutinized in my dissertation, Williams interrogates language, variously asking: What it is to be one (in this case, a dramatic character) who is subject to definitions, but not utterly defined by them? In other words, what is it to be made up of stories, or to exist as a character in another person's story? Alternately, what is it to retain a freedom in part in relation to language? What is it to develop, experience, or express a sense of self in a private relationship with language? To what extent is it possible to consciously choose to express the self through language? How does language either emphasize or efface the changeable, emotional, and loosely organized states of being that are so often narratively gathered together to call a self? In this dissertation, I write about the recurring figure in Williams of the homeless character, centring on Williams's metaphor of homelessness as it relates to political displacement and a symptom of a restrictive, sexual culture. Particularly, I focus on the

character related to the limiting tenets of the political world where Williams centres his critique of the systematic injustices that he writes throughout his fifty-year artistic career to question and counter. In Williams, the figure of abjection who struggles against definition appears in several forms and is either pegged as sexually deviant, or is limited from full expression, or is one who becomes punished as a cultural scapegoat related to their difference. The endangered character appears through what Williams-scholar, Annette J. Saddik, in her *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, The Crazed, The Queer* (2015), might call the grotesque body of excess. This body is always an erupting body: too loquacious, too poetic, too romantic, too emotional, too impoverished, too sexual, too female, too debased, too othered, too racialized, too vulnerable, too feared, too poor, too in need of protection, and too generally transgressive. Yet, I argue that this is also a holy body in Williams, infused with a metaphoric possibility related to love and queerness in and through poetic expression—the language that eludes absolute containment or strict, categorical definition. Williams's poetic freedom illuminates aspects of a character's being which precede or exist outside of normative, sexual categorization, and Williams queerly writes against any pretense of sexual authority. While the queer figure might meet a tragic end in the play, a revolutionary possibility remains in Williams in that what does not fit a damaging social order can potentially obliterate the order, or at least momentarily alter it, dependent upon a listener who is receptive to the resonance of language left behind by the figure who was pushed into silence within the world of the play.

In Isaiah Berlin's *The Roots of Romanticism* (1999), Berlin identifies what he calls a Romantic-consciousness. While Berlin does not say that the idea was "brand new" then (14), he locates the historical origins of this burgeoning sense of consciousness in the form of an Expressionistic "Attack on the Enlightenment" (26) in the latter part of the eighteenth century

(13). Berlin is careful to articulate that it is the philosophical tenets of the movement, especially as they pertain to art, which are his primary focus. Berlin discusses what he calls a Romantic "attitude toward tragedy," in which characters are each treated justly as a whole entity (12), which can shift moral judgments about the characters, so that the mere telling of tragic conditions might become important elements of political critique—as if the beauty or the revelatory power of the art could redeem the horror of any politically injurious situation. The Romantic consciousness, Berlin argues, consists of a passionate, total devotion to or an idealistic integrity of artistic expression (13), which elevates creation as if art is a law or truth unto itself. In his forward to *The Roots*, John Gray credits Berlin for his investigation of the Romantic idea of "the artist as creator" (xiii), who participates in making the world. That which can be understood as a spirit in and of art is an aesthetic principle whose expression indicates a type of freedom, which can open up imaginative possibilities for being, including human relatability. Berlin describes aspects of a controlled, Romantic, artistic freedom whose political aims might be realized through strong gesture and fidelity to style, which appears variously in Williams and includes his Expressionistic satire, socialist commentary, tragedy, and lyrical realism as containers for his humanitarian vision. Berlin says that the same Romantic spirit which potentially animates art for art's sake can also be what inspires and is directed toward social revolution, "salvation," or political change (223). It is this spirit as it is applied in both senses—as devotion to stylistic forms and to social change—which I see at work in Williams's expression of what I am here calling his "Queer Romanticism."

To read Williams as a Romantic writer, or to question his Romanticism, is to enter a longstanding, critical debate regarding whether or how he fits the description. O'Connor notes the extent to which pioneering Williams-scholar, Nancy M. Tischler, set the stage for two

decades of theorizing about Williams's Romanticism, centralizing poetry in his work as an ideal human expression following Tischler's 1961 publication of *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* (*Law and Sexuality* 16-17). O'Connor establishes Tischler's description of what she names as the anti-intellectualism and "emotional rather than rational" (16) tenor of Williams's work. O'Connor cites this step of Tischler's as an early one in the progression of Williams criticism, prior to 1990s gender and culture studies theorizing, the latter which O'Connor says asks political questions of the work, rather than focussing on the poetic/stylistic aspects. O'Connor says that a stylistic focus on Williams's poeticism neglects the "legal and political investigations of the diverse sexualities featured regularly in [Williams's] drama and fiction" (18). However, there are practical and political implications involved in Williams's questions of language in what I name as his queer, Romantic aesthetic. Saddik, who also explores his relationship to language and sexuality, writes that Williams is an anti-Romantic who asserts that language is insufficient to connection ("(Un)Represented" 349). I read Williams's style in part in relation to Saddik, who in *Theatre of Excess* explores what she might call Williams's anti-Romantic Expressionism. Saddik critiques Williams's attitude toward language in her anti-Romantic stance, and says that Williams became increasingly cynical of language's ability to rationally govern reality, "rejecting [r]omanticism" in his later plays in an "ironic worldview that was simultaneously comedic and bleak" (*Excess* 6). Saddik grounds her reading in an exploration of Williams's style as avant-garde Expressionism appearing most prevalently in his later works, saying that "[h]is plays honour the grotesque power of chaos, of the irrational and inexpressible, and the truth it reveals" (7). My reading draws on Saddik's understanding of William's style, even as I consider Williams's early works, especially Saddik's articulation of his Expressionism and his comedic and camp elements. However, I enter into a dialogue with Saddik by

considering another view on Williams's interrogation of language that particularly places him as a Romantic writer who situates poetry in the narratives as an experience of the political body, not as an ideal, transcendent affect either denying the realities of the flesh or unable to compensate for the pain of disconnection. While Saddik argues that Williams's explorations of language (particularly in his works focusing on a recurring consumption metaphor) articulate a state of "desire and language gone out of control" ("(Un)Represented" 352), representing a "fragmentation of the body" and an unstable self-identity ("(Un)Represented" 348) in which "language is not capable of expressing the desires of characters" ("(Un)Represented" 349), it is also true that Williams interrogates the political limits on language as arbitrary social constructions that inhibit a character's desire-based expressions. I argue that in Williams, characters who appear to lack a stable identity, or who cannot sufficiently express or satisfy desires, experience narrative confinement within the world of the play as abject figures trapped within stories whose limits they did not decide for themselves. As characters attempt to subvert the socio-political structures of meaning that threaten them, poetic affect is often the only available means in acts of Romantic resistance which form the basis of the characters' efforts to shift their personal narratives. In Williams, characters attempt to imagine their way to a limited freedom, which emphasizes the significance of a Romantic understanding of imagination and language related to narrative-identity and relative safety in the body-self and material world. Even as language is critiqued in Williams, and poetry is explored for its limitations, the work still expresses a spirit of art in which imagination, language, poetry, and shared narratives are anarchistic possibility.

My dissertation explains how in Williams's tragedies, queer characters who have access to poetry or highly symbolic language, but do not gain a safe home either within themselves or

their material environment, become mad, seen in examples such as Lucretia Collins from *Portrait of a Madonna* or Blanche from *Streetcar*. While other characters whose negotiations with embodiment through language are less successful, in that the character has little to no access to language, or their expression is severely limited, often die—as is seen with Sebastian Venable from *Suddenly Last Summer*, or Valentine Xavier from *Orpheus Descending*. However, my argument is that death in Williams is also a metaphor for either ecstatic possibility, or the possibility of shifting character binds through altering definition. This is seen especially in the short stories "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1948), "Mysteries of the Joy Rio" (1954), and "Hard Candy" (1954). In dramatic works such as *Menagerie*, *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, or *Vieux Carre* (1977), art itself becomes a place of possibility, not necessarily promising ecstasy, but a transfiguration of pain. Art in Williams is not merely a shadow or echo of a lost world, but a world unto itself, constructed through imagination, refection, and reminiscences that Williams insists can allow one to better live with the many pains of existence, including the politically forced injustices and errors at the heart of human tragedy. My dissertation explains that in Williams, vitality in language is not Romantic in the sense of reflecting any ideal state in nature, which is a typical understanding of Romanticism, and one that Tishler says appears in his work. Rather, while language searches for, aspires toward, and occasionally reflects ideals in Williams, mostly it can be viewed as politically resistant expression—language as recourse to political subversion, poetically reflecting that something has gone terribly wrong in the world, but could be remedied. Romanticism in Williams, in line with Berlin's definition of Romanticism, is also a fierce fidelity to artistic expression, which is focused especially in Williams's provocative satires on racialization or Othering as the underpinning aspect of American punitive sexual culture. Romanticism as it refers to possibility

in language also pertains to seeing the artists as a maker of another world, who, as in Williams's indirect or symbolic representations, exposes realities behind the veils of popular cultural stories and stereotypes. This sense of Romanticism raises art to the stature of another world of truth, and views the artist as a sort of revelatory prophet, although usually Williams's view on the artist is more ambivalent. Yet, in Williams, the sweetness or tenderness so often embedded in the heart of his dark narratives is also the "snakeskin trace" of wildness, or the Orphic song upholding the power of art, narrative, shared stories, or poetic expression to exist as balms, even in the midst of great suffering.

Creative expression and sexuality are two contested places in Williams's work where a character resists impositions and restrictions of meaning and being, while still seeking a type of self-definition or realization through a fidelity of experience and expression. I argue that Williams draws characters and dramatic situations of apparent polar extremes to investigate how such separations are enforced through political projects that treat bodies as if they are or can be removed from complex human needs, and as if the co-mingling of desire, love, and the basic need for safety do not exist importantly together for a character. The complex identity of self that Williams articulates (the identity the characters long to express) is partially a narrative identity, in the psychoanalytic-sense of the development of the self in relation to language. It is not my intention to write a dissertation on Williams entirely framed by any version of Queer, Aesthetic, or Psychoanalytic theory. To justify my project entirely on those grounds is more than what I can here explore or reproduce. My dissertation does not offer a complete explanation of poetic affect. It also does not (except for very briefly) enter into a discussion about or intend to record the rich history of the language debate between the Second Wave, French, feminist-psychoanalysis of Julia Kristeva as she articulates her understanding of the relationship between desire and

language, and Butler's more recent queer critique of Kristeva for what Butler might call Kristeva's essentialism.[8] However, my reliance on key concepts as articulated within terms of Romanticism and Expressionism, or the spirit of artistic freedom at work in Williams, correlates with ideas about language and expression pertaining to self-identity that also occur in the theoretical realm of psychoanalysis. In my reading, I draw on O'Connor's pragmatic telling of Williams as related to sexuality, especially as this connects to the foundational definition of queerness as explicated through Sedgwick's definition. I also rely on the psychoanalysis of Ernest Becker who, in *The Denial of Death* (1973), describes a sense of self as a type of imaginative/narrative-project; R.D. Laing, who, in *The Politics of the Family* (1969) articulates a self as it is developed in a dynamic, relational matrix; and Julia Kristeva who, in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), describes a vital component in language. If Kristeva cannot survive Butler's critique of essentialism, and if she does not succeed in adequately saving what she might call the semiotic (maternal) birthplace of poetry from the displacing symbolic (paternal) language that subverts essential drives (including the desire to speak poetically, outside of typical, cultural signification), or if her sense of drives is, as Butler might claim, a fantasy about the origins of language, then she still has interesting things to say about her own experience of language as it relates to her personal experience of melancholy. The sense of vitality in language that Kristeva articulates as a potentially life-saving experience is what many Williams characters at least attempt to realize, related to their queer, narrative, selfing projects.

[8] See Butler's "Subversive Bodily Acts" chapter of *Gender Trouble*, where Butler argues that Kristeva's theory of language offers a "problematic view of the relation among drives, language, and the law," which Butler says unintentionally reifies the paternal law and is therefore not subversive in the feminist sense that Kristeva intends, while also limiting homosexual expressions of self (119).

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler explains their understanding of the relationship between language/self-expression and the body:

> the body gives rise to language, and that language carries bodily aims, and performs bodily deeds that are not always understood by those who use language to accomplish certain conscious aims…We say something, and mean something by what we say, but we also do something with our speech, and what we do, how we act upon one another with our language, is not the same as the meaning we consciously convey. It is in this sense that the significations of the body exceed the intentions of the subject. (199)

Butler also reiterates in *Undoing Gender* what they earlier claim in *Bodies That Matter* (1993): "There is always a dimension of bodily life that cannot be fully represented, even as it works as the condition and activating condition of language" (*Bodies* 198-99). However, the idea that there are unintended aspects of language, or that unconsciously articulated components of language (such as one's tone, for example) contain unique meanings has implications for queer, Romantic, poetic expression. Berlin notes that a lack of complete representation in art is a necessary condition of art, and he indicates that this is a tenet which Romanticism acknowledges, embraces, and even exploits. Berlin speaks of the impossibility of there being a direct, one-to-one, representative, artistic expression correlating with a state of nature—what he says artists of Enlightenment consciousness attempt to reflect (25-32). There will always be something left over, something unexpressed, something created that evidences a space between the subject and its representation in art. However, this is not to say that states of nature cannot be represented, but that the representations are necessary products of artistic imagination—another category of (artistic) nature through which the necessary space is the more interesting, artistic field for Berlin. Berlin says that Romanticism acknowledges the impossibility of replicating in art the

clockwork universe of the Enlightenment and that art as it attempts to do this is always a limited expression. However, fidelity to the spirit of one's own inner-experience of nature represented in art is fidelity to imagination as a generative realm of knowledge—knowledge that is provisional, perhaps, but Expressionistically productive. This vision is apparent, for instance, in the literary or dramatic grotesque and in stories of queer expression. In Berlin's telling, the Romantic spirit (which, again, refers either to a structure of knowing/being/expressing or the possible veracity of particular objects of consciousness or external phenomena, or to both) justifies creative expression as a pathway to truth/knowledge as well as the product of truth/knowledge. The connections that I read in Williams create a triangle addressing Butler's scepticism related to language-based self-definition, which illuminates poetry in Williams as queer expression, connected to a truth of character expression in the psychoanalytic sense of the narrative self.

The other or extra sense of expression that exceeds intention in language (attaching itself as if it has a will of its own) in Butler's terms appears in poetic affect and is wonderfully described by American poet, Jorie Graham, who speaks of poetry as it is another way of knowing, or a unique way of expressing knowledge:

> One of the virtues of poetry is that it allows us to talk about things that can't be talked about in any other way…A poem is something made of words, but which is proceeding often through other means—association, uses of illogic that are more like the kind of logic that you encounter in dream structures, ways that Octavio Paz called, 'ways to approach ever more naked and ancient states,' and things like paradox, and analogy, and leaping associations, linguistic clusters that are supposed to accrue with a sort of musical tension, and, most importantly, music carrying all this language in such a way that it's often communicating something at odds with the denotative or connotative activity of the

> language itself…So that we have this fantastic sensation in poetry of paradoxical information, a way of feeling and a way of thinking that are not simultaneous…and I think that is one of the sensations that most people feel in reality…That kind of knowledge, that kind of comfort with paradox, with multiple meanings is something that all poetry allows us to feel, the mind is capable of undergoing, the soul is comfortable with, and the human psychology, the human sensibility…is comfortable with. (*Bookworm* interview 3:22)

Graham's definition of what poetry does forms the basis of my working definition of what it is to speak poetically, or what it means to be a poetic being, which is the sense that I see Williams working with as he crafts his poetic characters. The connection between creative expression and queerness in Williams pertains to how much his characters attempt to and are able to convey as much of an unconfined self as possible, and what might unconsciously drive his characters as causes of confinement and desire for release. Williams's characters' bodies attempt always to break out of socially imposed, categorical forms as they move or attempt to move into deeper self-agency in their various forms of expression. In her description of what it is to attempt to retain the "I," which is one's self-agency (with implications for the narrative-self), Butler says: "If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (*Undoing Gender* 3). While imagination, language, shared narratives, poetry, or art cannot always save the characters from censure, madness, injury, or death in Williams, and expressions of love are also limited, the unstable "I" of character becomes consolidated through expressions of emotional truths in defiance of imposed restrictions. Both queer and poetic expression in Williams can be viewed in terms of maintaining

Saddik's irrationality principle without conceding that chaos is the only existent thing in the work. Williams saw chaos as an opportunity for an artistic response through a fierce commitment to imaginative expression that might act as a momentary container of being sufficient so that an audience could gain a regard that might lead to a compassionate response. Williams's characters attempt to reconcile themselves with the harsh limits of their materiality through creative plays of language, and radical reconfigurations of narratives exist in the work as a fidelity to character experience and expression that is queer within their politically restrictive worlds.

In exploring how sexuality as a meaning-making system appears in Williams as an existential limit on the development of the self, underpinning his drama of queer resistance, I read him in relation to several prominent character types that appear in the prose and drama: the queer character who appears strongly as the confined spinster in Williams's family dramas; a Black or racialized character who appears in Williams's White, Southern hellscape; an insipid White character who exists in close relationship with a Black or racialized, exotic-other character in Williams's mockery of Southern, structural power; and a poet/artist character who ultimately illuminates Williams's theory of art. In each situation, I closely explore the relationship between imposed sexual restrictions and the body-self, especially as the restrictions influence expression within the complexities of love, desire, and self-expression in a stylized, critically queer (political) poetic. I shift an historical, critical focus from reading queerness in Williams largely in terms of male sexuality, or for degrees of a character's relative sexual-transgression (which includes female character transgression, such as in relation to Blanche Dubois from *Streetcar*, for instance), to reading the character as one who is sexualized within a punitive culture—a political act. In my dissertation, I draw out the limits on a particular character in each work based on their place in the socio-political sexual system, and I name the system for its consistent dimensions,

while highlighting how a character, if they have access to language, attempts to use language to escape the binds. My argument in this dissertation is that in Williams's narrative world, the framing sexualized limit on the homeless, queer character is coherently comprised of the particular restrictions of White-supremacist, patriarchal capitalism, bound by or enforced through religion, fundamentally for the sake of White "purity" and land ownership. This politically motivated limit is a continuous bind in the work, which in chapters two and three I name as a character itself, calling it Williams's White Southern Hellscape. Williams's works demonstrate how the restrictions of this hellscape force compliance to heteronormative marriage, and restrict homosexuality, female sexuality, Black or racialized sexuality, miscegenation, asexuality, and sexual ambiguity—as each character must be defined as a sexualized type *per se*, associated with and maintained through stereotypes, to determine their hierarchical place in the social system. Williams's critique of American twentieth-century censuring sexual politics is evident in his narrative world, and he exposes the cultural obsession with drawing demarcations based on sexuality, which leads to the false dichotomies and hierarchies that appear within the binary and hierarchical sexual system.

I also shift the historical, critical trend of reading Williams's dramatic figures as solipsistic, as if their concerns are not about maintaining relationships within their political worlds, as if they are, in a sense, solitary figures grappling with their own tortured sexuality. My reading strongly includes relationality, as Williams shows how the safety of the character-self is dependent upon this, and I explore lesser analyzed character relationships in the work, including: sibling pairs in which one member adjusts to heteronormativity and the other does not; father/son and mother/son relationships; female (especially spinster) relationships, as this character-type attempts to connect with herself, a lover, or a friend to find a home; and relationships involving

sexual encounters that appear casual (especially in interracial relationships), but which are charged with symbolic meaning. When language is not enough to save the character, this is usually fundamentally due to a failure of community or a breakdown in relationships (in line with sexual restrictions), with the resultant consequence to safety. The difficulty or impossibility of a character finding a safe home in Williams consists in part of the character not finding a receptive audience, or in an extreme restriction or rejection of the character's expression. In other situations, the character has not had access to language sufficient so as to shift the narrative trap that they have been culturally placed within. If language is limited in Williams, then this reflects how all types of expression become distorted in his political world. For a queer Williams character, language is often the first recourse to political subversion, even as it is limited, and when language as a container for self, or as a connector to others and the world breaks down (as when poetry or shared narratives cannot save the character), language still often provides a type of home for a character, a temporary space of safe dwelling, a place of dignity and expressions of self that are not otherwise accepted. This is clear with the characters Lucretia, Blanche, Alma Winemiller from *Summer and Smoke*, Carol Cutrere from *Orpheus*, or Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana*—all spinster characters in the canon. Williams also mocks the language of restriction—especially religious language for what it hypocritically hides related to suffering, especially in connection with sexuality. This trope is especially evident in the satires, where racialized characters become powerful figures, albeit with limited access to language. However, more than the limited access to language here undermining language or evidencing a limitation of a racialized character, this is a jab at the co-option or mis-use of the potential in language to liberate. Religious language is mocked in the satires for condemning sexuality (including anti-

miscegenation-motivated condemnations), while racialized characters become sexual gods who alter the meaning of communion in blissful relationships with White characters.

It is important for me to note in my dissertation, as I do in chapters two and three, what Williams is not doing in his comment on racialization and sexualization related to race in the political world of the White American Hellscape. In his overturning of cultural narratives, Williams does not attempt to write a Black/racialized sexual subject as a full protagonist. While other critics, such as John S. Bak, argue that this limitation is an aspect of a reflection of Williams's own racism in his marginalization of the character or reproduction of racist tropes ("Suddenly Last Supper" para. 4-5), I argue that Williams writes racialization in this way to offer a provocative view into the White imagination of Black and racialized sexuality. Williams writes a vision of what Savran calls the "exotic Other" character (130) within a contradictory world as a critique of White symbolizations, in a style that draws out the parameters of Williams's White hellscape. My dissertation uniquely demonstrates how the Williams environment so entrapping and infantilizing to female characters is the same one that is injuring to Black or racialized characters, and the one that similarly pushes homosexual characters into the social margins, where they grapple with experiences of shame forced through forbidden and hidden sexuality. My work also uniquely points out the trajectory of a progression or evolution of Williams's style, from tragedy to satire in his critique of Othering and racialization. I describe how Williams moves from the tragic, very early short story, "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll," written in 1931/32 and published for the first time posthumously in 1985, through to the final work I critique in my study, the 1968 satirical drama, *Kingdom of Earth*. I describe how the satirical, thematic turn appears in the 1945 short story version of "27 Wagons Full of Cotton" (an early iteration of the 1956 film *Baby Doll*), and the short story "Desire and the Black Masseur"—the

latter being a lesser-known work, initially published in small volume in the first collection of Williams's short stories, *One Arm and Other Stories* (1948). While there are other thematically related works in Williams's canon that I did not include—such as the short story "Miss Coyne of Greene" (1974), or Williams's final novel, *Moise and The World of Reason* (1975)— these texts do not exactly fit the parameters of the religious, allegorical stage that I identify as the character of Williams's White Hellscape, and so I left them out of this current study. However, there is an argument to be made that also includes these works.

Further, by uniquely by focusing on female characters in the work, I demonstrate how Williams's critique of the situation of the woman figure treated as a body controlled for the sake of the cotton economy in the hellscape, similar to the control of Black or racialized bodies in the same political environment, illuminates Williams's sustained focus from his earliest works on the unjust horrors of racialized and sexualized othering. My view shifts the critical focus from one outlined by Savran, who says that while Williams's placement of the "exotic Other" in an inversion of the "normative masculine male" sexual figure is a "complex" and "contradictory" "reconfiguration of masculinity" (130), in his comment on "race and masculinity[,]" Williams merely creates an "inversion of racial hierarchies" (130), but he does not undo them. My project ties Williams's comments on race in the works to his comments on the spinster, homosexual, and artist characters, in a queering of the world which alters the frame for reading power dynamics in the narrative. While there are problems with Williams's project, his intention is to critique racist tropes as he critiques other cultural productions of meaning, in a world which he consistently defines as tragically racist. My argument is that Williams explodes binaries and hierarchies, shattering tropes especially in the satires by drawing them as absurd extremes so that they are no longer intelligible. This shifts the cultural script, altering common stories in a questioning of

cultural authority, while art remains for Williams as a place of intelligibility and refuge. I work from categories of broad definition and politically motivated social categorization, for instance, leading to expectations regarding certain gender and sex/based roles, exploring stereotypes in Williams as he draws them to both reflect and reject the political place of his narrative. My work adds to the body of existing Williams scholarship by offering and expanding upon a contemporary view on his style and thematic emphasis, synthesizing several works which are not usually read in relation to one another, and focusing on unique character relationships and symbolic situations, while illuminating Williams's consistent characterization of a punitive word within which all marginalized or homeless characters queerly struggle.

VII. Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One establishes the framework for reading Williams as a revolutionary, queer writer critiquing heteronormativity under capitalist patriarchy. I draw on critics Alicia Andrzejeski, O'Connor, Clum, Saddik, and Savran in reading a pattern in the work related to the spinster character type as a queer character, along with a sibling-pair dichotomy that appears in several of Williams's family dramas in a Queer Gothic critique of the normative family. Throughout Williams's canon, ranging from his lesser-known short stories such as "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin," through several of his major plays from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* and *Orpheus Descending*, Williams crafts the situation in which one member of the sibling-pair conforms to the marital system and the other cannot and does not conform. The non-conformist figure in the work becomes sadly and unjustly emotionally and physically exiled as a cultural scapegoat within the dramatic world. Restrictive sex/gender politics of mid-twentieth-century America and the anxiety and danger related to the

normative, nuclear family unit with its strictures on sexuality and on freedom of expression are explored here.

However, also, while the displaced spinster is confined, she also retains a radical, poetic freedom. The figure of the poetic spinster whom I analyze uses language in an attempt to secure her tenuous place in materiality. Williams cultivates this character to demonstrate the significance of language to experiences of being and identity. The dramas *Summer and Smoke* and *The Night of the Iguana* particularly showcase the significance of language for the alignments of desire. The spinster's life is often challenging, as if evidenced in *Portrait of a Madonna*, but her language is her queer resistance. This chapter defines queerness as it appears in Williams and the psychoanalytic senses of identity that I work with throughout my readings of Williams. The chapter also locates the spinster as the centre of many Williams family dramas as an important spokesperson for Williams's placement of poetry. Savran critiques flawed sex and gender essentializing projects for their limited and limiting assessment of being when he says: "Because the individual is continually being articulated by an ideological apparatus that is contradictory and riddled with cracks, he or she is always constituted not as a seamless whole but as a radically divided or fragmented subject" (14). Williams writes the spinster as an ideal character of fragmentation within a terrorizing, essentialist ideology. However, he also gives the spinster the language to potentially piece herself back together.

In Chapter Two, I read several of Williams's tragedies for his deeply critical attitude toward racism and racialization in the Jim-Crow-era South, especially as Williams exposes dangerous sexual stereotypes as limiting stories with implications for self-identity and free expression. William's works investigate sexual meanings as they are arbitrarily and culturally connoted and strictly policed in violations of humanity. In this chapter, I begin to trace the

trajectory of a homeless-type Black or racialized character who recurs in the work partially as a figure of abjection displaced within American capitalism, which Williams describes in a Southern context as a violently White-supremacist setting through its historical origins of slavery. Drawing on theories of racialization and racism as articulated by Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, I also rely on several Williams critics—predominantly Philip C. Kolin and Tom Mitchell—for their readings on race in the work. I read Williams's earliest works, such as the controversial short story "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" along with the apprentice play *Fugitive Kind* (1937), through the later dramas *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) and *Orpheus Descending* to illuminate Williams's participation in American Civil Rights discourse through a line of works that can be read as Williams's Southern critique.

Williams's commentary on what he took to be the sickness of the world, including White-supremacist ideology based on fear of the Black, male, sexual body places Williams as a political writer specifically commenting on dangerous and violent, even homicidal traps of Othering within a racist American South. What Morrison calls the "American Africanist" (*Playing* 5) presence as the racist, social constructions of racialization—which Morrison says is "crucial to…[an historical] sense of Americanness" (*Playing* 6)—Williams distorts in his prose and drama in his Expressionistic and Grotesque style. Williams does not and cannot entirely avoid the problem of othering. However, othering is his subject in several works of critical interrogation of an insipid White character and world, in a queer critique of the language and stories of Whiteness as they comprise restrictive, dominant narratives.

The "violent eruption of emotion" that Berlin identifies as a characteristic of certain facets of Romantic expression (*The Roots* 7) is exemplified in Williams's satires, where he pushes the limits of his fidelity to the principles of art in interrogation of American sexual

stereotypes related to racialization, which is what Chapter Three explores. O'Connor quotes Williams, who said that his "deviance" (*i.e*., his then still illegal homosexuality) made him a "deeper and warmer and kinder man" (*Law and Sexuality* 4), and she reasons that his sensitivity, derived in part from having been personally endangered as a marginalized being, inspired his compassion for the vulnerable characters in his work and also charged his writing within the "sex panic" attitudes of the American, punitive culture (6). This chapter expands Williams's commentary on American anti-miscegenation attitudes and law. This chapter closely investigates Williams's comedic style, which features prominently in several mid-career works that centre eroticism as political subversion in the satirical line of Williams's Southern critique. The character of insipid-Whiteness is further explored in this chapter as a feature of White, heteronormative, capitalist patriarchy.

Both the short story "The Kingdom of the Earth" (1954) and the play *Kingdom of Earth,* along with the screen play from Williams's popular and controversial film *Baby Doll*, will be explored in this chapter as the works interrogate anti-miscegenation as an aspect of socio-sexual control related to White-supremacist tenets of property/land ownership. Savran states: "the work of Tennessee Williams offers an urgent challenge to the stubborn antithesis between the political and the sexual, and between the public and private, binarisms so crucial for normative constructions of gender during the 1940s and 1950s" (80). Savran also brilliantly goes on to say that "[Williams does not] police these binarisms…[but instead]…insistently delights in their precariousness (80). Williams playfully emphasizes the precariousness of all binaries in his highly satirical critique of American cultural productions of meaning, which appears prevalently in his work in the revelation and then shattering of cultural tropes and stereotypes. These themes are focused in the provocative short story "Desire and the Black Masseur," where Williams

satirically comments on race relationships and degrees of confinement in queer love. In his study on Williams on race, Tom Mitchell says: "The 'fugitive kind' among whom Williams repeatedly casts himself includes African Americans, Mexican, Italian, German and other groups who struggled (and often still struggle) against an oppressive society, suggesting that this depiction of racial others bear some relation to his own identity as a cultural outsider" ("Unpublished" 58). The othered or racialized outsider of Williams's work often appears inside of relationships that bear troubling elements of exoticization and racial stereotyping. However, as symbols in Williams constantly function in multiple ways, symbolism is explored here to alter or explode the ossifications of meaning which a sexually sanctioning system relies on in its creation and maintenance of sexual stereotypes. As desire is confined in the tragedies related to political categories, in the satires, it is explored as an element of shocking, political freedom expressing self-identity.

In Chapter Four, I consider Williams more pointedly for his Romantic views on poetry, art, and shared narratives/storytelling as what tie a character to the messy, emotional, sexual, corporeal, loving, death-bound life, while acknowledging the impossibility of a true hold. While, as Saddik says, "Williams's later work demonstrates an ambivalence regarding the possibility of resurrection or renewal" (161), a similar questioning of such possibilities appears throughout his work that still regards the necessity of language as a primary site of negotiation related to the contingencies of a politically situated being. A primary subject throughout Williams's canon is the place and meaning of art and the vital significance of storytelling and shared narratives to the nature of a character's being, the subject of Chapter Four. The artist character-type is frequently mentioned in the Williams criticism as an important figure in the work. My exploration of this character focuses on Williams's expression of the idea that art functions as compensation for

loss. The dramas *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Vieux Carré* explore questions about art and loss. I move back to the psychoanalysis of Becker in this chapter and include a discussion of Kristeva in exploring Williams's ideas about the necessity of storytelling to self-identity, centring Williams's particular Queer Romanticism. The artist figure who dies in the narrative often suffers due to queer sexual expressions of political inconvenience, and the inability for complete expressions of self, due to extreme political restrictions on the sexual being, is a continued injustice in the work. Yet, a persecuted character who cannot find a safe home in the political world of the play still suggests a sense of imaginative possibility. The message is not so much one of any certain, redemptive power to be found in art. In fact, the system which needs or asks for redemption is often the system leading to the fiery hell destroying the queer artist whose being will not be bound by narrow confinements, such as any concept of sin. However, even if language breaks down, or cannot completely express human truth, even as the artist dies, Williams retains a faith in art's ability to communicate to an audience an experience of what he says could allow them "to feel in themselves: "This is true'" ("Too Personal" 167). That feeling is the resonance Williams hopes to express in his art.

VIII. Williams on Williams: Radical Style

Queer Romanticism, as I read it in Williams, is a political stance which regards sexual limits as injustices, and views art as revolutionary possibility and the anarchistic product of the artistic imagination. In the introduction to the collection of Williams's rich writings spanning his career and covering aspects of his theories of art and dramatic craft, memoir, what were initially published as introductions to his plays, forwards or afterwards accompanying early play

publications, or responses to critics, *Tennessee Williams, New Selected Essays: Where I Live* (2009), John Lahr describes Williams's signature style as "a radical revolt against theatrical naturalism" (xv). Williams's radicalism which is his Expressionistic and, as his career progressed, his increasingly satirical style is also expressed thematically in Williams's interrogations of the painfully limiting politics of twentieth-century American culture. Williams's dramatic record is one of the politics of sexual persecution and exclusion. Williams's language, which he personally describes as being inflected by violence ("Forward to Sweet Bird" 93-6), is compelled by what he experienced as a near constant state of existential fear and loneliness, as well as what he witnessed of the ravages against the vulnerable people of the world. Lahr describes Williams's expression of the dangers related to the drama of being alive as "an almost operatic display of terror, at once full-throated, panic-struck, truth-telling, and seductive, full of startling observations and gorgeous music" (xiv). While expressions of existential threat exist strongly in the work, throughout Williams's canon also are reflections of his hope for the terrors being assuaged and the vulnerabilities limited through the possibilities inherent in human connection. Williams built an artistic world around such hope, grounded in a strong, ethical stance which spreads beneath his drama like fertile earth for his generative, narrative garden. In Savran's words, Williams's works "demonstrate the possibility of undoing the hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, and political praxis that have prevailed in the United States since WWII" (x). While Savran published those words in 1992, the possibility in Williams exists today through expressions of the transgressive and wildly free outlaw love—that which refuses to be bound in the private self and always resists categorization in the external, political world. In referencing the connection that he wanted to share with his audience, Williams explained his motivation: "It is the short reach of my arms that hinders…[but w]ith love and with

honesty, the embrace is inevitable" ("Person-to-Person" 74). Narrative is a bridge for Williams, constructed with the hope of creating connections through his prolific works. However, Williams is also aware that one can never actually fully gain or grasp a complete understanding of another character or person. Sympathy is necessarily limited and true connection is never guaranteed. It is in the earnest reaching that we might discover counters to the systems of prevalent human violence that separate people, in enriching contemplations of Fromm's exclamation: "love is a power which produces love" (23). Williams's expression designed to ideally create connections even across vast difference reaches still in a radical, queer, poetic of love.

Chapter One

For the Love of Spinster Sisters: Queer, Poetic Resistance

> "So successfully have we disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts, that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue."
>
> – Tennessee Williams, "The Timeless World of a Play"

> "We cannot expect to catch the curtain going up or down in a drama we are born into. But there are plays within plays within plays" – R.D. Laing, *The Politics of the Family*

I. The Political Body and The Relational Spinster

While focusing on Williams in terms of his writing the drama of the troubled, isolated sensualist situated within extreme twentieth-century sexual restrictions—the figure who heroically (if also futilely) seeks freedom of sexual expression against all constraint—facilitates a deep understanding of many aspects of Williams's complex exploration of desire, there is room in the critical discussion on Williams to shift the view on the tenets of desire. Reading desire in the work as encompassing and being informed by more than the purely sexual, and broadening an investigation of the apparently solipsistic character in renewed consideration of what forces her isolation and causes her vulnerability, offers insights into a consistent critique in Williams of the political world that influences and constrains the character's experiences of self and relationships, determining the fundamental tenets of her material and emotional safety. In *Tennessee Williams and The Theatre of Excess: The Strange, The Crazed, The Queer,* Saddik expresses a compromise concerning the critical poles in the discussion of Williams's political affect, stating:

> While Williams had always resisted positioning himself as an overly political writer, his plays throughout his career do engage the political sphere in terms of how it can affect

> the social and personal relations between human beings, and they demonstrate his awareness of political issues from his earliest beginnings. (143-44)

Theorizing about Williams within the political sphere of the Queer Gothic critique of the normative/nuclear family's impacts on situations of embodiment (related to sexuality and other facets of desire, such as the desire for material safety, or the desire to freely express aspects of personal identity, or engage in uninhibited love relationships) can assist in understanding the spinster character-type who appears prominently in the family drama of Williams. This character functions to queer the system of sex and gender designation, especially pertaining to heteronormative marriage as it is bound by religion within confining, capitalist patriarchy. In the family dramas, Williams explores tensions related to the development, expression, and safety of the unorthodox self, and the potential of language and poetic expression as it mediates politically enforced confinements. The questions of definition/identity and social roles related to sexuality appear in Williams's work as a radical, thematic component of his art in his Romantic poetic of queer resistance. Versions of the spinster exist in the works *Portrait of a Madonna*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin," *Orpheus Descending*, and *The Night of the Iguana.* As well, other popular dramatic works such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A House Not Meant to Stand* feature situations of siblings (as the spinster is often one member of a recuring sibling pair) and an exploration of the father character, that illuminate the limits of the patriarchal family unit.

Although influential Williams critics such as Clum and Savran discuss sex and gender restrictions in Williams, their focus is mostly on male characters' homosexuality and less on the sexuality of women characters. While historically, the character Blanche Dubois has been much considered in *Streetcar's* vast and varied criticism, she is typically investigated as a sexual agent

and not a sexualized figure,[9] even as she is evaluated as she exists within heteronormative, capitalist patriarchy—although, there are exceptions. In his "Criticism on *A Streetcar Named Desire*: A Bibliographic Survey, 1947-2003," Bak notes historical, categorical trends in interpretations of *Streetcar*, including what he calls those centred in "feminist, queer, and Cultural Studies paradigms" (4) which offer critiques of the character's sexualization. Bak cites Anca Vlasopolos's representative, early feminist reading, whose echoes appear in later feminist criticism, of Blanche's gender-based victimization within the play. Bak describes Vlasopolos's opposition to what has proliferated in the criticism as a trend to valorize Stanley as a symbol of the protection of a growing, working-class culture in a shifting, American political order (11), in a variation of what can be understood as the New South against the Old South critique. The view of the play that Bak articulates through Vlasopolos which pits Stanley against Blanche, as an example of what Kolin calls the typical readings of "Blanche-and-Stanley dichotomies" (*Production* 3), describes a clash between characters whose effects in the criticism largely depend on an orientation to Blanche's sexuality, including whether and how she engages in various seductions.[10] While the orientation of a particular critic and possibly the era of the

[9] To differentiate "sexualized" from "sexual" here, I rely in part on Butler, including her cogent explanation of Foucault. Butler explains that, according to Foucault:

> the body is not 'sexed' in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an 'idea' of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations…As such, sexuality is understood by Foucault to produce 'sex' as an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis. (*Gender Trouble* 125).

To be sexualized in this context is to live under politically assigned categories regarding what one's sexuality entails (including tenets of gender). To investigate a character's sexualization is to critically assess political assumptions about the character's sexuality. In this context, to read a character as sexualized rather than sexual is to read a character's sexual behaviour in relation to their social position and other motivating forces, and to admit the possibility of a misrecognition of behavioural traits, including possibly mis-assigning value/moral judgments about behaviour. There are implications for sexualization related to Sedgwick's ideas of queerness and queer identity, with queerness ideally and potentially uncoupling aspects of identity and being from socio-political, sexually decided categories (including gender categories) or the political terms of sexualization, *i.e*., how one is perceived, what is expected of one, how one is censured, *etc*. related to having been sexualized within a political framework.

[10] The degree to which Blanche is sexually attracted to Stanley and questions of her desire for him as defining features of her character are often considered in the criticism. In "Stanley Made Love to her by Force: Blanche and the Evolution of a Rape" (2004) and "*A Streetcar Named Dies Irae*: Tennessee Williams and the Semiotics of Rape"

criticism may slightly alter the view, Blanche's sexual objectification in the drama (*i.e.*, investigating Blanche as a sexual character *per se*) is often at the centre of *Streetcar* criticism, in what Kolin calls Williams's "dramaturgy of desire" (*Production* 5). In the *Williams Encyclopedia*, Kolin and Maureen Curley note the various epithets used to describe Blanche as a femme fatale, alongside the record of her being viewed as a fragile character (244-51). A description of Blanche is offered by Kolin and Curley*:* "At heart [she is] a faded Southern Belle, an aging woman who longs for a man to rescue and nourish her" (245) who "fall[s] into madness" (246). While Kolin cites the many critical "contradictions and ambiguities" in the discussion of *Streetcar's* characters as an indication of that which "Williams himself had sewn into the roles," the typical views of Blanche as either being, as Kolin states, "a guardian of the arts, a hallowed representative of the Old South, a secular saint" whose spiritual side triumphs over her sexual nature (making her a victim), contrasted with the negative telling of Blanche as she is "branded a nymphomaniac, a liar, [and] an infectious source of destructive feminine desire" (instead of a victim) form much of the basis of the historical, critical discussion of the character (*Production* 3). The Blanche-Stanley dichotomies in the criticism parallel what is

(2009), Bak carefully considers the situation of Stanley's rape of Blanche in *Streetcar,* as he believes that the act in the penultimate scene of the play decides Blanche's desires and whether she should be read as a victim. In "Stanley Made Love to Her," Bak says: "Stanley does destroy Blanche in many ways when he rapes her but *Streetcar's* controversial rape scene is more the thematic confluence of Blanche's inability to sequester her own sexual attraction toward Stanley than it is the visceral climax of their attraction" (95). Bak argues that Blanche, who has been careening toward death, longs to be raped and that she "turns to…Stanley [after Mitch lets her down, because Stanley's] potent sexuality will destroy a desire for the flesh that has completely destroyed her life (and those of her ancestors)" ("*Dies Irae*" 63). See Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation for an exploration of rape in Williams within White-supremacist, heteronormative, capitalist patriarchy that does not read rape in Williams as a liberating symbol, but as a symbol of extreme abjection and psychological violence within a restricted, socio-political, sexual system that is injuring to all, especially female and Black characters. Judith Thompson also reads Blanche's sexuality within the play, although she decides that "[t]he rape represents…a demonic parody of marriage" (44). Kolin also considers Blanche's character as he says Williams symbolizes her dual nature, which has implications for her sexual nature (*Production* 3).

critically cited as a character dichotomy in Blanche, as a symbol of what is said to be her internal war with herself, based on what is cited as a split between her natures.[11]

However, shifting the view from Blanche's possible dichotomy to other questions related to her relative safety and questions of the character's expression can open the discussion, exposing elements of a queer critique existent throughout Williams and strongly prevalent in the works featuring a spinster character. O'Connor notes the value of reading the female character beyond strictly assessing her sexual elements to investigate Williams's exploration of the complexity of emotion and desire, especially related to what is considered as the character's madness (*Dramatizing* 29-30). While Blanche's madness is a critically recognized feature of the character, and the topic of her madness is much discussed in the criticism,[12] the situation of madness (or the perception of a character as mad) in the family drama as a consequence for the

[11] A discussion of Blanche in terms of a character-duality reflecting both a spiritual and carnal nature is ubiquitous in the criticism. Bak says that while there is some ambiguity in the rape, it should be read related to Blanche's internal "dialectical struggle" between her sexual and spiritual sides ("Stanley" 84). Bak concedes that Williams "employs rape neither to demean women nor abase masculine desire; he uses it instead to excoriate religious dogma for having appropriated human spirituality and sequestered it from various worldly appetites" ("*Dies Irae*" 62). However, Bak also reads the rape as something that is ultimately good for Blanche, as he says that it has a liberating effect, and that reading the rape as such indicates Williams's resolution of the question of Blanche as either a "sexual predator or spiritual victim" ("Stanley" 72). Also, Kolin cites a dichotomous nature, stating that Blanche "is both moth (spirit) and tiger (flesh)" (*Production* 3). Judith Thompson states that Blanche is embroiled in an internal war between spirit and flesh, stating that: "Streetcar…moves between polar modes—romance and realism, tragedy and comedy, the mythic and ironic…[in] an ironic quest myth, an archetypal conflict between the soul and the body" (25). Brenda Murphy notes that Williams worked on *Streetcar* and *Summer and Smoke* simultaneously between 1945-47. Murphy says that the two works "[explore Williams's] sense of the split self from opposing vantage points" (77). Murphy states that while Alma Winemiller (from *Summer and Smoke*) is in a state of "emotional paralysis" due to sexual repression (with an over-developed spiritual nature), Blanche's spiritual sensibility is "undermined by her awareness that she is equally driven by sexual desire" (77).

[12] In "Stanley Made Love to her by Force: Blanche and the Evolution of a Rape," Bak decides that Blanche's madness is the result of her being torn apart by her internal struggle. Bak calls Blanche a "nervous, man-hungry spinster" (92), whose sexual attraction to Stanley is what destroys her, as her desire is in conflict with her higher, spiritual aspirations (96). See also O'Connor (who is referenced repeatedly in this dissertation) on Blanche's madness, especially in Chapter One and Chapter Four in consideration of the relationship in Williams between language and madness. Thompson reads Blanche's madness as a symbol of her representation of ironic myth, and reads the character as a fallen goddess, like Persephone (27). Murphy also says that "the weakness and flaws in Blanche's nature contain the seeds of her ultimate demise," which includes madness (83).

spinster figure (with Blanche as one spinster among several others in the work) made vulnerable by and within the restrictive, Southern, socio-sexual system as a dramatic indication of Williams's queer resistance has not been thoroughly explored. However, the critical exceptions that read the female character in Williams related to sexual confinement have implications for how the character potentially subverts (*i.e.*, queers) the socio-sexual system. In *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (2014), Brenda Murphy notes while Blanche is alternately attracted to and repulsed by Stanley, the character uses flirtation with Stanley "to gain his protection" (80), which can alter the perception of Blanche as a "sex-kitten" (Kolin, *Encyclopedia* 246) to that of a sexualized tiger who savvily manipulates the patriarch in an attempt to escape injury. Murphy contextualizes Stanley's aggression toward Blanche in accordance with "his need to defeat what he sees as a threat to his home and his dominance of Stella" (84), which hints at Blanche's possible queer disruption of the patriarchal order. Although O'Connor does not consider Blanche as a spinster in a series of spinster figures, she thoroughly explores the madness of Blanche. In her "From 'Home-Place' to the Asylum: Confining Spaces in *A Streetcar Named Desire"* (2004), O'Connor considers madness related to Williams's treatment of marriage in *Streetcar.* O'Connor reads marriage itself as a type of madness-inducing institution in the immediate post-war world of the play. O'Connor compares the marriage commitment (between Stella and Stanley) to Blanche's committal to the institution of the State Asylum. O'Connor describes the physical spaces in the play of Belle Reve, the French Quarter apartment, and the "madhouse" that Blanche is sent to as symbols of extreme psychological restriction for Blanche ("Confining Spaces" 160). In *Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (1997), O'Connor states: "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" (42). O'Connor also reads Stella as a

character with limited agency, who has "landed in marriage marked by a kind of madness" (166), and she reads Stanley as his confinement in marriage echoes his place as a soldier within the institution of the military, as the character's existential experience is limited by various states of authoritative control (166). O'Connor reads Stanley's rape of Blanche as the ultimate enactment of the violence of the hegemonic, patriarchal, political system that forces women's vulnerability within various institutions (*Dramatizing* 49-50). In this context, Williams offers his comment on the existential dangers of the mid-century, heteronormatively-sexualized, and heavily class-stratified, capitalist America, with its implications for women, including sexual infantilization and dependency through marriage, and a general queer vulnerability for women (and other figures) who do not conform to marriage as it is restrictively organized.

Significantly, a recent, singular, and illuminating queer reading of Williams by Alicia Andrzejenski, "Blue Roses and other Queer Energies in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*" (2017), also critiques heteronormative marriage. Andrzejenski reads a 2013-14 Broadway production of *The Glass Menagerie*, directed by John Tiffany, for its portrayal of Laura's queer "difference" (para. 1) as this difference causes her to appear to be an unsuitable marriage candidate. Andrzejenski reads the image of Laura's epithet, "Blue Roses," as a sign of her "uncommon beauty" (para. 6) and a metaphor for "Queer Energies" within Williams's "dystopia" (21), in which "the conditions for female bodies…are poisonous, if not fatal" (para. 1). Andrzejenski reads the play in part in relation to Sara Ahmed's disillusioning view on marriage as a "fantasy…path to happiness" (para. 5), and Laura Berlant's similar idea of "fantasy happiness" (related to marriage) as a socially limiting phenomenon for a figure trapped in heteronormativity (para 4). Andrzejenski says: "*The Glass Menagerie* offers a narrative of…cultural paralysis—the inability to turn away from marriage in order to desire otherwise or

better—and the devastation it causes" (para. 4). Andrzejenski reads Williams as he writes Laura as a figure of abjection "who lacks a place in the world" (Andrzejenski para. 7). However, Andrzenski states that Williams's description of Laura's "otherworldly" or "impossible" beauty fixes her as a figure who cannot or does not resist her female confinement (para. 7). Andrzejenski also believes that Williams writes the drama so that the audience will participate in Amanda's view that marriage will save Laura (para. 15). Andrejenenski writes that positing an alternate perception of Laura's queer difference as a symbol of her strong "refusal to perform a productive, legible form of femininity" (para. 11) can illuminate a latent possibility in *Menagerie*. She states that viewing the work through the lens of a queer aesthetic portrays the drama as "actively resisting heteronormative narratives of the good life and as conjuring alternative options for desire and agency" (para. 1). In her reading, Andrzejenski shares her vision of what she characterizes to be the character Laura "escaping even her playwright" beyond silence and fragility as a figure of queer resistance (para. 8).

My work on the sexual confinement of the spinster in Williams can be read alongside Andrzejenski's reading of *The Glass Menagerie,* in considerations related to queer resistance. However, my reading of Williams is that he intends a critique of the heteronormative trap in his work, which differs from Andrzejenski, who says that Laura's queer possibility is not something Williams intends (para. 12). The difference in the view of Williams's critique pertains in part to reading the consistent, tragic element in several Williams works as a dramatic pattern for a character who is always queer in relation to sexual restrictions. Her downfall in the tragedy proves Williams's exploration of the limits of the political world, in which the spinster's resistance is formed through expansive possibilities of self-expression related to the poetic imagination. Even if Williams's form of "subversion" is merely a question about what makes life

good, and he does not posit solutions to the tragedy, but explains it, the revelation of the complexities of the family situation is a queerly provocative critique of established order. The "uncontainable difference" (para. 33) that Andrzejenski excitingly attributes to Laura in *Menagerie* as queer possibility is one that recurs in works featuring the spinster character, as a figure who negotiates her entrapment and homeless displacement in attempts to tether herself to the material in a world that limits both the psychological and physical space she is able to occupy. My work is also strongly informed by O'Connor's work on language and madness in Williams, in a discussion of how the spinster gains relative agency through poetic affect. As sexual confinement forces the character into states of disembodiment, the liminal spinster attempts to attend to the split through language. Repeatedly, related to the spinster figure, Williams question the efficacy of language and the significance of poetry and poetic imagination, even as the spinster is considered mad and her language is dismissed by the other characters in the play. While Williams usually insists on the tragedy in the family dramas, he also insists on a type of Romantic, poetic rebellion for a spinster in her restricted negotiations of desire for safety and expressions of self-identity.

II The Trapped Spinster

The imperilled character of the spinster recurs in Williams's family dramas as one who does not or cannot safely occupy a place within a sanctioned, sexual system, and her presence forces questions about the validity and even the safety of the system for everyone altered by its governance. What O'Connor calls "the fate of women who display qualities that do not conform to the society they live in" (*Dramatizing* 32) is the spinster-character's madness, which appears in Williams in degrees, correlated with degrees of disembodiment that are themselves correlated with physical homelessness (or an inability to be safely at home in one's self or the world),

ranging from a curable neurosis for Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke* to a possibly irrecoverable state of psychosis for Blanche in *Streetcar.* If, as Williams's artist-character Valentine Xavier laments in *Orpheus Descending*, "[w]e're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!" (54), the question for the isolated characters is: what are the conditions of such a lonely imprisonment? Repeatedly in the work, Williams describes the painful terms of human disconnection, also suggesting a possibility for relief through loving relationships. However, relief is blocked in situations of characters having been forced into systems of sexual and gender conformity, as if one's place in any sexual system or a character's varying and personal sexual expressions determines one's human value and deservingness. Williams illuminates the error of mistaking sexual knowledge for definitive character knowledge. In Max Fincher's "Queer Gothic" entry in *The Encyclopedia of The Gothic* (2016), the critic outlines the confining tenets of the binary, socio-political sex and gender system: "The heteronormative is the assumption (often unconscious) that certain social structures (courtship, childrearing, marriage, family) are a priori natural, normative, and privileged over other social/sexual/economic arrangements" (535). Fincher's explanation describes what appears in the drama as the parameters confining a Williams character, centered on sex-based restrictions and expectations that either do not match the inner experience and desires of the vulnerable character inside of particular family/marital arrangements, or are not fully realized by the character, thereby increasing the character's vulnerability. As characters are reduced in the political world of the Williams play, sexuality as a signifying system is seen to restrictively mean too much. This excess of meaning is an overdetermining restraint for a character, and Williams investigates the absurdity of the concept of sexual purity or of prescriptive, sanctioned sexuality upheld within a patriarchal structure bound by marriage.

Throughout his canon, Williams repeats scenarios of character reduction and entrapment based on sexual assumptions. In *Orpheus*, for instance, a play focusing in part on extreme sexual prohibition, confinement, and control at the expense of love relationships, Val calls the limited understanding of self and other that comes from sexual knowledge the "make believe answer" (55). Although Val is perceived in the play by the rulers of the sexual order as sexually licentious and dangerously seductive, a perception the stakes on which Williams raises in the provocative decision to give the character an ex-hustler backstory, Valentine lives chastely, having given up the party (*Orpheus* 43), and he is offended by his sexual objectification. This character, like so many of Williams's characters, including the spinster, seeks a personal dignity and bodily autonomy within a sexually punishing world that reduces figures to sexual objects in acts of misrecognition and judgments limiting freedom of being, including a sexual freedom, among other desires.

Williams's spinster character exists as a variation of a traditional spinster character that appears in various incarnations throughout Gothic literature, in part in questions of marriage and madness. The association of the spinster with madness occurs prominently in the famous British example of Bertha Rochester, in Charlotte Brontë's Gothic romance, *Jane Eyre* (1847). While Bertha is still technically married (and therefore is not technically a spinster), she is sequestered in her husband Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall home as the homicidal "mad woman in the attic," and since the marriage has effectively been dissolved since its start through Bertha's madness, the character lives as if she is a spinster. Michael Thorpe says that the character Bertha, while she exists faintly in the novel as "little more than a figment of the 'gothic' imagination" (173), is yet a figure whom Brontë compassionately "asks [her readers to] pity" for her outcast state (174). Bertha can also be read as a foil who exposes the tragedy of Rochester and the

goodness of Jane as they navigate obstacles, including restrictive socio-religious norms, to make a love-match with each other—possibly upholding marriage as a potentially ideal situation. However, Jean Rhys's comprehensive telling of the Bertha character through the figure of Antoinette in Rhy's Postcolonial, prequel novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), effectively critiques the class system of the Victorian, British aristocracy with its laws of primogeniture, providing a view on marriage as imprisonment leading to madness. Rhys says that she wrote the novel to tell other than "the English side" of the colonial legacy, including the plantation horrors of the West Indies, and that the situation that she narrates in the novel centres on a "bad marriage" ("Selected Letters" 144). While the outcome is ambiguous, as the event is narrated at the end of the novel after a dream of Antoinette's (which recalls the actions of Bertha, who burned Rochester's house in *Jane Eyre)*, Rhys leaves her reader with the liminal, Jamaican-born, Creole-figure, Antoinette (who has been locked away in her husband's English estate due to madness for many years) about to set fire to her English home (112). In *Jane Eyre*, the act of the fire (which is also Bertha's suicide) liberates Rochester to marry Jane. In *Sargasso Sea*, the act poised to occur will be one of revenge.

A prominent Southern American Gothic version of the spinster exists in the Emily Grierson character from William Faulkner's 1930 short-story, "A Rose for Emily." Gary L. Kriwald calls this character a "homicidal dowager" and a "reclusive spinster who, by means of murder and necrophilia, wages a battle to the death with time and change" ("The Widow" 3). Emily Grierson, whom the narrator of the tale alternatively calls Miss Emily, poisons the figure whom the town assumed was her marriage-suitor, the Yankee-foreman, Homer Baron—a figure who appears queerly, as "Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elk's club—that he was not a marrying man" ("A Rose" 242).

The murder occurs prior to Miss Emily sealing herself in her dusty, decaying house into her old age and subsequent death, living closely with Homer's decomposing body as if in a marital crypt. Faulkner explores the extreme limits of patriarchal control in the narrative, as Emily Grierson, whom the town's people come to call "crazy" (241), is restricted by an imposing relationship with a severe father (241), and then left "a pauper" (241) after his death, unable to pay taxes on her property and subject to the varying wills of the town fathers as they attempt to decide her domestic fate (239-40). While there are suggestions of an earlier madness in the family through an aunt who "had gone completely crazy" (240), ultimately, the narrator claims, Grierson's restrictive family situation led to the spinster's downfall, "as if quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die" (243). Faulkner satirizes marriage and family institutions as he writes of the vulnerability of the Victorian-spinster, ill-equipped as an unmarried woman to confront "the encroachment of the new century" (3), just as Blanche's female conditioning in the Old South reduces her adaptation to the social changes of mid-century America. However, unlike the others, William's spinsters are not suicidal, homicidal, or pyromaniacal. Yet, like the other Gothic spinsters, his women are also fierce in their resistance of confinements and negotiations with realizing safety, even as there are attempts to silence them, evict them from their homes, send them to asylums, or banish them from town.

II. The House of the Father

Within Williams's drama, the character who does not conform to normative "family values" is a liminal figure, an outcast, or a persecuted scapegoat, punished for excesses and perceived as sexually transgressive, or she is misrecognized and overly sexualized, with her fundamental needs for basic bodily autonomy and material security either not known or not

sufficiently met in situations of her being or becoming increasingly squeezed into sexual spaces that she either cannot or does not want to occupy, with the result being a self in jeopardy, both within the social/family matrix and her own being. In Laing's *The Politics of the Family* (1969), Laing describes the psychoanalytic sense of the development of the self, conceptualized in the wake of the Freudian revolution influencing Williams and his contemporaries in the early to mid-twentieth century, and intricately explains the self's composition within the relational family system. Here, Laing sums up the process of how one draws from surrounding images to create an image of one's self, as if the self is constructed according to critical aspects of narrative structure and design (44-46). In Laing's terms, the human body is the range for mapping from the external world, and the family is the "principal *domain* from which…[one's internal self-] maps are made" (44). While of course there is great variability in pattern-manifestations, and source domains extend beyond the family, broadly, according to Laing, there is a sense in which the external politics influencing the family system and the family system itself play out within the very being (including the body) of a particular figure, with the relationship one enters into with the myriad elements forming the basis of the tension Williams writes of with careful, intimate knowledge in his dramatic characterization. The psychoanalytic sense of the relational developments of the self is apparent in Williams, who can be read for his emphasis on the structures influencing individual characters, with the conflicts and their resolutions being the stories of the tragic struggles Williams shares in his politically challenging and emotionally poignant family dramas. Within this context, it is not only that certain sexual expressions (*i.e.,* homosexuality, female sexuality, racialized and/or miscegenation) are restricted for non-conforming characters. It is also that the general affect of sexual governance forces such controls on being that characters in the work, even in expressions of sexual ambivalence or ambiguity, are

in jeopardy (including being subject to madness), and Williams writes to explore and expose the dangers and absurdities of any sexually essentializing tendency leading to social expectations that severely restrict his characters.

The question of what it is to be or feel at home (in one's self and the world) takes shape in Williams through the metaphor of an actual material dwelling, whether it is a house, an apartment, or Big Daddy's "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile" (*Cat* 112) and the spinster's relationship to place. The question of whether a potential safe structure or plot of earth (and therefore a possible home) is available for a character or not, and what level of disrepair or precariousness the place is, in becomes centred in the dramas in consideration of whether or not a queer character fits or can make the adjustment to the marital/family system. In Gaston Bachelard's poetic understanding of the many dimensions of the narrative-self as organized through metaphor, which he articulates in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), he says:

> the unconscious is housed…well and happily housed, in the space of happiness. The normal unconscious knows how to make itself at home everywhere, and psychoanalysis comes to the assistance of the ousted unconscious, of the unconscious that has been roughly or insidiously dislodged. But psychoanalysis sets the human being in motion, rather than at rest. (32)

While the tenets of normalcy are probably much revised since Bachelard's imaginative expression (with his description of the self's structure and the implication for homeless displacement still ringing true), the ultimate Williams question is of the supposed abnormal, of "the strange, the crazed, [and] the queer" Williams characters made weird through distortions of normalcy (regardless of normalcy's shifting tenets). The extreme, exaggerated Williams

characters necessarily question any distinction of "normal." The narrative frame of the house as the metaphoric dwelling-place, where a character thrashes out issues of the safety of the self, appears throughout the film and literature of the twentieth-century Gothic genre, and often the question focuses on a female character. This metaphor is also consistently present in William's Southern American Gothic.[13] Williams acts as the agent of psychoanalytic force, either dislodging his characters or revealing them as being on the move in various states of homelessness due to not yet having been and probably never able to achieve the outcome of being "well and happily housed," with the thrust of the drama being the desire for being or feeling at home.

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[13] The idea of the house as metaphor for the self is presented with thanks to George Toles for his introduction to the concept during his 2014 "Literature and Film" class, along with his introduction to various Gothic artists who explore the theme. The house as metaphor for a dislodged or precarious female self appears in Alfred Hitchcock's first American drama, *Rebecca* (1940)—a classic of the Gothic genre based on Daphne Du Maurier's British classic novel of the same name. Hitchcock, when explaining the film says, "the picture is a story of a house. The house was one of three key characters of the picture" (131). Hitchcock also compares the house in *Rebecca* to the house in his film *The Birds* (1963), for it being "completely isolated" as a metaphor for the extreme isolation of the female protagonist in the narratives (131). There are also several examples of the house as a metaphor related to female precarity in the Southern American Gothic genre. In William Faulkner's short story, "A Rose for Emily" (1930), the spinster-character Emily Grierson's domesticity is in question and possible jeopardy due to her owing back-taxes on her property. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a novel exploring the impacts of an impoverished, Southern culture on women, the body, family and maternity features a house belonging to the Bundren family, with the house built at the top of a bluff, at the end of the road (35). The narrative opens with matriarch Addie's Bundren's son, Cash, outside the house in the yard, building a casket for his mother, as Addie lies dying inside (4-5). Erskine Caldwell's novel, *God's Little Acre* (1933), also features a house in a precarious position, poised to lose its foundation and fall into a hole in the yard dug by the family at the father's direction. The mother is conspicuously absent in the narrative and the patriarch with gold-fever engages in a futile search on his property for the mineral. The novel explores Southern poverty and female vulnerability, as well as male sexual competition for a female prize. In the short story "The Interior Castle" (1953), a work that plays on the title of St. Theresa of Avila's 16th century work of Christian Mysticism, *The Interior Castle* (a treatise considering the body as a temple for the holy spirit in development of a personal relationship with God outside the bounds of any religious order), Jean Stafford considers the body as a dwelling place for a complete identification with the flesh and heavily gendered materialism. The result is that the female body after an accident is a house of pain, inundated with Barbie-pink images of frivolous femininity. Carson McCullers, in her intricate exploration of two similar, queer kid characters, Mitch from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Frankie from *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), features the house and physical space as significant to each character's adolescent passage, as they each struggle with settling into versions of femininity. As well, Shirley Jackson variously explores the house-metaphor in her work, especially in the famous novel *The Haunting of Hillhouse* (1959), a Freudian psycho-drama considering queerness and individuation.

Williams writes the Gothic plots and psychological situations of the Freudian family romance in which the overdetermining presences (or absences) of the father and mother relate to sexual politics and negotiations of bodily existence (and therefore the self). In these scenarios, a character's grappling as her being is relatively contained or confined through a sanctioned sexual system becomes a negotiation of love, whereby significant love relationships (or their lack) influence the character's existential state. In this way, sexuality is a primary site of self-negotiation, and love is a requirement for safety. In several Williams works, safety depends on the successful entry into a family system which, under patriarchal capitalism, is exclusively heteronormative, child-producing, and marriage-based.[14] The vulnerable character in Williams is often dislodged in relation to the father figure who presides over the heteronormative family system. Whereas in Williams, the mother figure frequently acts as a guardian of language,[15] the father is gatekeeper to the world of the material. He is one who would grant permission for safe passage or expel danger from a fraught situation, except when he is causing the trouble or absent, as patriarchs sometimes are in the canon. In those cases, the absence is the significant, determining feature of this figure. Either way, the struggles to make some peace with the demands of the flesh, including peace with various aspects of desire, both including and not including sexual need, but always indicating the need for loving connection and material safety, are the primary character challenges. Characters in the popular plays are threatened with

[14] In "Sacrificial Stud," Clum discusses the situation of "compulsory heterosexuality" related to the history of heterosexual marriage as it "makes the woman the currency of masculine transactions" and therefore necessitates homophobia (28). Clum also notes Blanche's "romantic, essentially asexual view of marriage" in *Streetcar* (28-29) as this underscores the character's vulnerability. Also, see Chapter One "Unhappy Objects" of Sarah Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), where Ahmed discusses the "myth" of the "happy family," including marriage and child production (45) as an "happy object" (21) supposed to govern one's social orientation toward happiness. Ahmed says that "[t]o inherit the family is to inherit the demand to reproduce its form" (46), which has implications for queer characters who do not conform or wish to conform to the cultural system.

[15] See Chapter Four of this dissertation for a discussion of the mother figure in Williams related to language and the artist-character.

homelessness related to the limits of the father—ranging from Amanda, Laura, and Tom in *Menagerie* left in precarity, with the image of paternal abandonment looming in the painting of the missing father, to the Coffin family's house allowed by the father to fall into disrepair, about to become washed away in *A House Not Meant to Stand*—and there are implicit and overt appeals throughout Williams's canon to the father figure. Each time, the father is in some way implored for consent, atonement, safety, or forgiveness, and a strong aspect of a Williams theme is repeated in the consequences of the lack of these fatherly benedictions. The spinster's unique vulnerability within patriarchy casts light on the system which is injurious to many characters (including several patriarchs), and as a solitary figure who queerly stands outside of the heteronormative family system, she is a character well-equipped to comment on the problematic politics of fragmentation.

The spinster-character exists in a homeless state or she is threatened with homeless displacement, since the place of home functions metaphorically for Williams so that not being at home in the political world also indicates not being able to safely occupy a physical home, as well as a character not being able to be at home with another, or within her own body or self. While O'Connor writes of the confining spaces for Blanche in *Streetcar*, the fact that Blanche cannot make a home and has either been evicted from every place where she previously lived, or is under constant threat of eviction, is also true. As Stanley interrogates Blanche soon after their first meeting to determine the monetary-value of the articles in her trunk (which he mistakenly believes indicate her hidden-wealth and a deceptive nature), she responds with: "Everything I own is in that trunk" (41). The audience is aware that the contents of her longstanding home and birthplace, Belle Reve, have been reduced to the gaudy bobbles, inexpensive rhinestones, and costume furs and feathers that Blanche carries with her in the trunk, items which Blanche

fantastically infuses with meaning, wrapping herself in the charmed veils in attempts to minimally protect herself from the waking nightmare of her life. However, while these items are of no economic worth, the trunk also houses what is most valuable to Blanche—her "love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy" (42). The bundle of letters Blanche can hold in her hand as a concrete symbol of a time when, for a brief moment as a very young woman, Blanche believed that she was safe in a love-relationship with another—her dead husband, Allen Grey, with whom Blanche could share her love for poetry. The tragedy of the death as it continuously burdens Blanche (since she feels she is to blame) leaves Blanche unmoored in conditions which continue to worsen. While technically Blanche is a widow, she experiences the economic vulnerability, isolation, and madness similar to other spinster figures related to a family system. Although Blanche was not safe even during her brief marriage, the poetry remaining in the letters exists now as a shelter, containing Blanche through her belief in its power as Williams's statement on the possibility of locating a safe home, however limited, in poetry.

The love-letters in *Streetcar* appear as a similar symbol in Williams's short-story, "One Arm," published in Williams's first short-story collection of the same name, written in 1946, a year prior to *Streetcar*'s debut. In the story, the sexualized, queer character, Oliver Winemiller, clutches between his legs during his state-execution a bundle of love-letters from a series of lovers (mostly men who paid Oliver for his company), sent to him during his time on death row (188). Oliver has been sentenced to die for murdering a wealthy pimp-figure who encouraged Oliver to make a "blue-movie," an action which suddenly "revolted" Oliver so that he reacted in violent passion through murder in resistance to his objectified confinement (177). Oliver's livelihood had been reduced to hustling on Canal Street when, as someone who made a living out of using his body in sport and agriculture, Oliver lost his arm in an accident, and, with no other

economic options, resorted to prostitution. Oliver recounts his memories to a young, Lutheran priest who visits Oliver in his prison cell days before Oliver's execution, telling the priest the story of how he came back to full, pulsating vitality after a grave depression that followed the loss of his arm—a depression which also led to the extreme, despondent state culminating in the murder.

The narrator describes Oliver's transformation after he lost his arm by explaining the loss in the terms Butler uses to describe a relationship between trauma and language when they cite Felman and Caruth, as they state that a key feature of trauma is its un-narratability (*Undoing Gender* 153-56). The narrator speaks of Oliver as he feels the loss with the whole of "the self that doesn't form words," the "speechless self" (176). Oliver recollects to the priest the story of how, after feeling "lost" in "the centre of his being," he came back to life through letter writing when he began responding to the lovers who had written him with their words of appreciation and adoration (176). Oliver speaks to the priest as if in a final confession, with the act of letter writing described as if it is as a holy ritual, a healing ablution. However, the priest cannot fulfill the last rite, which Williams cheekily writes as a possible sexual act, in parody of religious confinements of the body-self. Despite there being a clear attraction between the priest and Oliver, and despite Oliver being redeemed—he calls himself a "clean [*i.e.*, cleansed] whore" (187)—the priest is afraid and he rushes away, denying Oliver his last opportunity to experience sensual pleasure. Yet, the shameless, life-giving force in the letters has already provided Oliver with "a sense of communion," which restores Oliver to his whole self and a spiritual centre that he carries into death (181-82). As the charge of electricity kills Oliver (who holds the letters between his legs), the event is narrated like the opening lines from Dylan Thomas's poem: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower / Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of

trees / Is my destroyer (1-3). The narrator describes the force of God/Eros, the force of life, death, sex, sensuality, friendship, safety, connection, poetry as the force that moves through Oliver and the love-letters:

> Bolts from across the frontiers of the unknown, the practically named and employed but illimitably mysterious power that first invested a static infinitude of space with heat and brilliance and motion were channeled through Oliver's nerve cells for an instant and then shot back across the immense frontiers. (188)

Oliver dies in the story, "[b]ut death has never been much in the way of completion" (188), and the letters remain alive with possibility. The similar life-giving love-letters from Blanche's trunk are contrasted with the receipts of loss and death that Stanley forces Blanche to pull from her trunk, papers related to the old home, the deed, the bank statements recording lapsed mortgage payments, the notices of foreclosure on Belle Reve—evidence, Blanche says, of what her "improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged for their epic fornications" (44), as their accumulated debts led to the loss of Blanche's home.

From the start of the drama, along with having been driven from Belle Reve and Laurel, Blanche is also not at home in her own body. Her nervous agitation is so extreme, Blanche immediately tells Stella upon their reunion that her "nerves [have] broke" (14). Throughout the drama, Blanche is trapped in Stanley's world like a bird in a cage. However, her body is only precariously contained in the space, and she is still in constant motion through rapid speech or song. In explaining her agitated behaviour, Stella tells Stanley that Blanche has "always [been] flighty" (124), although the audience later discovers more about what drives Blanche's nervous instability. With no psychological or physical resting place to safely house her expression or offer her protection, Blanche still attempts to ground herself through language. When she lingers,

singing, before emerging from the bath (after one of many frequent attempts to calm her nerves through bathing) prior to her failed birthday dinner-date with Mitch, Stanley shouts: "Hey, canary bird! Toots! Get OUT of the BATHROOM!" (127). Shortly following, in an attempt to lighten the dark mood of the disastrous party and perhaps safely land, Blanche uses a trapped-bird metaphor in her joke from her "repertoire…of parrot stories" (130). "This one's about an old maid" she says and proceeds to tell the joke (130). However, Stanley does not appreciate Blanche's humour, and after they fight, Stanley solidifies his plan to force Blanche from the apartment by giving her a bus-ticket back to Laurel (131-36). The state of Blanche's homelessness manifests as a feeling of displacement which increases in intensity until it becomes a disembodying split. The violence of the world plays out through polarizing sexual politics that place the character in precarious situations even within her own psyche, so that Blanche becomes removed from herself and removed from connections within her material surroundings, including from significant relationships, namely from her sister, Stella.

III. Queer Language: Madness, Protest, and The Poetic Self

A strong feature of the spinster in Williams is that while the physical space she is able to occupy becomes reduced, the excesses of her being which are displaced, unhoused, and uncontained through a viable, relational connection fly into language. In "Babbling Lunatics: Language and Madness," O'Connor notes the movement in dramas such as *Streetcar* or *Suddenly Last Summer* on behalf of the play's community to silence the marginal figure. While O'Connor does not consider Blanche's homeless displacement, she writes of the female character who is viewed as troubling—particularly as "mad"—within the world of the play largely because she says what the other characters do not want to hear. O'Connor notes how one of Stanley's major frustrations with Blanche in *Streetcar* is that, "Blanche talks too much" (12), and how Blanche's

final exit (one of the most famous scenes in American theatre) is staged to emphasize how Blanche is "effectively silenced and removed from the group….[with] Blanche's dialogue…[leading up to the final moment of the play having] led progressively to this final muteness" (12).[16] O'Connor also discusses the Catherine Holly character in *Suddenly Last Summer*, describing the attempt by Violet Venable within the narrative to silence Catherine because the latter tells the inconveniently true story of her cousin and Venable's son, Sebastian. Venable refuses to witness the story as it is related to Sebastian's homosexuality, and O'Connor reasons that within the world of the play, "the only option for those who deny…truth is to proclaim the teller [of the…story] mad" (15). O'Connor argues that Blanche's "telling the truth leads to her downfall" (14), and that this theme of the inconvenient truth being dismissed as madness recurs in Williams (14-16). "As these plays illustrate," O'Connor states, "honest expression threatens those who reveal what they consider the truth [*i.e*., the "mad" truth-teller character's safety is jeopardized by her speaking], when that expression affronts the members of society who are considered normal" (18). One of O'Connor's questions of Williams's characterization is: "can madness be expressed through a language governed by principles of reason?" (22). Her answer is that the affected or exaggerated language in the play, and even the halted speech or limited or dwindling dialogue of a character is Williams's indication of "character instability" or "mental incapacities" (23), and O'Connor theorizes something of Williams's relationship in the work to madness, especially as he questions its designation. O'Conner says that through his use of language related to the so-called "mad" female character, "Williams demonstrates his conviction that American society seeks to silence those who shock

[16] See Chapter Four of this dissertation for a complete discussion regarding narrative identity, personal/creative expression, silence, language, art, and the significance of shared narratives, especially related to the plays *Suddenly Last Summer, The Glass Menagerie, Vieux Carré, A Streetcar Named Desire,* and *Orpheus Descending.*

or outrage with stories of the unmentionable" (25). If madness in Williams is a "social category" in O'Connor's words, "highly ambiguous and questionable" (24), maintained to demarcate between what is and what is not acceptable, it is worth further investigating the political tenets of the categories of acceptability as they appear in Williams. Williams's dramas shockingly investigate what compels "madness" for characters who appear or are thought of as mad, besides them merely speaking inconvenient truths. Williams investigates restrictions within the Queer Gothic critique of what breaks vital connection for the spinster character, leaving her, when all else is out of reach and she has been pushed beyond the bounds of safety, with language as her primary recourse for possibly reaching and being reached by the world.

While Williams's characters are as complex, contradictory, and variously reactive as most humans are in life, there is an exceptional pattern whereby he ironically distills complexity to a seeming single point of a character-type to create an Expressionistic symbol related to the political world. The spinster is this type of distillate, a queer character whose dimensions exist in relation to her poetry,[17] which is also the maintenance of her complexity and relative freedom within extreme confinement. In his essay "Person-to-Person," Williams reiterates the words he gave to Val in *Orpheus* in explanation of a character's poetic: "Personal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life" (73). The lyricism can contain a character's contradictory nature without her being left open to moral judgments, such as what are laden in the world of the play against the transgressive, outcast type. For instance, while Blanche obfuscates and manipulates within the narrative world to gain advantage for herself and her sister (whose lives are in jeopardy due partially to the patriarchal family arrangement), Williams justifies Blanche's actions through an appeal to the

[17] See the Introduction for an explanation of how this term is applied to explain Williams's characters' poetic affect.

emotional truth of her being. Williams says that Blanche has "that quality in life which is shadowy. [And he goes on to consider:] Was Blanche a liar? She told many lies in the course of *Streetcar* and yet at heart she was truthful" ("Critics" 77). The spinster is a difficult and wily figure whose heart is honest while her words and actions can appear to be contradictorily or confusingly charged with frustrating chaos. Her troubling nature emphasizes the question of any compassion that may be extended toward her, either within her narrative world or from the audience, for what true test is there in loving a saint? While madness as it appears for the spinster-character in Williams is related to what is perceived as an excessive, odd, or queer (to use the word as it was negatively connoted in Williams's era) use of language, if the spinster is not mad (or is not perceived as mad), then still the character exists strangely related to the other characters, and the oddity appears relative to her expression. The non-conforming spinster expresses herself through non-conformist speech. The liminal spinster character often speaks poetically, narrating in metaphoric code aspects of the unseen and unacknowledged situations that have placed herself and others in danger. When Blanche tells Stanley that the wealthy oil baron, Shep Huntleigh, is coming to rescue her (153), the audience understands that Blanche is sadly narrating the hollow promise of the male-saviour fantasy. Words are the only protection Blanche has against the isolation that she experiences in her alienating world. Language, poetry, and storytelling are contrasted in Williams with facets of the body, with materiality, with physical security. The more imperilled and isolated the character, the more poetic the speech.

Building on Laing, Ernest Becker psychoanalytically theorizes how one's self is developed relationally, dependent upon various responses to the global gestalt of combined internal and external conditions from birth onward. In *Denial of Death* (1973), Becker describes the relationship between the self and language or the structures of narrativization, with the self's

development derived through a negotiation with the chaos of one's very organismic existence. In Becker's assessment: "the body is a given, the self is achieved" (231). This means that the self in a sense is a narrative project consisting of necessary repressions and a desire and necessity to make one's self up in part through storying efforts (156). Personality (*i.e.*, the aspect of self that one shows to the world) becomes a defensive response to one's environments, or the "vital lie" of character that one can live with (47-66). In Becker's view, the self is a passable container for the chaos of corporeal existence— both the exigencies of the flesh and of the relational field housing or influencing the body, including the family network of relationships. Through the spinster-character, Williams narrates what happens to the achievement of a self when the body is perceived or placed through extreme confinements, leading to a sort of unraveling or disappearance of the character who has been too rigidly coded within to tight a codifying system, which means that she cannot make the necessary adjustments to become acceptable in the political world. On a socio-political level, related to identity as it exists in a social-matrix, Butler makes their claim about alienation: "I may…feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable" (*Gender Trouble* 4). This is Butler's theoretical starting point for re-imagining improved conditions for "livability" (1). Williams's characters might deeply want to experience improved conditions of livablity, but they are often pushed into extreme places and thwarted to the point of near character obliteration. Kolin describes William's dramatization of the progression of Blanche's devolution into madness, or her unravelling on the stage: "Streetcar innovatively presented a theatre of interiority, converting Blanche's fluctuating mental states into stage action. Streetcar staged the disintegration of Blanche's mind and its impact on those around her, including the audience" (*Production* 4). However, while this disintegration is a tragedy, the drama also postulates another possible situation of livability in a queerly Romantic sense. What

remains for the character when all other secure, relational attachments cannot be realized is a language whose force contains at least a potential for connection. However faint and disjointed the potential becomes, it still also proves the significant place in the narrative of poetry as a possible anchor to the body-self in a hostile world that limits most forms of expression.

V. A Poetic Home in the Body: Sex and Spinsters

Superficially, there appears to be a dichotomy in Williams between the spirit and the flesh, or love and sexual desire, and that the spinster—who is so seldom fully at home in the material, but who builds her nest in poetic imagination—exemplifies the split. A close reading of Williams's family dramas reveals Williams's scrutiny of the relationship between the supposed polarities. However, Williams's narratives focus on relational interactions between characters in which no true separation between these dimensions exists. The general Romantic hope for possibility in language is what Williams illuminates related to the spinster character, and the degree to which the surrounding world accepts or rejects the spinster's language determines her material and spiritual/emotional safety as she negotiates her place within the culture of the play. The spinster is a queer character erupting with speech who cannot be contained and who lacks attachment to the narrative symbols of embodiment, such as a secure home, or babies/children, or a safe marital arrangement—all ties in Williams to the world of flesh. The spinster is also the figure who most prominently questions the validity of the system, and her poetically charged speech can be read as Williams's early, queer outcry. In two dramatic situations written years apart, but with similar features and characters, as well as similar questions and resolutions, *Summer and Smoke* and *Night of the Iguana*, Williams writes the spinster's quest for home and the possible power of poetry to mediate the extremes of a vain, loveless, misguided, materially and spiritually alienating world. In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma Winemiller seeks home in a love

union with John Buchanan Jr., the boy next door and her secret love since childhood, with the possible union also representing Alma being at home in her own embodiment, finally at peace with her unashamed sexuality which she has not been able to express as she has properly followed the sexual sanctions imposed through religion. A similar character, Hannah Jelkes from *The Night of the Iguana,* appears to be more settled in her skin than Alma, yet she is literally homeless, having been travelling for twenty-five years with her elderly poet-grandfather, Nonno, protecting him in an effort to support his art as he nears the end of his life, with both of them now in a penniless state (*Iguana* 277-80). Alma and Hannah initially appear as superficially sexless figures who yet stand in the play as symbols of sexual negotiation. While Alma wants to unite with John, she is confused about how to make the wild passage into the erotic domain, since she is trapped between the restrictive world of her father and her own understanding of a poetry of love and the body that she has yet to fully realize. Hannah is not similarly confounded by a sexual love situation. However, Hannah also needs to inhabit her own embodied experience by finding a physical home in the world, along with family-type connections, since she will be completely alone and unhoused after her grandfather dies. The friend she will unite with is the priest, Shannon, a man in spiritual crisis related to his own feelings about sexual intensity. Both Alma and Hannah face the conflict of having to overcome internalized restrictions through grounding their romantic idealism related to their own personal desires. Romantic idealism is scrutinized in each play as it is throughout Williams's canon, in exploration of how relatively removed the idealism is from embodied experience, with Williams's goal here as elsewhere to situate poetry in an integral relationship with the body as a guiding force for being.

The split between poetic affect and the pedantic rules governing the material (and sexual) world, or the distance between poetry and materiality (including embodiment) itself is a primary

danger for a Williams character. Through both the spinster characters of Alma and Hannah, Williams places poetry at the centre of a moderating experience, so that resolution of distances, as it is achieved, is achieved in the poetic spinster-character's body and being. Also in each play, the need to reconcile with the limitations of the father is apparent, as he is the figure presiding over the extremes of a sexless, lovelessly isolating, religious rigidity and a dangerous sexuality also alienating for its lovelessness. In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma is the daughter of the Rector and she is overburdened with the responsibilities of being the caretaker to the rectory in Glorious Hill, Mississippi, in the early twentieth century. Since her mother is unwell and in a childlike state akin to a form of dementia, Alma assumes the roles of stand-in wife to her father and mother to her mother. Comparatively, while Hannah, closer to the mid twentieth-century and travelling outside of the South, is not forced into a situation of strict sexual over-control as Alma is through Alma's religious father, Hannah has subverted her sensual life to care for Nonno, who, like the poet Sebastian from *Suddenly Last Summer*, is a poet of minor output and supposedly minimal consequence. However, his granddaughter Hannah (who is without parents) still waits hopefully beside him as a version of the mother Violet Venable from *Suddenly Last Sumer*, in the role of midwife to her son Sebastian's poetry. Hannah is completely devoted to the delivery of her grandfather Nonno's poem. She is his caretaker in every sense. A major difference is that in *Suddenly,* Violet Venable is emotionally violent and controlling, whereas Hannah is gentle, yet she is herself very rigidly governed by the ideals of art and spiritual beauty. Hannah symbolizes romantic rule, order, propriety, and even extreme, spiritual goodness in the play. She is the painter who in looking closely at people sees "the light of the world" outside herself, which motivates her compassion for others (355). Yet, Hannah is alone in her observations, which are fleeting due to her transient lifestyle. Hannah's passage in the play is to make the close

connection through what she idealizes as the "[b]roken gates between people so they can reach each other" (352) in her friendship with Shannon, in a situation that will allow them each to overcome limitation and find a home in themselves and one another after Nonno dies. Similarly, Alma must reconcile the falseness of her idealism and enter and then express the truth of her feeling, at home in her body, which includes personal, erotic desire for John.

As with most of the spinsters in Williams's canon, both Alma and Hannah have been over-burdened by caregiving responsibilities toward their parent-figures, which has ironically left them in childlike states, with unrealized sexuality and/or unavailable material security. Williams emphasizes that the characters of Alma and Hannah are ideal mother-types who, although they do not have children, are the caretakers of language and the realm of the spiritual, of morality, and of poetry/aesthetics. Alma loves literature, presides over Glorious Hill's book club, and she sings on public occasions in devotion to the Glorious Hill residents. Hannah is a painter who earns a meagre income as a sketch artist to tourists at the places where she and Nonno stop during their travels, but her real role is of guiding her grandfather through his life as he nears its end, especially as he awaits inspiration for his final poem. However, Alma and Hannah's devotion to others and ideals have caused the spinsters to become removed from the fullness of their personal desires, which leaves them alone in their limited experience. Both Alma and Hanna must figuratively become mothers to themselves through claiming their independent desires and come into peace with the archetypal father figure on their way to experiencing self-agency. They must transform their idealism so that it becomes enriched in developments of mature relationships with language and the imagination, along with mature relationships to their bodies and love, possibly including sexuality. This passage of self-devotion is one of growing up, and it is one that many major figures in Williams's family dramas must make, if they are

able, in a process of individuation, so as to not become consumed by the grinding materiality of the world which slots beings into a mere perpetuation of an impersonal sexual order that can be alienating and denies both the life-preserving functions of an aesthetic life along with the varied sensual expressions of erotic desire.

The spinster character in Williams is one who is very challenged in or prevented from making the passage and finding a home. Since her language and sense of meaning are what the other characters usually do not understand or cannot come into sympathy with, these spinsters cannot enter into true, loving relationship, and they also cannot experience full safety within themselves or the world. In "The Sacrificial Stud," Clum presents a pattern in Williams work whereby one male, sexually disruptive "martyr" is triangulated between two female characters, with one female character "mutilated" and the other "healed" (27). Clum reads this pattern as expressing the possibility of a "new sex/gender system" through the male martyr's "relationship to the fugitive women suggesting a liberating possibility" (28). The liberating possibility for Clum refers to the space offered up on the stage, however obliquely, for homosexual expression.[18] Technically, a triangular pattern applies in *Summer and Smoke* and *Night of the Iguana*, as the characters John and Shannon are each triangulated between two women and one woman appears to be sexually strong and the other sexually weak. The triangle here represents

[18] Clum argues that female characters in Williams "voice and define men" and often function to express aspects of homosexuality that Williams did not as feely or overtly portray, as if the female characters are stand-ins for gay characters ("Sacrificial Stud" 28-9). While my work is informed by Clum, and I read Williams's characters as complexly queer and necessarily reflecting aspects of Williams's own personal character and experience, I do not read the spinster characters as standing in for someone or something else, such as Williams's possibly unintegrated self, as Clum suggests. My reading of the female spinster character in Williams is that while she is probably a composite figure inspired by and derived from many sources, her queerness in Williams's family drama is a unique politically and aesthetically occupied position in the work.

the spinster's need to negotiate between extremes—herself and another female/polar opposite (who represents an aspect of the spinster not yet realized), to possibly come into relationship with the male as the third figure in the triangle, but also fully with herself, through a reconciliation both with her unacknowledged aspects and with the male. Poetry and a poetics of the integrated self and body form the basis of this negotiation.

Williams describes Hannah's relative disembodiment when he says that she is "remarkable looking, ethereal, almost ghostly" (266). She exists at a remove from the jungle surroundings and she is tired from having to navigate with her elderly grandfather through challenging terrain. According to her apparent opposite type, the tough and bawdy (and fully embodied) Maxine character from *Iguana,* Hannah and her grandfather appear as "a pair of loonies" (278) in indication of their difference from others. O'Connor characterizes Alma's trouble in the terms she is perceived in by other characters in the play as Alma suffering from "a nervous disorder inherited from her mother" ("Madness," *Encyclopedia* 134). Alma's father calls Alma's outbursts of emotion her "nervous attacks," and they exist as a sign that Alma has not yet integrated her excessive feeling, which remains restricted in her family situation (*Summer* 136). Williams's stage directions explain Alma's emotional difference: "People her own age regard her as quaintly and humorously affected…Her true nature is still hidden, even from herself" (135). However, while their similarly refined manners, sensitive poise, and idiosyncratic use of language causes them to appear out of place in their surroundings, neither Alma or Hannah are dismissed by others as mad. Yet, their virginal devotion to chastity and to spiritual idealism is considered to be neurotic, and the characters themselves must integrate the neurosis by bringing their idealism into full, expressive embodiment. For Alma, this means fully entering her own experience and claiming sexual choice. Hannah's choice is to offer her spiritual awareness to

Shannon in a mutually healing relationship, that assists Shannon in his crisis and allows Hannah to maintain a home through connection. Hannah and Shannon's safety in one another will be aided through their incorporation of the words of Nonno's final poem, completed by Nonno moments before he dies:

> O Courage, could you not as well
>
> Select a second place to dwell,
>
> Not only in that golden tree
>
> But in the frightened heart of me? (*Iguana* 372)

Since initially Alma and Hannah's ideals are misunderstood (even by themselves) as they follow an enforced moral code that is not connected to the fullness of their personal desires, their ultimate passage in each play is to become the poetry that they are the caretakers of.

In *Summer and Smoke*, Williams cites a Williams Blake poem "Never seek to tell thy love…" to represent Alma's wrestling with the errors of overly controlling love and the possibility, through Blake's pragmatic mysticism, of inspired and subtle human connection. Although the other characters in Alma's literature group dismiss Blake as "a mad fanatic" (173), the message of the poem is one that Alma tries to understand—how to balance the privacies of the heart with expressing love, or how to be with her love for John in a true, embodied way. However, Alma is prevented from following Blake's advice. While she is guided by the angel of eternity at the fountain of life, she cannot fully place herself within the limited, corporeal, death-bound, sensual productions of time. Alma has been governed to believe that love means denial of the flesh, of vulgarity, of aggression, and of desire. Williams exaggerates the apparent split between spirit and flesh in seemingly different character types and polarized scenarios in both *Summer and Smoke* and *Night of the Iguana* following the common pattern in his work of

character triangulation. Contrasted with Alma, there is her beloved, John, the doctor's son, himself a doctor, identified with his anatomy chart in an atheistic worship of the biological urgencies of unreflective, corporeal existence, which is also his revelry in sensual delights. John's overdetermining father, with his strict medical edict to control the body, has forced John away from being vulnerable or openly cultivating sensitive emotions. And with John's mother as a potentially softening or nurturing force dead since John's youth, and John having severed himself from an emotion life since watching her die, John does not see the body as a temple for any subtle delight. His drive to free himself from love causes him to rebelliously reject Alma and enter a violently sexual affair with Rosa, a character who appears to be Alma's opposite in that she is uninhibited by the puritanical mores governing marriage. The John character appears similar to the priest Reverend Shannon in *Iguana*, who is an abandoning father figure who feels abandoned by his spiritual father, God (*Iguana* 304). Shannon arrives at Maxine's Costa Verde Hotel in Mexico in search of his friend (an older male, another father figure) whom he discovers is dead. Maxine is the woman contrasting Hannah, a version of Rosa, and is an apparently uninhibited, sensual figure. The question of focus is that of the efficacy of the father, or the meaning of his rigidity or absence in both plays, as the characters inquire into how to best be in/with the erotic body.

Williams rarely presents in these two dramas a similar and slightly sad, but not tragic or pathetic, compromise of the possibility of existing in a state of peaceable or at least tolerable temperance, whereby the conflicting extremes can come into a gentle union in what is not a tragicomedy, but a comedy of the inevitable compromise of the bitter-sweet. Unlike other spinsters of challenging extremity, Alma and Hanna's political environments provide them with enough safety to integrate their excesses, and, guided by Blake, Nonno, and the principles of art,

they each eventually find a place in their bodies and the world. While it initially appears that *Summer and Smoke* and *The Night of the Iguana* are written to emphasize what Williams names as his own personal war between his worse and better angels, fought, as he says, through a "combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in people I write about" ("Facts" 65), the characters in fact resolve any apparent conflict. Ultimately, what Williams decides in these plays is that there is no choice to be made. In fact, the decision to live in extremity is shown in both of these works to be an error. The spinster characters here seek and oddly gain a middle-ground way of relating inside themselves and with others. Like Blanche, they both appeal to a kindness in the world, but unlike Blanche, they find a way to exist without losing the vital parts of themselves. While they transform (and possibly lose) aspects of their idealism, their own softening brings them into closer connection with others. Alternately, John's compromise appears as a sad self-betrayal. Following a guilty, self-reproach, he settles into a married life, but it is not with his beloved, Alma. Instead. John chooses as a wife a supposedly safe, desexualized figure—a member of the society of good manners—so that John can enter the legacy of his father's design. However, while John conforms to the sexual sanctions, he will be sadly missing a vital passion. Contrarily, while although Alma loses John, she finds a compromise in wryly making the mature decision to accept a non-ideal love, but a sensual love of the body that will still be fulfilling. The decision occurs at Moon Lake, the recurring place of sexual terror in Williams, which appears here rarely as a tepid place of sensual satisfaction. In *Iguana*, Hannah's spiritual idealism is transferred to Shannon, the priest in spiritual crisis, in exchange for his friendship and care, which secures for Hannah a place to live. Shannon recovers his faith, which allows him to reclaim his identity as curate, and as a helpful father-type to Hannah in their mutually beneficial relationship. Neither

Alma or Hannah enter marriage. Alma finds a lover and Hannah is able to remain celibate without being seen as neurotic. Neither are the characters forced into madness for their unorthodox choices, and their artistic expression, the poetry of their being, remains intact.

VI. Sexless Sister Spinsters

The liminal spinster character, the character of paradox, margin, and contradiction, is the figure who overturns the applecart of order and makes a general mess in her exposure of the supposed truths which the other characters are bound up by, in denial of, or cannot themselves see or express. She exposes what is wrong with the ossifying dynamics of the political world, and while it may be difficult or uncomfortable to listen to her, she uncovers the relationships between the grotesque or exaggerated character and the codifying hegemony that pretends an authority to define beings as rigid and unchangeable, especially according to any sex or gender designations within the cultural/family structure of the American twentieth-century. The character of the aging spinster, Miss Lucretia Collins from Williams's 1945 one-act play, *Portrait of a Madonna*, often thought of as a prototype for Blanche in *Streetcar,* is such a character. She appears in the mad-spinster form in the midst of her being ousted from her home where she formerly lived with her mother until her mother's death. The dwelling is an urban apartment filled with the tattered relics of a faded, Southern pseudo-aristocracy, mottled with decay from a lifetime of neglect. Lucretia is the elderly, Southern belle, who, as the Porter of her building present to escort Lucretia from the premises says, is on her way to "the state asylum" (91). Lucretia has been wrecked by the infantilizing or female-desexualizing politics of extreme Southern sexual governance (or ironic female objectification and over-sexualization) in which female sexuality is controlled (along with homosexuality and miscegenation) to maintain heteronormative marriage bonds for the sake of capitalist land-title ownership and property

acquisition.[19] Like Alma, Lucretia is the grown daughter of a father who was the Rector at a church in Glorious Hill, Mississippi. Having, as she says, "literally grown up in the shadow of the Episcopalian church" (97), Lucretia's life has been darkened by the shadow to the point that the sunlight burns her as a symbol of her inability to come into the full light of her own complex, embodied existence (99-100). In Neal A. Lester's discussion of the play, he explains a significant, thematic feature of the work: "[*Portrait of a Madonna*] highlights the artificial separation individuals make between spirituality and sexuality, specifically as Christianity and its doctrine of morality lead women to deny themselves pleasures of the flesh" (3). The nature of this denial along with the enforcement of the doctrine are Williams's main considerations as he explores the spinster in a view that does not blame the character for not being able to cast off the sexual strictures, but explains her situation structurally as that of a victim who uses her poetry to rebel.

While Dean Shackelford in the Kolins-edited Williams encyclopedia entry reads *Portrait* as proclaiming "the fragility of the Old South and the inevitable change that threatens it" (280), *Portrait* is one among several excoriating Williams works condemning the insidious political, sexual structure of the Old South, illuminating how damaging that structure is to the individual unable to conform to the demands in a situation that both literally and figuratively leaves her homeless. Lucretia's poverty is partially explained in the words of the Porter who says with pity: "Southern ladies was never brought up to manage finanshul affairs" (91). Lucretia's inability to

[19] See Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation for a discussion of Southern sexual control related to White-supremacist, capitalist projects. Also note: There is a similarity between Lucretia Collins and Faulkner's Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily." The absence of the father in *Portrait* after his extreme control of Lucretia's life places the character in peril in a situation similar to what Miss Emily experiences related to the overdetermining presence and then death of the father. There is a similarity in the characterization of both figures who remain as if children, bound by patriarchy, symbolizing sexual female subjectification or infantilization within the Southern socio-sexual system. This entrapment is suggested by Faulkner when his narrator describes the appearance of Miss Emily's parlour, explaining that "[o]n a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father" as a figure symbolically presiding over Miss Emily's domestic experience (239).

adjust to the world of policed marriage or to produce children in a capitalist system in which progeny count as material success can be viewed as the cause of her madness, not the effect. In Becker's assessment, highly creative beings who are unable to follow a cultural script or who cannot sufficiently integrate or narrate the excesses of existence—those who experience extreme sensitivity and awareness and who cannot repress what one must repress to maintain the "vital lie" of personality that passes for truth in other characters who appear to be sane (or at least better adjusted)—are figures who can experience mental illness or are seen to be mentally ill, except when their creative expression reconciles excess and can effectively serve as an emotional barometer of the era (217-221). In the incident of facing an extreme situation, the character in Williams who cannot and does not make the adequate adjustment refuses to conform in a dramatic, poetic rebellion that appears as madness (*i.e.*, his dramatic form of mental illness). Williams exaggerates Lucretia's entrapment in a Southern girlhood, having her appear in childish curls and a "frilly negligee" (89), with the consequence being her dramatic homelessness. Lucretia's relative disembodiment and full flight into imagination is her last retreat from a world that could not and did not provide her with adequate shelter. Williams writes in *Portrait* the eerie view of what happens when one is severely displaced from others and herself in both Becker and Bachelard's terms, so that her unconsciousness, unhappily housed, spills over in protest against the bonds of constraint.

In *Portrait*, Lucretia's excess is comprised of exiled desires that are not fully integrated by the character. Lucretia's inability to occupy a place as a society "lady" (96), graduating from girlhood into marriage (*i.e.*, the symbol in the Southern culture of fully accomplished and supposedly safe womanhood), become projected fantasies as Lucretia's world is filled with the apparitions of marriage under patriarchal religion. A ghost husband of her former beloved,

Richard, appears for Lucretia as a fantasy figure and a psychotic delusion who Lucretia says impregnated her, as if through immaculate conception, making her a spectre of the Virgin mother (101). The fantasy pregnancy Lucretia indirectly explains to be the product of rape (another fantasy), and this story functions for her as both a symbol of her material sterility and of imaginative fecundity expressing the double-bind of her having been prevented from entering a sexual relationship prior to marriage due to the strict conditions of religion, but then outcast from marriage when she could not make a leap past her training to secure a place. This waking nightmare is Lucretia's extreme metaphor of her expression and rejection of what has led to her isolation, a story she garishly announces to anyone who might be able to read her poetic code. Lucretia Collins's obsession with her fantasy children takes an interesting and comedic form here as Williams parodies an image of a happy family through what will later become the Andy Warhol symbols of 1950s American consumer culture. Instead of the many "no-neck monsters" (*i.e*., Gooper and Mae's children) running around in *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* (*Cat* 163), the obnoxious and snotty inheritors of all the Southern trouble, Lucretia's kids are, as the character Porter explains in the play:

> Campbell soup kids. Them red-tomato-headed kewpie dolls that go with the soup advertisements…[And Lucretia] made a collection of 'em. Filled a big lot of scrapbooks with them paper kiddies an' took 'em down to the Children's Hospitals on Xmas Eve an' Easter Sunday, exactly twicet a year. (92)

The children of Lucretia's scrapbook are contrasted with the six children who her former love interest, Richard, had with his wife, "that Cincinnati girl" (100), in their successful virility of flesh as organized by Southern propriety, which expects women of the early twentieth-century to

enter marriage as virginal children and then perform as womanly sexual objects in the production of children, while also bearing up without breakdown under violent conditions such as rape.

While there is some comedy in Lucretia claiming that she is going to raise her fantasy baby outside "the evil influence of the Christian church" (101), the imagined pregnancy here is a symbol of danger for Lucretia, just as Stella's pregnancy is a sign of danger for Blanche in *Streetcar*, and Lady's pregnancy is a danger for her in *Orpheus*. Pregnancy in Williams is related to fantasy, as it is the symbol of the possibility of an ideal dream realized. However, Williams exposes the fantasy as a dangerous distortion. Maggie pretends a pregnancy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to try to secure her and Brick's home. Lady's second pregnancy is the cause of her extreme joy, after the sadness of losing her first pregnancy along with her beloved. Yet, each time, except in *Cat* which ends ambiguously for Maggie, pregnancy in Williams related to a sexually transgressive female character is a major event precipitating the character's downfall. Lady is killed for transgressing in love, with the pregnancy having been a sign of her transgression. In *Portrait*, the fantasy rape/pregnancy is evidence of Lucretia's total unravelling and it is also the story she relays to others in her reaching out for help. Even in her despair, Lucretia attempts to legitimize herself as a figure of dignity through her having found a viable marriage partner, albeit here an imagined one. Lucretia, who was trained against following her actual feeling in youth and so made no viable connection, now in old age can only attempt to relate to others through the medium of her completely safeguarded and solitary imagination. However, she is so far removed from others in her own relationship with her fantasies that no other figure can get close. When Elevator Boy asks Porter why Lucretia's apartment is in such disarray and why she did not receive assistance for her leaking plumbing, Porter answers: "She wouldn't let no one in" (90). This statement is a characteristic Williams line of the double entendre, poetically charged to

indicate the sad lack of connection for Lucretia. Old, poor, unmarried, and alone, the grotesque spinster Lucretia is in trouble. Forced into acting a pageant of virginal femininity to gain marriage and then shut out at the marriage gate for not overcoming her virginity, an event which led to her extreme isolation in the culture, the only freedom left to Lucretia is her wildly imaginative associations and poetic expression.

The character Lucretia Collins appears as an older version of one member of a sibling pair dichotomy in what will recur in Williams's family drama as the sibling pair. The situation of the sibling pair dichotomy manifests strongly in Williams's 1950 short story, published in the 1954 collection *Hard Candy*, "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin." It is useful to study this story as a microcosm featuring the primary themes that preoccupy Williams throughout his career—the place of art related to feeling and loss, hidden or imperilled queerness, disconnection and isolation in sibling/family relationships, sensuality, madness, death, and the torturously painful difficulty of either not being able to enter or being rejected from the safely sanctioned house of love. The character who eventually becomes the spinster-type appears in the story as the character Rose, here in her childhood state. The narrative most closely resembles the emotional contents of the real-life, dramatic situation between Williams and his older sister of two years, Rose. In the short story "Violin Case," the character Rose who struggles with her adolescent exodus from childhood is contrasted with the narrator, an unnamed version of a very young Williams, who recalls being awakened for the first time as a "monster sensualist" (281), secretly crushing on Rose's music partner, the handsome, capable, adolescent violinist Richard, who accompanies Rose while she plays the piano. In the story, Williams tells a version of what can happen to an excess of feeling when it becomes blocked from expression or cannot find an adequate channel, when, instead of fully and capably entering life, Rose is driven

in a flood of continued anxiety outside of her own body. The narrator explains that while he and his sister both had the "turbulent blood" of their father (272), a figure who is almost totally absent from the narrative, he (*i.e.,* the fictive, young Williams) was the only one of the two who reconciled with his change in childhood, while his sister did not. The narrator explains his negotiation of his own passage:

> it was then…that I began to find life unsatisfactory in explanation of itself and was forced to adopt the method of the artist of not explaining but putting the blocks together in some other way that seems significant to him. Which is a rather fancy way of saying I started writing….(274, ellipsis original)

However, Rose becomes crushed by female expectations placed upon her by her mother and grandmother, as well as by her passionate, confusing, and overwhelming feelings for Richard. Williams is able to watch Rose and Richard through the staircase from the top floor of the house, protected in the development of his feelings by their secrecy, whereas Rose becomes alien in her own home, her feelings on display in an environment where she is trained to walk, speak, and behave in the tightly cultivated ways of the Southern lady, and then on stage at a piano recital where she breaks down under the bell jar.

While Williams (as the character in the story) was able to hide his feelings and spy on Richard from a distance, recording the images that he would eventually use in his art, Rose, who the narrator says was "magically suited to the wild country of childhood" and "might have fled back into the more familiar country…if she had been allowed to" (272) was prevented from a natural growth. The character Rose eventually and sadly disintegrates under the sort of pressure and rules of feminine propriety as what the character Laura experiences from her mother, Amanda, in *The Glass Menagerie*. The goal in both "Violin Case" and *Menagerie* is for the sister

character (Rose/Laura) to earn a solid entry into the pageant of femininity, with the ideal finish as the prize of an eventual, well-appointed marriage. Of course, Amanda's earnest attempt is to ensure that her daughter avoids the destitution she personally faces as a woman whose marriage did not succeed, leaving Amanda unable to fully provide for her children. While much of the force of Amanda's wishes and plans for Laura are based on a fabricated nostalgia which recalls the romance of her own youth as if it could or did lead to her happiness and material success, Amanda also understands how endangered her daughter is if she cannot find a husband. Both "Violin Case" and *Menagerie* fit Williams's queer critique of the violence of the rigidly stratified sex/gender system by demonstrating the tragic circumstance for non-conforming characters.

The short story "Violin Case" opens with Williams naming the location from which he metaphorically watches his sister disappear: "With her advantage of more than two years and the earlier maturity of girls, my sister moved before me into that country of mysterious differences where children grow up" (270). The country of mysterious differences is Rose's adolescence and the literary alteration she experiences there mirrors the changes in the real life of Williams's actual sister Rose, recounted in *Memoirs* as being partially connected to a failed relationship with a boyfriend and to Rose taking an emotional fall after not successfully "coming out" at an "informal" debut during a time when young, Southern girls were expected to participate in debutant balls, their sexual attractiveness on display for the marriage market (117). Williams repeatedly writes against the sort of gendered pressure his sister faced in the sexual system, softening the harshness of his sister's real illness with his own poetry. Williams describes his sister as awkward and shy, and in *Memoirs*, he explains how Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* is created as an image of his sister, who also appears in an earlier version in the short story "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" (121-25). However, Williams says that both works only catch a hint

of his sister, Rose, particularly "her inescapable 'difference' which that old female bobcat Amanda would not believe existed" (125). The bobcat Amanda here is a stand in for Williams's mother Edwina, and the difference is what the sexual system refused to recognize or respect in his sister, Rose. In "Portrait of a Girl," written in 1943 (published in 1948) shortly before *Menagerie* made Williams famous, a sketch of Laura exists of the character living in a dreamy, distant, solitary haze, polishing her glass ornaments and singing sweet, old love-songs in an off-tune key (112). Laura is a character who inhabits a distant world that eventually largely seals her away from others. The territory Rose enters in "Violin Case" is also a solitary one, and not a place that she returns or emerges from, just as Williams's sister Rose would never return or make a full transition to maturity. Williams writes images throughout his prose and drama of his sister. Rose's fragility and sensitivity, along with her playfulness and imagination as the characteristics Williams said made his sister the wonderful playmate whom he adored, are memorialized in "Violin Case" (274), and elsewhere, as Rose is a figure Williams sought to understand, memorialize, and care for throughout his life and work.

In *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams writes a fictional reflection of the real-life lobotomy of Rose, which occurred in 1943, forced as he believed at the hands of their mother during a psychiatric era when lobotomies were a treatment for the diagnosis for what was then known as dementia praecox (*i.e.*, contemporarily called "schizophrenia"). The event occurred soon after Rose had been transferred to live at the State Asylum in 1937, during a period when Williams was away studying playwrighting at the University of Iowa. In the play *Suddenly Last Summer*, the threat of lobotomy exists in an effort to silence the character Catherine Holly, who tells an unfavourable story of unsanctioned sexuality, and Williams often recalls in *Memoirs* Rose's hilarious and poetically symbolic, but often inappropriate speech (243-44). In *Memoirs*, Williams

candidly discusses Rose, the woman he calls the source of greatest anguish in his life, while also saying when referencing his care for his sister by ensuring that she had a good home: "This is probably the best thing I've done with my life, besides a few bits of work" (127). In *Memoirs*, Williams cites his sister in her expression of a theme that recurs in his art: "You must never make fun of insanity….It's worse than death" (121). Williams speaks of his sister, who, throughout her life, even into her old age, he affectionately calls "Miss Rose," devoting his last word to her in *Memoirs* in acknowledging his respect for her due to what he calls "the gallantry with which [her] surviving experiences are survived with grace" (*Memoirs* 252). The difficulty for Rose of her mental illness and unfortunate treatment, what Williams calls "a tragically mistaken procedure" (*Memoirs* 251), created a lifelong sorrow for Williams. The events also influenced Williams's compassion for the vulnerable characters in his work, as indicated by the final gracious note that Williams gives to Blanche in *Streetcar* and his strong, general stance toward the gravely injured people of the world. While the sister in "Violin Case" is bound to become a spinster forced into silence, and the character Richard's early, silencing death from pneumonia is startlingly announced through a brief mention in the last few lines of the story, Williams gives the rest of the spinsters in his canon versions of his poetic voice, in various loud and queer disruptions of the injuring sexual system.

A disturbingly vocal and humorously affected version of the mad sister-spinster type appears as the complex character Blanche in *Streetcar.*[20] Poignantly, the exploration of safety for

[20] While Blanche is not typically read as a queer character, in the revision of *Streetcar*, *Belle Reprieve*, written and produced in 1991 by New York queer/lesbian theatre company, Split Britches, Blanche is written as a drag queen. The revision explores gay and lesbian sex in Williams's 1940s world. Kolin offers an explanation of *Belle Reprieve* in his "Recasting the Players: Expanding and Radicalizing the *Streetcar* Script" chapter of *Plays in Production*, saying: "*Belle Reprieve* interrogated the political and sexual implications of portraying woman as the object of male desire and man as the indomitable agent of that desire" (121).

the character related to sex and love occurs in this play through the dramatic situation of a sibling-pair dichotomy, in which one sibling, Stella, conforms to the sanctioned, sexual system and the other (in her atypical sexual and relational expressions), Blanche, has not made a successful entry. Although the play is not typically read as being about siblings, Murphy notes an early version of *Streetcar* contains an image of Blanche sitting alone in a chair in the moonlight as this image relates to one of Williams's sister, Rose, pining over lost love (79). Murphy cites Williams in a letter he wrote to Audrey Wood about the early draft of the play, saying: "He wrote that it was 'about two sisters, the remains of a fallen southern family'" (79). Tensions between the conforming and non-conforming sibling pair arise when to maintain her place with her husband, the sibling who fits the system rejects the other who does not. The separation between Stella and Blanche is based on the possibility of Blanche's physical homelessness, as well as her complete emotional exile through what appears as madness, the ultimate consequences of her having been severely injured and rejected at the end of a long trial of injuries and rejections. The queer figure here (represented as Blanche) as elsewhere threatens the marital system under patriarchy, which is everywhere a danger to many characters within the political world, as she is also threatened by the system. O'Connor notes the similarity between Lucretia and Blanche's economic vulnerability (*Dramatizing* 35) as two desperate figures. However, while she is banished in the narrative and removed at the end of the play from the physical world of the family in their attempt to silence her, Williams gives Blanche the powerful language to incriminate the conditions of her torment. Of Blanche's excess of feeling, her sensitive awareness of herself and others, Williams says: "She was a demonic creature, the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain without an escape of madness" (*Memoirs* 235). Yet, while Williams gives Blanche madness, he does not silence her. Her language tells the story

of her suffering and the story of the suffering of the group, although she is misunderstood and dismissed within the play.

The spinster figure implicitly implores the other characters (and by extension, the audience) to listen to her, to come into agreement with her as she attempts to make sense of the world, to restore it to balance, to create in it the justice it lacks. That the other characters cannot or do not listen and cannot and do not follow the spinster as her speech (and therefore her being) seem too divorced from the literal or rough-and-tumble materiality of the environment demanding the compromises that the other characters make in various states of spiritual conformity, compromises that the spinster is not and will not be bound by, constitutes an aspect of the Williams tragedy. Yet, while the spinster may lose the world and pieces of herself in a disembodying split (*i.e*., madness), she gains an ability as the potentially rational governor of the narrative world. Although she may appear and sound mad within the limitations that shun her as a political inconvenience, her voice still resounds spiritually as what O'Connor calls "the emotional-center" of the play (*Dramatizing* 183). While the other characters turn away from Blanche and push her into silence, O'Connor notes that Williams's plays contradict the silencing effect in that "the audience witnesses the release of truth" (18). When, in the penultimate scene of the play, Blanche shouts during her imaginary call to the non-existent operator on the telephone she has picked up in SOS: "In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap!" (160), as she is stranded and about to be ejected by Stanley from the broken-down French Quarter apartment moments before her brother-in-law rapes her, the audience understands that Blanche's entrapment is not figurative. She is caught in a situation from which the only escape becomes madness. If her sister will not listen, then Williams ensures that Blanche's appeal reaches an audience whom he has ideally primed to come into sympathy.

The spinster in Williams is ultimately a moderating character (even in her most extreme manifestations) whose downfall indicates the problem of the social world, and Williams asks his audience to lean in closer as the troubling spinster vocalizes her affected, yet still truthful "cry of the heart" (*Memoirs* 231). The cry, occurring during Blanche's "season of desperation" (*Memoirs* 231), or the mad language of the spinster evidences the Freudian upholding of a sane, poetic logic that has the potential to ideally expand the limits of the supposedly rational (and socially sanctioned) cultural order, bending it toward increased understanding.

Blanche speaks with authority about her own situation and she is wise and articulate about the emotional truths which are not openly discussed by others. Blanche inconveniently breaks the social taboos with her speech, criticizing Stella's home (12) and naming Stella's husband, the violent Stanley, as a brute danger to Stella (33). However, the words of Blanche are incriminated within the play for the ways they do not conform to popular, or consensual forms of truth telling, and for how they threaten the marital order. Blanche initially obfuscates about her age and her sexual history, and she is damned for it by Stanley and Mitch to the extent that they justify sexual and emotional violence against her. Blanche has not followed the rules of courtship, she has not maintained chastity prior to marriage, and her history is filled with events that she strongly believes she must hide. Murphy explains the necessity of Blanche's deceptions as the character acting out the tradition of the genteel Old South, as Blanche knows that she must deceive Mitch enough to get him to marry her, and so she acts the sexual innocent (*The Theatre* 78). While questions of Blanche's sexual improprieties become the focal point for Stanley and Mitch as they weigh whether she is worthy of care and shelter, she is a sexually ambiguous figure throughout the drama. Blanche confesses to Mitch the story of her brief relationships with the soldiers, but the story does not exactly describe acts of erotic fulfillment. The sexual

character of Blanche's notorious former encounters is in fact ambiguous. Blanche explains to Mitch how she reacted to the alienating traumas of her youth: "intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with" (146). Blanche tells the truth of her desperate search: "I think it was panic, just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection" (146). However, when Mitch discovers the missing aspects of Blanche's story that she formerly had not shared with him, he declares that she is "not clean enough" to be cared for, and he will no longer marry her, as does not want her in the house with his mother (150).

Throughout the play, Blanche's language is brilliant in its design and deception, either when she is masking pain, or manipulating a situation to her own or another's advantage by telling "what *ought* to be truth" (145) in her creative efforts to transform or avoid tragedy. When Blanche says to Mitch during the scene of her confession: "I don't want realism. I want magic!" (145), she emphasizes the significance of imagination not as a mask for truth, but as a softer version of the story, an alternative to the visceral pains of her life. This line echoes the lines from Hart Crane's posthumously published poem, "The Broken Tower," which Williams includes as an epigraph to the play:

> And so it was I entered the broken world
>
> To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
>
> An instant in the wind (I know not wither hurled)
>
> But not for long to hold each desperate choice. (17-20)

Crane's poem describes the fleeting necessity of the poet grasping at poetic beauty to make some sense of chaos. The poet questions his own authority, as Blanche is questioned in Stanley's world. However, the poetic authority remains. Also, while Blanche's speech is suspect in Stanley's world, her expression is ultimately more honest than the other characters, whose less

obvious deceptions illicit a sort of immunity which is tragically denied to Blanche, the character who needs it most. Some of the central questions of the play pertain to the various measures given to language. What sort of speech is acceptable and within which context? How can Blanche retain credibility when her poetry is so ardently discredited as lies? Blanche's castigation is largely caused by the unpopularity of her manner and speech, her threat to the order of the world she has entered—the world that will not bear her. Blanche seeks shelter in the poetic fantasies of her imagination where she retains a type of relative control over her psychological fate, trapping the terror within herself in Becker's terms—as he cites Harold Searles, who pioneered mid-twentieth-century psychiatric/psychoanalytic treatment for patients experiencing schizophrenia—as a way to live with the terror (Becker 63), and this difference leads to her becoming outcast from the group.

However, while Blanche retreats into madness (or a dangerous excess of fantasy), the lie that is sanctioned and uninterrogated within the political world of the play is the dangerous lie that Stella must tell herself to remain in her marriage with Stanley. Certainly, Stella is compelled by her love and intense sexual desire for Stanley, indicated when she says to Blanche that there are "things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" (31). Williams means to comment on the "narcotized" (*Streetcar* 70) effects of sexual passion, but he also criticizes the structure of Stella's marital situation. Incentivized by her pregnancy and economically dependent in her marriage, Stella actively chooses against Blanche's safety, and against their loving, sisterly relationship in a willful denial of the truth. When Blanche tells Stella that Stanley raped her, Stella chooses not to believe Blanche, because, as she says to Eunice, "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (165). Since Mitch has abandoned Blanche and will no longer be her hoped for "cleft in

the rock of the world…[to] hide in" (147), Stella is Blanche's only possible shelter. Stella's rationalization is followed by an affirmation from Eunice, Stella's upstairs neighbour and herself a woman in a volatile relationship with her own husband, Steve. Eunice says frankly about Blanche's rape story: "Don't ever believe it. Life has to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep going" (166). Life going on means offering one's self up to another chance hand in a gamble with violence. The poker card-game called Seven Card Stud is one where the men are "at their worst," and Stanley periodically erupts in violent drunkenness in a situation that Stella casually dismisses as Stanley's habit (74). The patriarchal game is one that creates winners and losers in an arbitrary situation of extremely high stakes. Stanley asserts his claim in the family dwelling: "Who do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said—Every man is a King!" And I am the king around here, so don't forget it! (131). While Stanley, who always wins at poker, takes for granted his privileged place in the hierarchy, saying without irony, "[l]uck is believing you are lucky" (163), Blanche clearly understands her precarious place in the brutal world.

In Williams's *Streetcar* world, the various betrayals of love are injurious within the structure of the post-WW II New Orleans society, still governed by the left-over remnants of the Napoleonic Code, by which Stanley makes his proclamation: "what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa" (32). The idea that a "piece of property" (32) would bind Stanley to both Stella and Blanche, were Belle Reve still owned by the family, here raises a question of whether in marriage a figure in this system can be said to belong to one's own self, or what agency exists within such limiting arrangements. Williams repeats the idea of the childlike dependencies created within heteronormative marriage when, after Stella temporarily leaves Stanley following his abuse, he bellows like an unregulated child, repeatedly crying out for his

baby doll: “Stella! My baby doll’s left me!” (65). Stanley shouts into the phone with Eunice: “I want my baby!...I’ll keep on ringin’ until I talk with my baby” (65). On the coarsely sociological level, within the dramatic situation of the play, an aspect of the sanctioned marital system is upheld as Stella chooses her marriage with Stanley over remaining with her sister. However, Williams portrays the conventional marital arrangement as a vulgar, limiting container for complex, emotional needs. Blanche’s sensitivities and extreme vulnerability increase her feelings of terror related to the potential for violence in Stanley’s home, where she is less a visitor and more a prisoner, but this is not her only injury related to the tenets of heteronormativity. The queerness of Allen Grey, Blanche’s lost husband, is what Blanche’s conditioning could not permit her to abide (114). Blanche’s extreme regret over her cruelty toward the person she loved as what she believes caused his death has led to her dissolution: “He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn’t holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn’t know that. I didn’t know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or myself” (114). The dead want to be remembered in *Streetcar*. They call out to Blanche: “Don’t let me go” (22). Although death is the shadow on marriage, by the end of the play, the structure of the marital world ostensibly holds. However, it is emptied of its virtues, just as the contents of Belle Reve were carted off after the property was lost.

The multiple violations in the play, regardless of who is causing the insult— and there are many, as the characters are in a war with one another—tear into any soft place of vulnerability. Vulnerability is what cannot be safely housed in the play. Even Mitch and Stanley as ex-soldiers have been placed as objects of war and work in a stratified patriarchal/capitalist structure of violence that isolates the members of the under-class in both an economic and a sex/gender hierarchy. While Blanche is fierce as she attempts to gain safety for herself and her sister,

including manipulating Mitch to try to gain the supposedly safe harbour of marriage, or in fighting against her bully, Stanley, she is also excruciatingly vulnerable. She arrives in the French Quarter in a fragile, alcoholic state, homeless, without employment or money, and she is in a terror of nervous sickness, while constantly re-living a traumatic memory from her youth. Blanche is in need of care and protection. While Blanche perceives the intensity of Stella's attraction to and love for Stanley, and herself feels drawn by his intense physicality, which seems to hold some promise of protection for the women in the play—with the extreme masculinity he epitomizes being either what is most prized, or most feared in the dramatic world—as the older and wiser sister, Blanche senses the frightening possibility in Stanley's violence that Stella will not acknowledge. When Stanley rapes Blanche during the event of the birth of Stella and Stanley's first child, an event that occurs on Blanche's birthday, the rules of the patriarchal order are forcibly affirmed.

Williams offers Blanche a last attempt (not pictured on the stage) to appeal to Stella, because, as he says in *Memoirs*: "As long as you can communicate with someone who is inclined to sympathy, you retain a chance to be rescued" (204). When Stella does not believe Blanche, Blanche's last chance at being rescued within the world of the family disappears. Blanche retreats into a lonely wilderness of madness in a form of spiritual, emotional, and psychological death. Whatever flicker of humanity remains in the play after the brutal abandonments occurs through the brief exchange between Blanche and the fatherly figure of the gentlemanly psychiatrist—the ideal patriarch whom Williams often searches for in his work. The doctor is gentle toward Blanche when he comes to remove her to the state asylum. Williams allows Blanche her dignity at the end of the play by demonstrating a quiet connection between herself and the psychiatrist, in proof of Williams's primary assertion about the importance of kindness—

what is most lacking in the play and what a brutal world also most needs. In George Toles's "Blanche Dubois and the Kindness of Endings," Toles explains the significance Blanche's poetic resonance at the end of the play: "When Blanche has left the stage, it becomes apparent that her endlessly misjudged form of knowing, in its final absence, appears the be the only thing that is not a hiding place" (para. 45). While love is exiled in the play, the potential exists through poetry/poetic imagination for a recovery from betrayal, for a place to return to through reimagining a more loving response toward the isolated, victim in trouble—a narrative choice that Williams leaves for his audience to make.

A similar situation of betrayal and exile appears for the recurring figure of the homeless spinster-sister character, Carol Cutrere, in Williams's play *Orpheus Descending*. In this dramatic situation of a sibling pair dichotomy, the brother, David Cutrere, represents the restrictive, sexual and marital tradition, and Carol (as the queer figure) represents non-conformity, non-monogamy, miscegenation, and various free expressions of sexuality and love outside of marriage in the racist Two Rivers County of Mississippi. Carol is similar to Blanche in that her unorthodox sexual choices mark her, along with her wild speech and mannerisms, so that she becomes shunned from the county. Carol is a poetic character similar to Val in the drama, which emphasizes their shared difference and the trouble they are in. Carol, who understands the rules of the town, drives through the night to warn Val: "You're in danger here" (66). Yet, Carol is probably celibate during the span of the play (like Blanche, they are two of the least sexual characters at the time of their respective narratives). However, she tells Val of her longing to connect with another, even if only in a limited, sexual way (64), and she is thought to be a sexual deviant within the county. Suspicion surrounding Carol's former relationship with a Black man, and her free spinster-spirit ways cause a great, political inconvenience to the world that will not

examine its contradictions or adjust its violent inhumanity. The Blanche/Carol character is a Cassandra-type figure, pushed into a public silence, in part as a shame-inducing punishment for breaking the sexual rules. The irony in each sibling-pair situation is that the supposed functional, or conforming member of the sibling pair (Stella or David) is only superficially safe. While Stella and David are ostensibly sheltered in marriage, a deep betrayal of love has occurred between the siblings that will now haunt them. While the marriage bond holds for Stella, the world of her marriage is either irrevocably shattered or at least extremely altered. At the end of the *Streetcar*, Blanche is a permanent ghost in the marriage between Stanley and Stella, and there will be no peace for any of them. Stella has just called out to her sister three times, and Stanley is on his knees before her at the end of the play, desperately grasping up at his wife as Stella "sobs with inhuman abandon" (*Streetcar* 179). Whether Stella will completely trust her husband again is in doubt, and whatever innocence existed in their love is altered. Similarly, in *Orpheus Descending*, David's betrayal of his sister symbolizes a betrayal of love. This betrayal follows David's pattern, when prior to banishing Carol, he banishes his deep love for the character, Lady, to conform to the expectations of wealth-maintenance and the standards of his social class. Since Lady is the daughter of an Italian immigrant, and the social hierarchy he was born into will not permit him to marry outside of his class (had he followed his heart and married Lady, whom he is in love with, he probably would himself have been exiled from his social group), he in turn banishes his sister, Carol, who represents a freedom that David could not realize. David chooses against his sister to uphold what he perceives as his fated responsibility as a patriarch within White/heteronormative capitalism, which includes David entering marriage for pure, pragmatic gain at the loss of his emotional integrity.

At the ends of the plays, Blanche and Carol remain homeless, pushed extremely outside of the cultural, family system, with no way back to connection. Blanche is in an asylum and Carol is on the run in her broken-down car, drinking and juking along the highway from joint to joint. Since there is a constant air of reckless danger around her, it is easy to imagine Carol dying young, possibly in a car accident. However, Stella, David, and Stanley (the latter who, while not betraying a sibling, betrays his love for Stella, much as David betrayed his love for Lady), while all remaining housed in the system are no longer secure within themselves or their relationships. Each character is now displaced, in exile from whatever shelter had formerly protected them—denial, status, wealth, even the exciting "colored lights" of sexuality. Remorse seems now to be their only recourse to balance the hurts they have caused to their loved ones, and the pain of every character is excruciating for an audience to witness. There is no relish in the supposedly better adjusted characters being forced to face the tragic consequences of their action of betraying love in maintenance of a social structure. Williams does not write revenge fantasies. However, Williams's loving appeal to his audience for sensitivity and kindness in light of human weakness remains at the end of these plays.

VII. In Search of The Father and Forgiveness

In two significant family dramas, a work from the middle of Williams's career, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A House Not Meant to Stand: A Gothic Comedy,* the last major work produced in Williams's lifetime (opening first in 1981 and then revised in 1982, nine months before Williams died), the desire for the blessings of the father results in Williams giving up. Big Daddy's quest in *Cat* to secure a place in the capitalist world, the "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile" (112), which he also woefully admits to his son Brick is no guarantee of fortune (*Cat* 83-91), an acquisition that must be maintained through

heteronormative marriage and the production of children who follow the cultural script, ends with the father Cornelius Coffin in *House* losing everything, but retaining his wit and a benign place as the innocuous materialist. Cornelius is a character largely dismissed as being beyond reproach, ornery, and pathetic as he attempts to escape the pains of aging, but he is still given the best and funniest lines of the play. However, what begins with a desperate appeal in *Cat* to Big Daddy for love, acceptance, and forgiveness for queerness ends with a letting go in Cornelius. Permission from the father is no longer necessary and a request will no longer be made, since he is in no position to grant a benediction and is himself is in need of love, acceptance, and forgiveness—which Williams graciously, however wryly grants. Forty years after her favourable review of *Menagerie* facilitated Williams becoming one of the most beloved playwrights of the American twentieth-century, Claudia Cassidy said while reviewing the premiere of *A House Not Meant to Stand*:

> *A House Not Meant to Stand…*is Tennessee Williams' Southern gothic and it is shrewd as well as bitter, often sharp, acridly funny as well as sad…[It involves] a rotting house…on the edge of an abyss, a kind of metaphor for the human condition inside…mysterious, grotesque and desolate but whoever said that theatre is none of those things? There is [also] here the acute compassion Tennessee Williams has always had for the victims of the world we live in. (qtd. by Thomas Keith xvi)

In both plays, Williams imagines versions of a reconciliation with his own father, "The Man in the Overstuffed Armchair," a peace that Williams could not realize outside of fiction. The peace arrives through the acceptance of sexual ambiguity (queerness) and in realizing a freedom in and of love-relationships ungoverned by the strict patriarchal code that so governed Williams's father as a form of violence which his father, Cornelius, then repeated in Williams's family home.

Within both plays, Williams considers adjustments to heteronormative hegemony as expressions of justice related to love.

When discussing the strongly male-coded and beautiful character Brick Pollitt in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams defends Brick's sexual ambiguity. One of the main questions in the play pertains to the relationship between Brick and his best friend and football partner, Skipper, concerning the type of love between them. Williams says that Brick's "sexual adjustment was, and must always remain, a heterosexual one" ("Critics" 76). Brick's "adjustment" is in part a confinement within compulsory heteronormativity, and that the eroticism in the love relationship which Brick maintained with Skipper creates a tension for Brick that he feels he must hide (in part through addiction) and shamefully keep from his father, despite Big Daddy himself being ambiguously sexually coded, is written as an essential injury to love. Williams writes that Brick's "sexual nature was not innately 'normal,'" placing normal in quotation marks prior to a time when a discussion on relational queerness had entered wide, public discourse ("Critics" 76). Williams clarifies that it is the friendship between Brick and Skipper, with its tenderness and intimacy—a situation that Brick does not experience with his wife, Maggie—that Brick mostly grieves after Skipper's death to suicide, which occurs related to Skipper's transgressive love for Brick ("Critics" 77). The grief is compounded in the play by the fact that Brick, having felt unloved by his father, could not care properly for Skipper, which he believes led to Skipper's death. Trapped in shame, Brick cannot openly love his wife, Maggie, or anyone. The conflict in the play pertains to the many incidents of thwarted tenderness.

Maggie's unrequited love for Brick parallels Big Mama's love for Big Daddy, as well as Brick's longing for his father's love. There is also a tension in the play between Brick and his brother, Gooper. While Gooper and his wife Mae are primed to inherit the Kingdom after Big

Daddy dies, Brick's failure to adjust to the terms of marriage, which mirror Big Daddy's failing in his marriage, appear to be what will jeopardize Brick and Maggie's material security. However, both Gooper and Brick's relationships with their father are questioned (meaning that everyone's material security is threatened or uncertain) in a pattern following Big Daddy's uncertainty in himself related to his experience of his own father's early death. While Big Daddy overcame the poverty he was left in after his father's death left him destitute, Big Daddy created an empire filled with stuff, but empty of love, and so also filled with suffering. Love is the outlier in the play, clawing at the window to come inside, clinging to the screen, and yowling its fugitive place. However, Williams writes the possibility into the play of Brick coming to accept himself through accepting his father's acceptance of him, in a rare instance in Williams where a father has a real, persistent gift to offer and he freely gives it (119-128).

The gifts of the father are not in evidence in *A House Not Meant to Stand*, but Williams offers his audience here the gift of comedy as resolution. In an introduction to *House,* Williams explains something of his project related to the main protagonists in the play, Bella and Cornelius, images of his own mother and father, Edwina Dakin and Cornelius Coffin, explaining: "The woman – [is] whom I want you to love – and her husband – [is] whom I want you to understand as much as you are able" (qtd. by Thomas Keith xxi). While the understanding in the play is weary, if comedic, and the three children of the family are either dead, mad/institutionalized, or unemployed and homeless, there is still a sense of a reconciliation offered here, an acceptance. To this end, Saddik says: "Williams's last produced play, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, does end with a hint of peace and renewal" (*Excess* 160). The extreme tension that Williams experienced in his childhood home becomes a tension that is soon to be washed away in the play in a Biblical-type flood threatening the house whose pillars will no

longer hold, but here there is a sense of relief in the possibility of this house's obliteration, which also leaves open the possibility of comedy as a transformative force.

Williams's lifelong exploration of the relationship between sexuality and religion also appears here, with religion no longer existing as the dangerous, delimiting cultural power. The play includes a gay character, Chips, who is dead at the start of the narrative at age 31 from "Terminal –Alcoholism!" (61), which is consistent with the pattern in Williams of several gay characters being dead at the start of the narrative, so that the queer ghost haunts the stage from behind the curtain. However, what earlier appears in other works as religious danger for the sexualized protagonist becomes for the "bawn-again Christian" Stacy (64), the character in the work symbolizing youth, beauty, and sexual vitality, an ecstatic eruption in parody. Stacy, who is engaged to be married to Charlie, the homeless son who appears on the stage and whom his mother Bella continually mistakes as the dead son, Chips, is in a late stage of pregnancy. Her "bawn-again" preaching hits the high note of her speaking in tongues, occurring in what Thomas Keith in his introduction to the play calls a "'holy roller' fit in the second act…[as] a riotous kind of madness" (xviii) that sounds like her expression of orgasm (64-65). Pregnancies that earlier destroyed a female character in Williams are resolved in *House*, as Stacy gets to have unmarried sex and birth her baby in orgasmic bliss. Whereas in earlier dramas, the sexualized figure dies or is maimed as if in a religious rite, religion and sexuality can now co-exist on the stage without a death or mutilation. Rather than religion thwarting sexuality, it is now admitted to be a full, gushing vehicle for sexual expression, and Williams seems more at peace with the sex/religion calamity in an irreverent mockery of structural power.

VIII. Queer Resolution

The questions, for Williams, and what he offers up in his interrogations of power are not mere reactions to limiting binaries in a sexually contested political world. He is not merely attempting redress related to sexual oppression in a right versus wrong, tilt-a-whirl fashion. Williams's drama is concerned with the complexities, the uncertainties, the potential, and the negative capabilities of being, not with reifying definite categories within structural, political hierarchies. Strict, immovable definition is a type of death for Williams, foreclosing on possibility. The family drama of Williams is a sexual drama and a drama of love which strongly centres queerness in its heart. Williams's expressions can cause the savviest queer thinkers to question the limitations of the epithet. "I give them views," Williams says, "but not certainties" ("Critics" 78). Queer framing is related to sex and gender expression, but sexuality is only an aspect of a broader affective experience, which expands queerly in relation to queerness as an identifier. Ideally, "queer" can be a more holistic descriptor of being for those who do not identify with the place they are assigned within what Savran calls the "despotic binarism" of the sex/gender codifying systems (119). Williams fought for a place for queer love and made art to show the world what happens to someone when their love is abandoned, denied, criminalized, or otherwise cut off, castigated, or forced into restrictive spaces. There is no greater injury to a being in a Williams work than for one who cannot realize love within safe parameters. It is uncertain to posterity, and Williams did not clarify whether Brick would have fully partnered with Skipper had the political world of the play permitted it. The open question allows for the relational emphasis to regard the loving connection between the members of the couple, what all the characters in the play long for and suffer to gain.

Queerness as a qualifier includes senses of the ambiguity, the mystery, or utter unknowability of a person, and it permits the elastic alterability of the relational complexities of desire and love more than what a restrictively categorical (and implicitly sexual) definition or sanctioned sexual status asserts. Queer is private, evasive, relatively free and ungovernable, and, according to Sedgwick, the label is probably most apt when a person uses it to describe herself. Of the potential related to the term, Sedgwick says:

> A word so fraught as "queer" is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone's use of "queer" about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else… "Queer" seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only *when attached to the first person*. (*Tendencies* 9)

Sedgwick's definition includes the freedom to define one's own experience, including but not limited to sexual identity. Queerness is a structure of knowing that regards a certain anarchy in relationship and an implicit power to disassemble rigid codifications that would determine how people are allowed to be and love. What is wild (*i.e.*, the private, queer heart) in or for a Williams character or in a Williams play or prose narrative is what ultimately eludes complete definition, it is the thing that cannot be fully contained or explained for Williams, except through a flash of poetic light or a grotesque expression on the stage, or the language poetry. Sedgwick's analysis draws on the sense of possibility inherent in any encounter or prior to any structuring

meaning system or categorical definition of being, relationship, or happening, and this includes possibilities in and of love. Love in Williams is unbounded, either manifesting through desire-based encounters related or not to sexuality in surprising ways, as sexuality signals in multiple and surprising ways in Williams, or through fidelities of expression in poetic language that curiously express multiple facets of desire. Queerness denotes what exists in potential, including possibilities in loving relationships, and the possibility of discovering a safe home.

Several of the spinsters in Williams's canon will not find a stable home, either within themselves or with others, and their queer expression remains misunderstood or threatening. Still, while the characters are pushed into madness, silence, or exile, their poetry remains in-tact for an audience to reflect on as a guide in resurrecting an image of the character who has disintegrated on the stage. The spinster character of the Williams family drama, if she is not safely housed in the material, finds a home in narrative. Her story of herself is her power in her queer avoidance of containment, and she waits for a compassionate response

Chapter Two

Williams's (Sexed) Symbols of Protest: Relational Complexity in Racist America

"Racist dehumanization is not merely symbolic—it delineates the borders of power."

-Ta Nehisi Coates, Forward, *Origin of Others*

I. Racialized Hatred: The Scapegoated, Sexual Body

Among the homeless "fugitive kind" characters in his canon, Tennessee Williams writes on a racialized figure. While Williams rarely focuses on American racism by centring a Black character in the narrative, there is a foundational, political understanding observable from his earliest works about sexual persecution in which the Black figure is illuminated as one of the most hated, feared, objectified, and misunderstood characters in the off-stage, social drama. Several prominent works exploring the political limits on sexuality reference racism as the damaging force challenging free expressions, especially related to characters' desire. Williams writes critically in a flaming interrogation of what James Baldwin, writing during the same mid-twentieth-century period in the moments before the Civil Rights Movement bursts into full effect, calls, "the sexual terror and hostility of American whites" ("Alas" 250). The "sexual terror and hostility," particularly directed toward the Black, male body, is what appears in Williams's record, writing in the terms of Baldwin when the latter says:

> there is probably no greater (or misleading) body of sexual myths in the world today than those which have proliferated around the figure of the American Negro. This means that he is penalized for the guilty imagination of the white people who invest him with their hates and longings, and is the principal target of their sexual paranoia. ("Alas" 252)

Williams exposes the sexual myths, or what can be read as sexual scapegoating for the purpose of social control in his deeply disturbing satires, exaggerating the paranoia in his tragedies and

tragicomedies as products of White, capitalist modes related to the legacy of American slavery. Among other works, in his short stories "Big Black" (1931/32), "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1948), and "Kingdom of Earth" (1954), and then in the later play by the same name, *Kingdom of Earth (The Seven Descendants of Myrtle)* (1968)[21], as well as in *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), Williams dramatizes images of the White American consciousness, which hypocritically denies or sublimates its desires and justifies its hatreds through laws, religion, and other cultural mores that persecute a scapegoat and, among other dehumanizing characteristics, in Williams's vision, is grossly racist.

The Williams works commenting on American racism are discomforting and graphic, bordering on pornographic narratives. They are shocking works filled with images of sado-masochism, cannibalism, immolation, castration, and sexual exaggerations and absurdities that provoke questions about various political relationships within sexuality. For Williams, an over-focus on sexuality generally (or overt sexualization) without acknowledgement of diverse or subtler (including non-sexual) aspects of being related to desire is a type of dehumanizing reduction and a sort of emotional violence that transpires through an ignorant, over-simplification of character, such as what Chinua Achebe says is the limiting effect of stereotypes (qtd. in "Blackface" para. 1). In his political commentary on racialization as an extreme element of social control, including control of the sexual body and being, Williams illuminates reductive stereotypification as a racist practice of human violence. In his assessment of what he calls "American social protest fiction," or (largely White) America's literary response to racism, in works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's nineteenth-century *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Baldwin identifies a problem of well-intended literary renderings of racism that, due to an inability to

[21] See Chapter Three of this dissertation for a complete discussion on race in "Desire and the Black Masseur" and both the short story "Kingdom of Earth" and the play by the same name, *Kingdom of Earth*.

properly imagine Blackness, or to think outside of a hierarchical paradigm of White superiority within Christianity, misread the situation and therefore unconsciously reinforce aspects of racism through reproducing racist tropes ("Protest" 11). Williams consciously plays with the idea of the racist trope related to sexuality by characterizing stereotypes in extremity before complicating them in irreverent, ironic subversion. Prominent Black characters do not appear in Williams's most provocative works as whitewashed, sanitized version of acceptability within White culture, as in other protests narratives. Instead, the characters who at first appear to entirely conform to stereotypes are ironically altered by Williams, opening possibilities within relationships previously either severely sanctioned or otherwise unrealized within a White imagination. Simultaneously, White characters appear as symbols of racist America, offered to an audience unaccustomed to seeing its own bigotry revealed in such shocking terms. Williams's reversals of the audience's expectations regarding how a racialized figure should appear, or what they supposedly deserve, ideally facilitate at least a type of imaginative freedom for Black characters (and other characters similarly ostracized) within an otherwise extremely politically confining situation. The Black characters in Williams's most extreme works are intentionally portrayed in symbolic terms as grotesque caricatures, alongside White characters who are similarly drawn, all within a grotesque parody of religious allegory. The ideal effect is toward obliterating (or gravely skewing, or at least exposing) the supposed righteous (and hypocritical) foundation of the White-supremacist apparatus governing the capitalist politics of the Mississippi Delta in the Jim Crow era. As well within the work, to expose the extent of Southern racial hatred and social control, the political world itself becomes a character of antagonistic persecution and grotesque villainy that, due to the sexualization of the Black figure and perception of Black difference within the world, codes other sexualized characters in terms or degrees of Black sexual

scapegoating. The overt, stylistic exaggerations within Williams's grotesquerie frame his politics of sexuality in a critique of othering and the often violent, existential limits on self and safety related to desire, which began in Williams' early career and remained a consistent consideration in his work.

The racist setting of the political world in focus appears often in Williams as the fictional Two Rivers County and Moon Lake—places which symbolize the Clarksdale, Mississippi of William's birthplace, the area that late in his life Williams called "the country of my childhood" ("The History" 16). In this country as it is dramatized by Williams, sexuality and various sexual situations are the sites of existential demise, or, more rarely, degrees of potential spiritual flourishing and material gain within the relative limits of White, capitalist, patriarchal, and heteronormative Christian puritanism. While a critique of racism was always a part of his writing, it is important to note that Williams cannot and does not attempt to tell the complete story of American Blackness. An inflection of racist ideology as a most extreme manifestation of American hatred, causing (at least) a misrecognition of the full humanity of a character recurs in his work, although Williams seldom writes a Black protagonist. Williams admits the impossibility of writing Blackness in a 1974 interview when he says it would be "presumptuous" for him to "write about the blacks [in a very intimate way]," as he is not familiar enough with Black culture or the complex, interior lives of Black people to fully write Black characters.[22] Instead, Williams writes from an interior position of what Toni Morrison in *Origin of Others* (2017) might call Whiteness's "Configurations of Blackness" (55), in critique of the configurations.[23] The configurations are explorations of what, in his Forward to *Origin of Others*,

[22] As cited by John S. Bak in "*Suddenly Last Supper*: Religious Acts and Race Relations in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire,'" where Bak discusses Williams's interview with Cecil Brown.
[23] See Toni Morrison's *Origin of Others* (2017), "Chapter Four: Configurations of Blackness" pp. 55-74, for a complete discussion of othering in American literature. See *Origin of Others* for a thorough discussion of othering in

Ta-Nehisi Coates calls, "the oldest and most potent form of identity politics in American history—the identity politics of racism" (x). In Williams, problems in or of identity politics are connected, in part, to misunderstandings and fear, or hatred of difference, exaggerated through political ideology and justified through an appeal to restrictive state or religious authority. Williams interrogates the social controls of the sanctioned, Southern order that limit sexuality and various desire-based relationships.[24] Within this order, the only acceptable sexual expression is of the marital, heteronormative, White and Christian type that is supposed to dominate the White-supremacist South for the sake of "social purity," tied to White land ownership and other facets of economic dominance. Non-conforming characters, the unsanctioned, queer and fugitive kind in Williams's world, are controlled to the point of murder, with social control (manifesting as sexual control) of the American caste system as the implicit cause and mode of racial hatred, extending to a general fear and hatred of all types of relatively unbound sexual and relational expression.

In Williams, the extent of sexual hatred, fear, paranoia, and violent control is staged within the setting of an earthly hell, with torturing demons, versions of Hades/the devil, and burning fires that bind free, personal, desire-based relational expressions that can include but are not limited to sexual desire. In several poignant, critical works, desire-based relationships include manifestations of loving, relational connection bringing relief from human loneliness. However, Williams's works also show that this human need is not recognized or honoured within a punishing political system that focuses strictly on sexuality as the most significant

general American culture, especially related to American slavery. See Chapter Three of this dissertation for a more thorough discussion of Williams in relation to Morrison's concept of othering.

[24] See Kolin as he repeatedly appears in this dissertation, especially in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, for his comments on sexuality and race in Williams. See Chapter Three for Savran's comments on race and desire in Williams.

aspect of desire. This degrading limit related to desire occurs in extremity within racism, which, in his earliest iterations of the theme, Williams writes as a type of "blind whiteness" (*Notebooks* 21) for its lack of vision of complex humanity. Whiteness in Williams is often a symbol of character restriction and it often signifies violence. It is significant that the most extreme villain in his canon, and possibly the only character written without subtler dimensions and with no loving or redeeming characteristics (as all other villainous figures in Williams possess, even if in limited forms) is the figure of death in the drama *Orpheus Descending* (1957), Jabe Torrance. Torrance is a racist, political leader and head merchant of the unnamed, southern town, a former leader of the group approximating the KKK in Two Rivers County, and he pointedly symbolizes the capitalist horrors of the political South. Torrance hates and fears difference, and he manifests paranoia and rage related to sexuality to the extent of becoming the murderous purveyor of a fiery hell. In Kolin's comprehensive entry "Race" in *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia* (edited by Kolin in 2004), Kolin says that, "Williams was outraged by racial prejudice and injustice. [And that h]is indignation is dramatically recorded in *Battle of Angels* (1940) [the precursor to *Orpheus Descending*] and continued in *Orpheus Descending* (1957)" (205). Kolin goes on to say that the "most bigoted" characters in *Orpheus Descending* are Torrance and Sheriff Talbot, the latter a figure similar to Torrance as a segregationist lawman who hunts Black men and whose wife is Christian visionary painter/artist going blind. Kolin says also that these two violent, racist characters "are the [characters in the canon] most despised by Williams" (206), and versions of the racist hatred that these characters represent (as an outcropping of the sociopolitical control of sexuality) appear in other works. The problematic situations of segregation and extreme separations and sanctions based on race, or the political situation of self, safety, and love under siege, was one that Williams had personally contemplated since youth.

Being born in Mississippi in 1911 and somewhat sensitized through a close relationship with a racialized figure, Ozzie—Williams's beloved, early-childhood, and Black caregiver, whom New York writer and theatre critic/producer and race commentator, Hilton Als, says provides the model for the sympathetic caretaker Nursie in *Vieux Carré* ("Portrait" para. 3)—and being a highly sensitive, politically critical writer living in a racist, segregated culture, Williams covers the topics of racism and racialization in the Gothic, literary terms which he consistently uses to discuss human violence. In his recent assessment of Williams's early attempts at working out issues of race in "Tennessee Williams Wrestles with Race in Three Unpublished Works," Tom Mitchell notes how Williams grappled with his own indoctrinated racism as a southern child. Mitchell recounts the story of Williams as a child (aged four) calling Ozzie a racial slur and Williams's personal experience of regret over the incident, citing Lyle Leverich (Williams's biographer) for recollection of the shame and guilt that Williams carried for this act for the rest of his life (59-60). That racism was inherent in Williams's southern family of origin was a troubling and significant fact for Williams. In Williams's 1972 *Memoirs*, Williams writes often of his mother's racism, her lifelong fear of "Mexicans" (57), and her fear of Black people and her late-in-life paranoia about her Black maid stealing from her (226). Williams's continuous grappling with the situation of race/racialization as a marker of politically enforced division correlates with the significant love-relationship he had with the woman whom he cites as the most important caregiver of his life, Ozzie, and his loss of their relationship and what he calls the blissful "cabalistic circle of three" which he shared with Ozzie and his sister, Rose (*Memoirs* 11). The sudden and unexpected disappearance of Ozzie and her interrupted communication from the family under unexplained circumstances preceded Williams's family's move north to St. Louis, a city he always hated—events which emphasized the confusing pain of

separation for young Williams (Leverich 43-44, Tischler 24). The loss, a deep, original, emotional wound, severed Williams's loving connection with his mother-figure and echoes of a sense of a similar woundedness resounded throughout his life, as well as is manifest in all his art. Williams writes characters who struggle with loss related to love relationships, often due to extremely restrictive political divisions. These characters are exiled in various states of homelessness and express a longing and sadness in line with Williams's own pain, which he names in *Memoirs* as: "my greatest affliction, which is perhaps the theme of my writings, the affliction of loneliness that follows me like a shadow" (99). Als says that Williams "always remembered Ozzie; [and that] her kindness, a counterpart to his parents' narcissism, deeply influenced his relationship to blackness" ("Portrait" para. 1). Williams references Ozzie on the last page of *Memoirs*, closing his narrative also with reference to the person he cared for most in life, his sister Rose, writing in the troubling and generalizing tone indicative of his time: "Rose is fond of the blacks, as am I, perhaps because of our devotion to our beautiful black nurse Ozzie when we were children in Mississippi" (252). The motif expressed repeatedly in Williams of the longing to connect safely in a loving union, and the conflict that appears as distances that cannot be bridged, are written as variations of the expulsion from the Edenic garden state, and the difficulty or impossibility of return. When loss of the garden is caused by political differences (*i.e.*, racism), the extremes of emotional distance are interrogated by Williams as the highest political injustice and as grave, political injuries to love.

One of the most graphically horrific scenes of injury in Williams is when Torrance, the villain-leader of Two Rivers County and a Hades figure, in a fit of rage toward his wife, Lady, as she is realizing love with the itinerant musician Valentine Xavier (a male character who is

sexually scapegoated similar to how Black, male figures are scapegoated in the South[25]) shoots Lady dead, prior to Valentine being burned to death. The violence occurs on the day of the grand opening of Lady's confectionary, which she built in effigy of the wine garden from her childhood—an idyllic place where she lived with her Italian immigrant father, Papa Romano, who owned and operated the garden on the shore of Moon Lake. In the 1959 Sydney Lumet film adaptation of the play *Orpheus Descending* (called *Fugitive Kind*, with the screenplay written by Williams), Torrance lights the confectionary on fire prior to killing Lady. The blazing hell of the fire kills Valentine and destroys the confectionary. Torrance will not give up his property in the form of his wife or his store. Torrance (who is imminently dying of cancer) would rather kill the couple than have them inherit the store as co-merchant lovers, blissfully presiding over the Edenic garden as a resurrected image of the ability to love and economically thrive in sweet freedom. In both the play and film versions of the narrative, the confectionary is a symbol of love and resurrection, set to open on the Christian holiday of Holy Saturday (*i.e.,* the day before Easter Sunday) and poised as an ideal triumph over "Mr. Death" (*Orpheus* 123). In the play, Valentine is killed by a blowtorch on the day of the confectionary's grand opening, prior to the return to the garden being realized. The blowtorch is a subtle joke, a mockery of the pathetic power of the dying Hades, but it is also a symbol of the horrific 1957 Klansmen era of the play, a

[25] In "Tennessee Williams Wrestles with Race in Three Unpublished Works," Tom Mitchell recalls that Valentine has a Cajun background and claims Native American parentage. Mitchell notes that in early drafts of the play, Val "is suggested to be African American passing as white" (64). What remains in the final draft of the play is Val as an exotic other, a sexualized figure who is hated and controlled for this sexuality in ways similar to how Black figures are hated and controlled in the southern hellscape based on sexuality. When Valentine and Lady fall in love in the play, sexuality between them is deemphasized, although the external focus is on their sex and its implications, which are viewed by Torrance as cheating him out of his property (in the form of his wife, Lady). However, Val initially resents the possibility of being sexualized by Lady (or anyone), since he is renouncing his former 'hustler,' peripatetic lifestyle, as he longs for a chaste, stable, sober, and sedentary existence. Val and Lady's relationship becomes one of love based on mutual respect, care, and understanding—a primary narrative development in the play. Yet, when Val is killed, it is an outreach of sexual control and punishment on behalf of the White, male leaders of the town for him having transgressed the policed sexual order of Two Rivers County. See Chapter Four of this dissertation for a thorough exploration of *Orpheus Descending* related to artistic expression.

fiery, killing torch. The killing fire echoes an earlier event in the narrative, when Torrance as the leader of a group of Klansmembers torched the wine garden of Lady's childhood, killing her father who died trying to save the orchard where couples would drink wine and make love at Moon Lake. Torrance/Hades confesses how he killed Lady's father whom he calls "The Wop": "[The Wop] made a bad mistake, one time, selling liquor to ni**ers" (95-6).[26]"We burned him out," Torrance sneers, "house and orchard and vines" (96). In introducing a 2012 New Directions re-publication of *Orpheus Descending,* Martin Sherman says that the lack of prejudice involved in the loving setting of Papa Romano's wine garden (occurring before the opening scene of the play) as an inciting incident is a significant "act of racial tolerance and [that this act along with] the hatred it sets off…[including torching the wine garden and the consequences are] the central tragedies of the play" (3). Sherman notes that "[r]acism drives the play and ultimately destroys all its decent characters" (3). While Valentine is not a Black figure *per se*, he is killed for appearing to threaten the capitalist, marital system, which aims to keep its property under a particular type of White, patriarchal control even to the extent of homicidal violence. The standard for violent social control in the Klan-run-county manifests its murderous extreme in relation to Black sexuality and existential autonomy, so that all characters' sexual expressions are measured in relation to that standard, since Black difference is perceived as most threatening to the White supremacist political and economic leaders. Figures who appear to the villainous leaders as non-conformist (or extremely different), such as Val and Lady, incite the hatred which Williams explores as the attack on a character's queer freedom to express myriad manifestations of desire, including desire related to loving relationships. While hatred and desire manifest in

[26] The term "ni**ers" as it appears here is my alteration.

many forms in Williams, the stability of the character of the punitive world remains a consistent bind and stultifying or killing force, an extreme political limit on being.

Within the White-supremacist Two Rivers County, which Williams figures as a type of hell, it is clear that Valentine is sexualized and hated by the male, racist leaders of the town for what they perceive to be his corrupting potential, which is a type of freedom he apparently possesses to be unbound sexually and to move and love freely. Val is a peripatetic blues musician and he has lived in cities where he associated with Black blues singers and, therefore, he is associated by the Klansmen with American Blackness, which is their reason to kill him. Williams's provocative political comment in *Orpheus Descending* and elsewhere pertains to the sick and sometime murderous atrocities related to the Southern sexualization of the Black, male body and attending hatred in the Baldwin sense. Characters who appear freely sexual (while not necessarily being sexual) as non-conformist, if not Black, are ostracized as sexually deviant, and persecuted and punished in situations ranging from exile to murder, similar to Black persecution and punishment. Another ostracized character in *Orpheus*, Carol Cutrere, whose "family name is the oldest and most distinguished in the county" (*Orpheus* 18), is an exaggerated urbane bohemian who is shunned and exiled from Two Rivers for her unconventionality. Carol is paid by her wealthy brother to stay away from town and she is unwelcomed by the other members of the town, who suspect and hate her for her associations, which include Black sympathies. Like Val, Carol does not follow the sanctioned sexual order. She is unmarried; she drives, drinks, and jukes; and she is perceived as sexually transgressive largely because she is a political-rights activist with a history of being a "Christ-bitten reformer," who marched in protest against the execution of a Black man convicted of rape in a controversial case (34). When Carol's association with Val is perceived by the townsfolk, her shunning is reinforced. Carol takes her

shape from the Cassandra Whiteside character in the precursor to *Orpheus*, the play that Williams revised most in his life, *Battle of Angels*, which includes strong themes of sexual obsession and paranoia related to difference/miscegenation. Cassandra's car is confiscated and she is exiled from Two Rivers County, turned into "*persona non grata*" as she says, under suspicion of having "improper relations" with a Black man, despite the event not transpiring (*Battle* 97). A mere association with Blackness in the hellscape is cause for White-supremacist persecution, fuelled by sexual paranoia.

The Carol/Cassandra figure, while being sexualized in both versions of the narrative by the male leaders of Two Rivers, is emphasized by Williams as a uniquely non-sexual figure. Val recognises the character for her longing, but he sees in her more a spiritual hunger, which she expresses as a desperate need for human connection, than he perceives her to be a robustly sexual figure. Lady, a character othered as the Italian immigrant's daughter and severely restricted in her associations, is the most strongly sexual character in the play. Lady openly claims and gains satisfaction from her desire for Val. Their relationship of earned loving connection includes sexuality and results in a pregnancy, with the fertility a symbol of the garden resurrected, and Lady pays for this flourishing with her life. In *Battle*, Cassandra tells Lady (known by the character name Myra) about the sanction against female expression: "They've passed a law against passion. Our license has been revoked. We have to give it up or else be ostracized by Memphis society….Whoever has too much passion, we're going to be burned like witches because we know too much" (99). Knowing too much pertains mostly to passionately speaking too much. Sexual knowledge in this context also refers to knowledge of the tenets of sexual persecution and the limiting culture's dangerous obsession with sexual control. Through the transgressive character of Carol/Cassandra, Williams voices the possibility of imaginative

escape from the White, capitalist, patriarchal world of limits. Casandra makes a poetic claim in *Battle* for freedom in being unbound through exile and finding a home on the wind, telling Val, "we belong to the fugitive kind" (97). The fugitive kind who oppose sexual conformity in the segregated South are criminalized, injured, exiled, or killed by the system which depends on scapegoating to justify its illegitimate claims. "Lewd vagrancy" (*Orpheus* 34) is the current, minor charge against Carol, but the charges and sentences vary, and the threat of extreme danger is imminent for all who appear to transgress. The scapegoated, fugitive characters in the Williams dramas prominently featuring racism are either not White (or are not perceived as White), not married, not heterosexual, not monogamous, or they are sexually ambiguous, coded as deviant for having Black sympathy, and automatically generally associated in the narrative world with Blackness—perceived to be antithetical to the preservation of a White sexual domain, which, as an effect of Christian hypocrisy, becomes a sterile, burning hell.

The theme in *Orpheus* of the hellishly violent political interruption to Edenic bliss is similar to the danger imposed on the sexually ostracized character in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), Chance Wayne. Wayne, a Valentine Xavier type, is prevented from fully returning home to his southern, coastal paradise birthplace, St. Cloud, in a reunion with his true love, Heavenly Finley, due to local perceptions of Wayne's sexual corruption and corrupting potential. The event of Wayne's thwarting occurs when Heavenly's father, the racist Governor Boss Finley (the villain in the play who appears similar to Jabe Torrance) and his son Tom Junior, as presiders over segregationist "social purity" projects, perceive Wayne as a threat to the social order. Wayne, who is physically beautiful and whose economic prospects were limited in St. Cloud due to his lower-class status, left town to pursue an acting career, and he has sold his sexuality as a paid companion in foreign cities. In her introduction to *Sweet Bird*, Katherine Weiss says that, during

the 1959 McCarthy/Eisenhower setting of the play, "communists, homosexuals, and people of colour were not tolerated within mainstream America…and [within *Sweet Bird*, Williams exposes the political] intolerance for those who challenged white America by being left-wing, non-hetero-sexual, or non-white" (*Sweet Bird* xxv). The play expresses a revolutionary tone regarding sexual freedom and freedom of expressions of desire related to love in a cutting interrogation of the immoral and unjust restrictions on sexual expression, including Black sexual expression. The play specifically focuses on the hypocrisy of a sex-obsessed culture which denies free expressions of desire (including sexuality) while openly consuming (and hating and hurting) the figures it sexually objectifies. Wayne, as a sexually ambiguous figure, is coded similar to the Jim Willard character in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), the latter a work set partially in Hollywood, exposing the secret shame and corruption of a material, mid-twentieth-century American culture of consumption, obsessed with physical attributes, including images of beauty and sexual allure, which also ironically expects and places extreme limits on expressions of personal desire (including homosexual desire). Williams's comment on the political restrictions on Black sexuality, female sexuality, and (due to his Hollywood connections) also on queer/homosexuality occurs through the Chance Wayne figure. In the play, Boss Finley appeals to his daughter, Heavenly, to maintain an image of "white purity" as a badge for his own political/economic control. Within this control of culture and sexuality in Williams, a poignant limit on love exists. Boss Finley implores his daughter to attend a political rally in his honour dressed in "the stainless white of a virgin" (56) so voters might appreciate his supremacist stance. To prevent the union between Chance and Heavenly after Chance returns home to St. Cloud, which would taint Heavenly's "purity" (and alter the White-supremacist political platform), Wayne is castrated by a mob of KKK-type figures on Easter Sunday. The

mutilation occurs under Boss Finley's auspice, who stands in the play himself as a sexually corrupt symbol of Christian hypocrisy, a man with a not-so-secret mistress towards whom he is violent, while preaching about the importance of female chastity and marriage. In a speech which is Williams's parody of Christian leadership and control (appearing here in an early version of the satirical form and theme which increase during Williams's career and appear most prevalently in his later works), Boss Finley, who sees himself as a Moses figure, pontificates on his justification for the mob and race-based violence (which extends to other types of violence, related to perceptions of desire/sexuality):

> A lot of people approve of taking violent action against corruptors. And on all of them that want to adulterate the pure white blood of the South. Hell, when I was fifteen, I come down barefoot out of the red clay hills as if the Voice of God called me. Which it did, I believe. I firmly believe He called me. And nothing, nobody, nowhere is gonna stop me, never…. (57)

While the play is set in Tiger Tail County in Florida (instead of the usual Two Rivers County of Mississippi), the castration of Wayne is still a symbolic ritual of corrupt, Southern, White power, occurring on the high holy day of Easter Sunday as another of Williams's statements about White-supremacist, Christian hypocrisy, and capitalist patriarchy being the violent limits on a character.

While the protagonists in *Orpheus Descending* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* are White, the reference in the plays to Black sexual persecution is more than oblique. Although Hooper in *Sexual Politics in The Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire over Protest* claims that "racial bigotry is used as a [mere] backdrop to the main events of *Orpheus Descending* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*" in an investigation of personal desire (126), the limits on desire in both plays are

strictly political. Since the focus in *Sweet Bird* is largely on the Wayne figure (who is White), it could seem that racism is not an essential element of the play. In arguing that the racist affect in *Sweet Bird* is peripheral, Hooper states that "the only African American represented in *Sweet Bird of Youth* is Fly, a black waiter who has accepted his position serving whites" (141). Actually, there are two Black figures in the play, although the second Black character, Charles (who is the "manservant" at the Finley manor), also plays a customary and apparently minor role in the Williams play as a romanticized figure who facilitates ease or reduces violence for White characters of an upper class (*Sweet Bird* 51).[27] However, Williams intends this drama to reflect the mid-twentieth-century American political domain with its various limits on love, which strongly includes the tenets of a racially segregated world in which Black men have been placed in servile positions as one means of social and economic control. The castration of Chance Wayne would not have happened inside any configuration besides the inverted Christian world of the racist hellscape. The violent occurrence echoes an earlier event in the narrative of the castration of a Black man, and it is clear that the sexual threat to Wayne is similar to the threat against independent, Black figures, with the foundation of the threat being the intention to maintain an image of White, sexual "purity" (70). Williams writes in *Sweet Bird* and in *Battle*/*Orpheus*, as in others tragic works, with political intent: Racist bigotry and hatred are the causes of sexual hatred, predicated on the terror of difference, and degrees of non-sanctioned sexuality are measured and punished in relation to Black sexual expression for the sake of White-supremacist, territorial control. While a Williams play exploring bigotry could occur without a Chance Wayne character, what happened to Wayne could not occur within a non-bigoted, narrative world. Bigotry drives hate in both plays and the hatred is under thematic

[27] See Chapter Three of this dissertation for a through exploration of this character-type.

investigation for its unjust limit on desire in the Southern situation, with its primary goal of cementing a particular type of Whiteness, and with the limitations based explicitly on extreme codification and political divisions which sever loving connection.

Williams's awareness, which began for him in childhood, was that America persecuted the Black figure as one of the most extremely hated and imperilled characters. This hatred and control, along with hatred and control of women, queer, sensitive, and generally non-conformist people appears in the tragedies through the common narrative device of characters who are most in danger in the work, if not Black, or viewed as the racially ostracized, ethnic-other, having a relationship to Blackness and being perceived in terms similar to the Black scapegoat. This common thematic element is Williams's highlight that White sexual hatred and economic control are at the core of racist hatred. In his introduction to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams says, "I think that hate is a thing, a feeling, that can exist where there is no understanding" (*Sweet Bird* 3). Williams writes to invoke sympathies for ostracized characters, ideally increasing an audience's understanding of the complexity of their desires and constrictions, so that the characters, while expressing sexuality, are not merely objectified in sexual terms. It is important to note that the severing of loving connection, not the loss of sex, is the ultimate dramatic theme in these narratives. Although the villains in the works emphasize sexuality and seek to violently control it, the protagonist characters search for loving relationships which may include sexuality, without sexual desire being the exclusive, most important, or even prior drive. Restrictions in love are always related to sexuality in Williams, since sexuality is the political site so often troubling to loving connection. Love becomes fugitive in a world that cannot understand the myriad connections between sexuality and love, or reconcile human longing for a loving union, and can read union only in terms of sexual limits/transgression, so that, as sex is ostracized, love is

shunned and exiled. The loving intimacy that Williams experienced with Ozzie, alongside his sister, Rose (who was two years older than Williams), provided Williams with a soft, safe, and stable interior nest from earliest memory, with versions of a longing to return to a sense of home, the blissful garden feeling, reflected throughout his fiction and drama.

II. Symbols and Stereotypes: Early Origins and The Troubling, Monstrous Trope

One of the earliest records of Williams crudely working out the themes of racialization and the problems of sexualization, ostracization, and control related to the Black, male body, and emotional distances politically enforced through stereotyping a Black figure—here reduced to a post-slavery work object and a rare instance where Williams centres a Black protagonist—is in the short story, "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll," written circa 1931/32 and published for the first time in the 1985 New Directions publication of Williams's *Collected Stories*. In "Big Black," Williams writes about the effects of racism in the broad, imagistic terms characteristic of his Expressionistic style, in which all the characters are fallen in a shared exile from Eden into a White, capitalist trap. The theme of exile is William's frame in the story for exploring violent social controls and is consistent with Williams's early, socialist stance. In the story "Big Black," the exile occurs in a scorchingly hot White Hell, where a "mad devil" boss presides over a Black work gang building a road in Jackson, Mississippi (26). In most of Williams's work where he explores the concept, he does not reify hell as an afterlife site of Christian condemnation. Williams's hell is a sort of pagan/gnostic horror on earth, a type of worldly purgatory, or a reflection of a terrorizing after-world, and the instance of "Big Black" is an early example of Williams deciding this theme. Hell appears for Williams as a social construction, a place of Christian hypocrisy, the *Kingdom of Earth* from which his scapegoated characters are in some ways better off to escape, since the rules of Kingdom are violently rigged by capitalist White-

supremacy. In this story, an early version of the white supremacist boss figure (*i.e.,* a Torrance/Finley type) also appears as the devil in the hell of "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll." The "white boss," whose face is "fiery red as if he had just been dipped into a tub of blood," is a brutal, drunken, beastly man with a whip who has murdered a former Black worker with impunity (26). "Big Black" is a difficult story to read, and it can be troubling to defend, especially because its eponymous character does not initially appear to be written as a fully human figure. However, what is apparently lacking in Big Black is a bearing of the political world's lack of recognition. Williams writes the character so that he will initially be misunderstood, with misunderstanding being the image Williams intends to reflect back to his audience. Williams offers the stereotype, and then complicates it to shock his audience into questioning their assumptions about the desires of the character and his political place in the hellish state.

Initially, the character appears to entirely fit a stereotype of a frightening Black figure. "Ole Big Black," as he is called by his work fellows, is described as a muscular giant, "prodigiously ugly," who "gorged work as though he were famished for it" (27). Yet, Big Black rather than fitting a mass type is an individual isolated within the post-slavery, capitalist system, separated from others and alienated without shared affinities. Big Black does not join the others after work when they return to their homes and families. He is thought of as unpopular among the group for being "too strange, savage, [and] inarticulate" to participate in communal life (27). The ostracization of Big Black and his singularity are clues to a hidden difference in a subtle complication of the stereotype, ideally revealing an ignored aspect of the potential freedom and autonomy of the character to the audience, along with an image of what injures freedom. Although the White devil boss, the truly monstrous figure in the text, is allowed a return to

comfort after passing out in the "shadowed weedy ditch," then vomiting and dragging himself back to the road on his way to a "big Irish supper…[and] a big Irish woman on a brass bed" (28), Big Black is completely alone. Typical of Williams's cultural critique, the dramatic contents which Saddik says refer to "the brutality of human nature stripped of cultural artifice" (*Travelling Companion* xiv-xv), or a revelation of the limitations of artifice, the stakes of human interactions in this story are largely reduced to the harshly limbic, or crude, emotionally and physically violent, and unconscious forms which transpire like a war within the psyche and experience of the protagonist. Big Black is denied any pleasure from culture (including language), or the society of others. Instead, Big Black, the supposedly pure worker, mindlessly trudges alone after his shift toward a shaded pond to escape the hellish heat.

The character Big Black appears symbolically, as many characters do in Williams. He is the grotesque Black worker next to the correlating grotesque White devil boss, in an allegorical world contained by religious auspices, symbolizing the American cultural nightmare of slavery and its legacy in the capitalist, Jim-Crow era-South. There is a similarity in this work to Eugene O'Neill's 1922 Expressionistic play, *The Hairy Ape*, another investigation of the political restrictions of class in early twentieth-century America. There is evidence that Williams as a young writer was reading O'Neill while studying at Missouri (Williams's place when he wrote "Big Black") and several critics cite O'Neill's influence in Williams's work.[28] In O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, an encounter between an upper, middle-class White woman, Mildred, the daughter of the president of the Steel Trust company, who epitomizes the "extreme wealth" (51) built on the backs of the American underclass, becomes the violent undoing of the character, Yank, who

[28] See *Notebooks*, pp. 20, 120, 304-5. Also, Katherine Weiss cites Philip C. Kolin for his comment on the influence of O'Neill in several Williams works, including *Streetcar*, *Kingdom of Earth*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*—the latter sharing with O'Neill a similar boss character to what appears in O'Neill's play *Desire Under the Elms*, as two patriarchs who "struggle to maintain power" (Commentary, *Sweet Bird of Youth* xix).

represents a class of wage-slave workers. Yank, the figure of "superior strength" among the men who O'Neill says "should resemble…the appearance of Neanderthal Man" among "[a]ll the civilized white races" represented in the group, is respected by his fellow workers as the "most highly developed individual" among the men employed by the steel company (4). The working men first appear by the coal-burner on a cruise-ship on which Mildred is travelling, singing and talking together in "a confused, inchoate uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning—the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage" (3). Yank delights in his rough work and seems impervious to being educated about how to possibly alter his state through learning about his class position, while also coming to hate the upper class, and eventually dying a pathetic death signifying the horrible extent of his dehumanization (92). Prior to his death, Yank is contained in a prison cell for threatening to blow up the steel company, with its bars appearing as those of a monkey cage, so Yank calls the place "the zoo" (63). The implication, of course, is that American industrial capitalism traps figures, represented here as beasts confined in "the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel" (3), where "[t]he ceiling crushes down upon the men's heads" so that they cannot stand (4). The play also references Christian hypocrisy and the hypocrisy of the American Constitution, with the character Long stating the irony: "All men is born free and ekal. That's in the bleedin' Bible, maties" (10). Even Mildred appears limited by her status, bored, listless, and disconnected from the physical world while studying sociology "to discover how the other half lives" (24). While she claims philanthropy in her interest about the underclass, stating, "I would like to help them. I would like to be of some use in the world" (24), the irreconcilable political gap between Mildred and Yank is a terror to both of them, although only Yank dies. While both O'Neill and Williams reference class injustice, there are major differences in the works, as O'Neill's view is a more cynical reflection of a latent, middle-class

fear, with Yank never gaining self-awareness, being a complete symbol of his class position, and appearing as an uncritical animal with purely violent emotions and aggressive tendencies. By contrast, Williams at least attempts to add a humanizing element to his trapped figure, Big Black, alluding to a secret, interior life removed from his supposed class/race status that O'Neill's Yank lacks. Yet, both characters manifest the violence of their social position, and there is an extreme limit on possibility for both characters, whose lives have been determined under capitalism, with their personal will either shunted or distorted.

The emotional violence of objectification in the social system, leading to the further developments of sexual/social control in his later plays, is what Williams begins to explore in "Big Black." Kolin observes that Williams wrote "Big Black" as a "young [student] writer experimenting with his craft" and that while it is an amateur and flawed effort never published in his lifetime, still "[i]ts graphic violence and lurid language look ahead to Williams's later plays" with their more greatly developed, similar themes ("Race Relations" para. 1). Indeed, "Big Black" is an early example of Williams's revelation of the cultural artifice concealing or justifying violence against the individual (with its impact on desire), occurring in a literary grotesquery of twisted religious auspices.[29] The story is also an early example of what David Savran, in his study of sexuality and gender in Williams, names as the "almost constant movement back and forth [in Williams] between the political and the sexual" (80). "Big Black"

[29] In a 2005 panel discussion at the annual Tennessee Williams Scholars Conference, Philip C. Kolin, Jacqueline O'Connor, Brian Parker, and Annette J. Saddik gathered to discuss the grotesque in Williams, particularly representations of the grotesque body, or Williams's masterful "gross physicalization of the body" (7). Various synonyms of the grotesque were discussed, including "ludicrous" and "horrifying" (1). Williams scholar Lynda Dorff's sense of the "outrageous" in Williams was accepted as an excellent synonym for the grotesque in his work (1). Also, O'Connor suggested the grotesque in Williams as "cartoonish" (2) and Saddik related it to Williams's general investigation of "excess" (7); while Kolin compared Williams's use to "surrealism" (3). During the panel, Kolin also noted Williams's first published short story, "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (1928), as a grotesquery and cited several more examples of the grotesque in Williams works (3-4). Kolin summed up the discussion, calling Williams the "Master of the Grotesque" (4). O'Connor, who compares madness in Williams to the grotesque, often as it manifests in Williams through gross physicality, cites Big Black (the character) as a grotesque (4).

is an early example of Williams writing the grotesque body as a representation of the political distortion of a character who becomes (or is viewed as) distorted within a system of extreme socio-political confinement. In "Big Black," Williams describes the distortion through the effect of the character being impacted in the most private and intimate experience of his own being, related to his desire. A significant point here regards the anti-realistic style of the work, which Saddik argues is an avant-garde, Expressionistic form, which, while appearing most prevalently in Williams's later plays, "had always been a part of his artistic philosophy" (*Excess* 4).[30] The anti-realistic, grotesque representation attempted crudely in "Big Black" by a twenty-year-old Williams, and becoming more sophisticated as Williams's writing progresses, is the mode through which Williams interrogates racism in America, with racism tied explicitly to sexuality, capitalist productivity, and anti-miscegenation. Also, this portrayal is an early example of a sexually confined character, consistent with the Gothic mode Williams uses to investigate general fears related to sexuality that appear as representations of what Michel Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* (1978), reads as a consequence of the imposition of violently reductive and capitalist, puritanical controls of the body and self through control of the sexual being.[31]

Consistent with his socialist critique of low-wage, twentieth-century labour in which people are reduced in a White-supremacist, class/race system to sexualized bodies and work objects—which Williams began writing into his dramas during his early-career apprenticeship period with The Mummers, a politically-left theatre company in St. Louis—the artifice of work historically organized through the injustice of slavery is scrutinized in the short-story "Big

[30] In *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, The Crazed, the Queer* (2015), Saddik argues that Williams's themes always centre on a mixture of laughter and horror within degrees of abjection, as in Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, and that Williams's style is expressed in forms of the grotesque and carnivalesque.
[31] See chapters one and four of this dissertation for a more thorough discussion of Foucault's concepts of bound sexuality, related to Williams's explorations of sexual confinement.

Black" for its dehumanizing effects. Kolin notes that "'Big Black' is a shocking, provocative tale that reveals Williams's keen interest in and sympathetic response to racial problems of the day[,]" including objectification and sexualization, segregation, anti-miscegenation, scapegoating, and existential isolation ("Race Relations" para. 1). Class confinement, Williams states in 1937, as a main theme of his early, dramatic work is "the sacrifice of the individual to *social* ends," and this concern is a primary one repeated throughout Williams's canon (*Candles* xxv).[32] Often in *Memoirs*, Williams recalls his disdain for class hierarchy, and his ideas about related injustice appear in several works, beginning with stories such as "Big Black." While the violence of imagining a human reduced to a work symbol (*i.e.*, a slave grossly reduced to a dehumanized status) causes the effect of imagining an *other* whom, in Morrison's view, the imaginer gravely fears, disdains, and must completely control (*Origin* 25-30), in "Big Black" Williams reveals the terrible error of White imagination's assumptions about the Black Other.[33] Williams fills his pages with the worst images of a White supremacist system that appear as rudimentary, Gothic tropes in the text, and can be characterized as a critique of what Morrison would call the products of white ideology, in an early example of his investigation of "literary whiteness" (*Playing* xii), or aspects of the cultural constructions connoting race. The limited interior life Williams offers his character Big Black is the fulcrum of the narrative, crafted by

[32] *Candles to the Sun* (1937) is William's first full length "apprentice" play, produced six years after "Big Black" was written, by the amateur theatre company The Mummers, in St. Louis. Among other things, The Mummers produced socialist works during the interwar period. Williams co-wrote the work as an investigation of intergenerational labour in a family of coal-miners, with, as Jay Smith explains in the Forward to the work, the descent into the coal-mine being a descent into madness for a significant character (xvii).

[33] Toni Morrison's "Romancing Slavery" chapter of *The Origin of Others* (2017) discusses historical, White justifications of the degradations of slavery, through dehumanizing the other within the organized, White supremacist economy (3). Morrison writes of Harriet Beecher Stowe's attempt to romance slavery: "For Stowe, slavery is sexually and romantically sanitized and perfumed" (14). Williams, in the following century, writes a completely anti-romantic view of the effects of slavery in his shocking, violent, and critical works.

Williams within the context of a racist hellscape, and specifically designed to reveal something of the hellscape's horror, including wrong assumptions.

Williams's revelation of Big Black's character beyond him being perceived as a work object and terror figure occurs related to the character's desire, as desire is a highly charged symbol in Williams. Desire in Williams stands for the shameless realization or attempted realization of self, or self-actualization and free emotional expression, especially related to sexuality, friendship, art and creation, or generally to love and joy (*Notebooks* 110). Alternatively, desire is also the symbol in Williams for constrictive social and political dangers, excessive emotion becoming sickness, violence, loss, loneliness, abjection, lack of love, danger, maiming, and death (*Notebooks* 10). Desire related to sexuality is often the mode through which a Williams character becomes dismembered, is forced into exile, goes mad, or is variably killed—several times in his canon related to White-supremacy. For Williams, the possible realization of desire is often presented as a potential way of coming home to one's self and finding a sense of home in the world with and through connection to another within the Edenic garden state. What prevents a realization of the sense of home (or return to the garden) for the character is governed by the political system which controls bodies, including strictly governing sexual expression. Within this governance, which is the hell-realm of "Big Black," the control of difference becomes a site of dehumanization that, for Williams, is the birthplace of human violence. This is because, besides the horrors of physical injury or death, the dehumanizing control can lead to catastrophic self-denial and spiritual erasure—often manifesting in a madness (through extreme isolation) that is worse than death, since it is a form of loneliness that cannot be relieved. Big Black's desire is what gives him life beyond being a mere slave object in a White world. However, that his desire is distorted and manifests as a dangerous monstrosity, in

reflection of how he is perceived and has been cast in the social hell, proves to be the ultimate exile for the character. Big Black is viewed by all as merely "a black beast that had taken a grotesque human form…[who] had no voice but that of a terrible ululating cry," and as such he is not related to by others as a person (28). Instead, he is so greatly feared as other that even the White devil boss will not curse him (28). Big Black's extreme ostracism is the result of a political reduction, in which Black bodies are controlled for the American, capitalist gain, which is implicitly racist. Within this fallen order, or the underworld hell on earth that is Williams's *Kingdom of Earth*, the White Irish boss is of a lowly position, but he still has more ostensible power than Big Black within the social structure. While both characters are confined, Big Black's confinement is worse, for he can gain no relief through communion. Big Black appears similar to O'Neill's Yank, in terms of manifesting aggressive, uncritical, and dangerously violent traits. This Expressionistic characterization is an attempt of Williams to sketch an image of the foundational hatred of difference connected to both Big Black's class and race within the damaging Mississippi atmosphere. Big Black cannot relate to another character except in a form mediated through the violence of political distance, manifesting as actual violence, which ultimately ends in a violent self-perception that cannot be altered since it is forcibly entrenched. This is a distortion that Williams would wish his character to be relieved of, while admitting the difficulty of relief through illuminating the origins of ossifying, racist classification. While Big Black's desire initially appears to entirely conform to the White fear of the Black, sexual, male body, in that what Big Black apparently wants is to have sex with a "delicately beautiful," young, White woman whom he sees bathing naked in the pond (30), Big Black actually wants a connection with something else. This story offers an early account of what will become Williams's ongoing comment on "race mixing" and unjust anti-miscegenation, property, and

other segregationist laws prevalent in the United States until the late twentieth-century. While the reader is initially led to believe that Big Black wants to rape the young woman, and the language is initially leading, suggesting the beginning of an assault, what Big Black is revealed to desire most is not sexual union with the White girl, but union with beauty, of which he believes the White girl to be the ultimate symbol (31). To be one with beauty here would be to become beautiful, which is something Big Black is denied within the political world that casts him as a monster. Big Black's desire to unite with beauty is an aspect of his character veiled through his objectified status as work object and monstrous other. The girl's beauty is written in contrast to the White devil boss, as if the innocence of a cool, green Eden can exist with the fiery hell raging a few steps down the road. However, this possible Edenic place, existing as a precursor to the Moon Lake site repeated in Williams as a symbol of abject loss (and often of murder) related to foiled love unions, becomes a place questioning racist symbols.

In this scene, Williams signals what he will repeat in his canon, that within a racist hellscape, no purity of symbol can or does exist; all images within racism are dangerously manufactured distortions, and even a concept of beauty is tainted or ruined by the violent system of othering classifications. Beauty as it appears to be emblematized by White ideology is actually a danger to the Black character. O'Neill makes a similar comment in *The Hairy Ape*, as Whiteness in his play becomes a dangerous symbol (of wealth rather than of beauty), entrapping and alienating to Yank who is mystified and repelled by its foreignness. Initially, Yank cannot decide whether he loves or hates Mildred, who appears to him as a "white apparition" (36) and is introduced by O'Neill as a shivering, fearful figure, "standing there in a white dress" (35). The moment of their encounter is a surprise to Yank, who has been shouting instructions to his mates shovelling coal into the ship's engines, so that when he notices the arrest of the men who see past

him to Mildred suddenly standing behind him, Yank jumps, expecting an attack, his voice turning into a "snarling, murderous growl" (36). The encounter is also a shock to Mildred, who had been "paralyzed" while listening to Yank as he has been shouting instructions at his crew (36). When Yank springs, animal-like, to face Mildred in his anticipation of assault, her eyes become "stony," and she faints at the mere sight of Yank, "her whole personality crushed, beaten in, collapsed, by the terrific impact of this unknown, abysmal brutality, naked and shameless" (36). The moment is similar to the encounter between Big Black and the White girl at the pond, except Williams raises the stakes and shockingly narrates the encounter as an actual attack, with Big Black "sick with desire," mindlessly swaying as an ecstatic animal with prey and the girl struggling and terrified (30). Mildred's terror response to Yank causes him to feel "insulted in some unknown fashion in the heart of his pride" (37) as the first instance where Yank gains self-consciousness, which he misunderstands. Yank is then confused about his emotions until he settles on contempt for Mildred, asking: "What is she? What's she come from? Who made her? Who give her de noive to look at me like dat?" (48). There is a major character difference between O'Neill and Williams's portrayals of character however, in that Yank decides he wants revenge and to possibly hurt Mildred (by spitting in her eye) for perceiving him as a monster, while Big Black does not wish to hurt the girl at the pond. When, in his first moment of self-consciousness, Big Black realizes his impact on the girl, which has unconsciously manifested as violence, Big Black is horrified by his actions. Big Black's self-horror is Williams's attempt to subvert the stereotype of the Black man as monster by including for the character an element of humanizing sensitivity, however still reduced by his governed status. Both Yank and Big Black cannot see themselves except in the image of how they are perceived by the ruling class, with the

perception becoming extremely dangerous, mostly to the character himself, as the central tragedy of the narrative.

However, Big Black attempts to run from the image, while Yank, who is superficially shameless, succumbs completely to his objectification. In *The Hairy Ape*, after Yank is arrested for threatening to blow up the Steel Trust company, he shouts his limited assessment of the situation to the arresting policeman: "I was born, see?...I was born, get me!" (85). The policeman responds by telling Yank to "[g]o to hell" (86). Yank is so confined in the Manhattan world which he cannot navigate, that the only place left for him is death. In the last scene of the play, Yank dies alone and unrecognized in the appearance of a degraded form of human existence. Having crawled into a barred cage of gorillas at the zoo in a search for kinship, he is killed by an embrace from the caged gorilla, the only type of embrace Yank is afforded by his status (*Hairy Ape* 92). While the messaging is different, Big Black is still imprisoned within himself as an object who, with consciousness, now experiences self-torture. When later reflecting on the event which horrified him, Big Black recalls it as a moment of "Ugliness seizing upon Beauty—Beauty that could never be seized!" (31). The scene of Big Black seizing the girl occurs much as a scene in James Whales' 1931 "Frankenstein" movie adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel, in which the monster accidentally kills the child at the pond and is horrified when he realizes both his dangerous power and that he cannot access what he desires most—communion with another. Big Black can have no human relation except what has been mediated by his social position, so that even his own longing for beauty can only be expressed in limited, aggressive terms, such as what are projected onto a Black figure in the sexually paranoid South. The ironic, narrative shift of Big Black realizing the monstrous nature of the happening of his attempt to possess beauty/the girl, then calling himself a "black devil" and releasing his grip (30), is meant to symbolize Big

Black's sad internalization of the trope of the Black man as a predatory figure. Big Black's sudden awareness of his distorted desire and its potential effect is shocking and painful to him, as Williams guides his audience to understand that the character's intent was not predation. In the final scene of the story, in Georgia on another work gang in an "orgy of labour," a phrase directly indicating the situation of a sexualized body being tied to commerce (a theme that recurs in Williams's work, especially through variations of the figure of the prostitute)[34], Big Black howls his "terrible ululating cry," which might now be recognized as his deeply human cry of despair over his forced isolation (31). Williams concludes his piece on an anguished note to ideally elicit sympathy for the ostracized, isolated character who intends no harm, but is himself ultimately harmed by the system of racial othering.

III. Early Symbols of Supremacist Danger: White, Capitalist, Patriarchal Rape

Another piece of Williams's from a similar period, the so-called apprentice play *Fugitive Kind*, one of Williams's first dramatic works, produced by The Mummers Theatre Co. in St. Louis in 1937 (five to six years after Williams wrote "Big Black"), explores the common, socialist themes as what he will write throughout his career, concerning the political restrictions related to desire and love. Williams exposes the hierarchical system of classification that isolates and injures people who are racially or otherwise dangerously othered and confined within White-supremacist, capitalist, heteronormative, Christian patriarchy. According to Kolin, "Blacks, Hispanics, Italians, and members of other ethnic groups are found throughout Williams's plays and fiction as important symbolic characters…[and, i]n many ways, Williams was a radical in his

[34] The Chance Wayne and Valentine Xavier characters, among several similar others in the canon, such as the former hustler Oliver Winemiller from the 1948 short story "One Arm," are viewed by the hypocritical, political world as bodies to be used for consumption, while simultaneously being degraded, feared, and hated in ways similar to Big Black. This point is emphasized by Williams also giving the characters Wayne, Xavier, and Winemiller hustler backstories.

portrayal of race and civil (human) rights…He was always a champion of the oppressed, of the underdog, the Other" (*Encyclopedia* 204). This radicalism in an early stage of Williams's exploration of vulnerable, homeless characters made fugitive by the ruling order appears in *Fugitive Kind* through an exploration of American criminality (*i.e*., vagrancy, prostitution, and bank-theft) during Depression Era poverty. The merciless cruelty forced through American class injustice appears here in early versions of the fugitive characters who recur in later works, such as in *Battle of Angels* and its descendant, *Orpheus Descending*. Questions of human vulnerability are explored through *Fugitive Kind's* most vulnerable characters: women, immigrants, unemployed/poor people, poets, and Black men, who are the scapegoats of the classist, sexist, and racist economic/cultural system. In *Fugitive Kind*, a man named Abel White terrorizes women by lighting their hair on fire. Abel White targets a woman named Glory, who is the operator of a boarding house, which is the setting of the play. Glory is an Armenian, Jewish orphan, adopted by a Jewish Italian immigrant on the ship they happened to be sailing on together, after Glory's father jumped off the boat, and her mother was previously deceased. Mr. Gwendlebaum (who owns the boarding house) renamed his adopted daughter Glory after the American flag as the ship approached Ellis Island. Glory symbolizes the hope inherent in *what could be*, were the promise of the American dream to be fulfilled. However, for several vulnerable figures, the promise is empty. Glory's love relationship is interrupted when her beloved, Terry, a man who wanted to be a doctor, but was forced into criminality due to poverty, illiteracy, and social isolation (101-02), is hunted and then killed by police. Glory is an early version of the character who appears in *Battle of Angels* as Myra and then later in *Orpheus Descending* as Lady, the wife of the White supremacist economic and political Hades-figure, Jabe Torrance. Like Lady, who is also economically dependent and prevented from becoming

the proprietress of the store she operates, and who also has her love with the othered, fugitive character, Val, interrupted, Glory is deeply constrained due to her ethnicity, her gender, and her class. There are several references in the play to Glory's endangerment related to men from the time of her youth, including an attempted rape when she was a child (94). Williams's theme of many incarnations, that of sexual danger, appears here, as in other works, related to scapegoating and class injustice, as well as racialization and racism.

Whiteness repeatedly appears in Williams as a symbol of sexual danger. Within several works, as Williams explores sexual violence related to segregation, racialization, racism, scapegoating and other tenets of ethnic othering, he also investigates how the socio-political order impacts all vulnerable figures, including women. In the White-supremacist control of sexual bodies as Williams records it, White men of the patriarchal order use rape to control women and they control Black men by falsely accusing them of raping White women. The opening scene of *Fugitive Kind* references the common, Southern situation of the Black figure being wrongly cast as fearful other and monstrous rapist (such as how the figure appears, albeit in a troubling form, in "Big Black") through an oblique mention of the 1931 Scottsboro case. The famous Scottsboro case covering the period of 1931 – 1937 includes the time of Williams writing both "Big Black" and *Fugitive Kind*. The case records the events of the group known as the Scottsboro Boys, who were nine Black teenagers (aged 13-19) convicted and believed by many to have been falsely accused in 1931 of raping two White women on a train in Jackson County, Alabama. The falseness of accusation consideration is based partially on the event of one of the women withdrawing her claim and later testifying on behalf of the defendants, citing racist hegemony as the cause of her accusation. The case led to landmark Supreme Court rulings and altered tenets of Black representation within the law, according to the 14th Amendment of

the American Constitution. The case also drew international attention and national action, with representatives from the American Communist Party's legal defence team and the NAACP vocalizing support of the defendants. In the "Desiring Others" chapter of *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest*, Hooper argues against Kolin's reading in "Tennessee Williams' 'Big Black; A Mississippi Idyll' and Race Relations, 1932" of Big Black as a figure who does not rape, but is inaccurately perceived as a rapist, as inspired by the case of The Scottsboro Boys. Hooper argues that in "Big Black," "Williams is more interested in the compulsive and debilitating effects of desire…than related questions of race and discrimination" (138). In a refutation of Kolin, Hooper says that, "Kolin can only speculate on both the relevance of Scottsboro and any sympathy embedded in Big Black" (138). It is possible that Williams was not influenced by the Scottsboro case when writing "Big Black," although the case generated intense popular, cultural and literary interest, inciting Williams Faulkner, an influence on Williams, to publish letters in support of "The Scottsboro Boys." As well, while the setting of "Big Black" is not explicitly stated to be Alabama, it is still reasonable to assume that Williams was writing an iteration of the theme of false accusation in "Big Black," especially considering he directly references Alabama a few years later when writing *Fugitive Kind*, along with including a lynching reference in the work—a significant feature of the Scottsboro case, as the National Guard was called to Alabama to prevent a lynch-mob of White men from breaking into the prison where the Scottsboro Boys were held. While Kolin does not read the multiple instances of false rape accusations in Williams in support of William's critique of racism, as I do in this chapter (in fact, Kolin does not mention them), his work supports the critique, most strongly in relation to *Baby Doll* and *Kingdom of Earth.*[35]

[35] See Chapter Three of this dissertation for a thorough reading of *Baby Doll* and *Kingdom of Earth*, further incorporating Kolin's criticism. Note: Hooper does not read White supremacy as an overt, dramatic danger in

In the opening scene of *Fugitive Kind*, a group of transient White men rooming at the boarding house chat about their misfortunes, except for the 'good fortune' of evading responsibility for a rape charge and being released from custody when two Black men were "strung…on the same charge nex' day" (8). A shifty character named Texas voices the casualness of the era's sexual scapegoating by joking about the common phenomenon of false rape accusations against Black men when he says: "One nice thing about Alabama is they'll never hang a white man down there as long as there's a ni**ger left in the state" (9).[36] The common phenomenon of the false accusation of rape against a Black man occurs also in "Bottle of Brass," the story derived from "Big Black"; in *Battle of Angels*; and eventually in *Orpheus Descending*, when Carol Cutrere is shunned for marching in support of "that Willie McGee thing" (34).[37] What Williams targets is the error of an American Southern culture that cannot perceive a Black figure beyond terms of violent sexuality. In *Orpheus*, Val carries his "life's companion" (49) of a guitar signed by multiple musicians, including the American Blues singer, Leadbelly, who wrote the famous song called "The Scottsboro Boys," with art being a place to freely speak in the South about racial injustice and sexual persecution—what Williams explores in his drama. There are further implications of the same theme of persecution in *Sweet Bird*, as, along with lynching or another form of murder, castration (*i.e.,* what happens to Chance Wayne, mirroring the castration of the Black scapegoat-figure in the off-stage event) is another

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Williams, or assess the multiple instances of false rape accusations in Williams, or generally consider Williams in relation to James Baldwin's assertion about the White sexual hatred and paranoia related to Black sexuality which recurs in Williams's work, except to mainly claim that the race-focused situations in Williams are incidental in that they do not posit or intend change (Hooper 124-155).

[36] Alteration of quote my own.

[37] Willie McGee was a Black man executed in Mississippi in 1951 for the supposed rape of a White woman. The case was controversial, in that McGee's confession was said to have been coerced. As in the Scottsboro case, the trials of Willie McGee received national attention, the National Guard was again called in to prevent a White lynch-mob from killing McGee, and prominent figures, such as William Faulkner, publicly supported the very high probability of McGee's innocence.

punishment for the charge of rape. In Williams's other and later works, such as in "Desire and the Black Masseur," *Baby Doll*, and *Kingdom of Earth,* a satirical mockery of White fear related to miscegenation occurs. Williams's later comments on racism see him giving the Black figure extreme sexual freedom in grotesque parodies of White fear and control, in contrast to the horror and abjection of "Big Black."[38] In the early stage of his career, however, such as in *Fugitive Kind* or in the prose works never published, including "Big Black" and "Bottle of Brass," Williams is clearly working out the consideration of a Black character perceived as a rapist figure in tragic terms. When Williams writes about rape in relation to Black men, he illuminates the common situation of the cultural justification for killing Black men in the South being a false rape charge. In Williams, when White men rape, the rape overtly occurs as another dangerous limit within patriarchy, injuring to women. In contrast to the repeated mention of false accusations against Black men, two prominent rapes occur in Williams's canon by White figures who exemplify the toxically masculine effects of the Southern, socio-sexual order. The characters Tye from *View Carré* (1977) and Stanley from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are both written as exaggeratedly heteronormative, masculine types, with their rapes of Jane and Blanche respectively appearing in the narratives as the extent of injuring, patriarchal domination. While these men are also confined within capitalism as members of a relatively impoverished underclass, they still have dangerous power over a more vulnerable figure. The rapes have a similar effect in both narratives as the final limit on the women who are previously already extremely confined. Rape is the situation leading to madness for Blanche, and rape is Jane's final sexual experience prior to her death. In Williams, the spiritual poverty of the underworld hell of the Southern setting is repeatedly dangerous to: Black characters, as well as toward women; homosexual characters;

[38] See Chapter Three of this dissertation for an exploration of Williams's investigation of othering/racism through satire.

infirm, poor, poetic or artistic characters; and toward anyone sympathizing with difference. When Williams writes a queer, vulnerable figure of disenfranchisement, he does it in an effort to wrestle control away from that damaging, political order.

IV. Complicated Stereotypes and Complex Desire

Williams exposes the origins and effects of stereotyped scapegoats in his early works such as *Fugitive Kind,* as in his truncated attempt in "Big Black," in early explorations of a castigated character below the surface image, which is consistent with his mode of exploring most characters. The moment of narrative reversal at the pond in "Big Black" is an early effort of Williams to epitomize the situation of confinement for the character Big Black—what will become a constant theme in his work of the misrecognition of a character and revelation of a secret or hidden humanity related to desire not recognized by the limiting, political world, or even initially recognized by the character. However, the moment also appears as an overly simplified metaphor that, while intended to complicate the character in a questioning of a stereotype, does not fully accomplish what Williams will elsewhere and later realize in his writing. As the story does not fully evidence Williams's later narrative sophistication, the character Big Black too closely appears as a stereotype, and the reversal at the end of the story and revelation regarding the complexity of the character's desire are not sufficiently realized to fully humanize the figure, or reduce White fear and paranoia. The situation of a character who appears to want to rape, but is not a rapist, is one that Williams does not revisit after "Big Black," possibly due to the problematic and unresolved narrative implications, and his message of stereotyping/scapegoating is more refined in other and later works. Significant to improvements on the theme, Williams's racialized characters in other works do not appear to have internalized the racist ideas which alter the self-perception of Big Black. They do not refer

to themselves as monsters or as devils as Big Black does, although the world might still perceive them as such. While other Black figures in Williams will still be limited within racism, like all the Williams characters who, on a level exist as victims in their worlds, they also exhibit a measure of power and personal dignity that allows for them to be viewed heroically, if ironically, in the high satire of Williams's later drama. The quietly wrought facet of Big Black's desire can be easily missed or misunderstood in a reading of this character, and Williams's comment, especially in the absence of a consideration of the common features of Williams's style, symbolism, and narrative modes, can also be read here as merely conforming to expectations. In his critique of what he cites as the racist aspects of Williams's work, Bak says that the "Big Black" story's "language…plays upon white fears of the marauding black mass" of the Jim Crow era ("*Suddenly Last* Supper" 136). However, Mitchell admits that, although Williams does "use non-white characters as stereotypical functionaries, [in the three unpublished Williams works under Mitchell's review,] the characters' central placement also shows Williams attempting in various (successful and unsuccessful) ways to challenge the racism of his era" ("Williams Wrestles" 72). "Big Black" is probably a less successful attempt than what Williams realizes in his other works. Yet, while the White fear of the Black, sexual body is represented in "Big Black," and the problem of repeating a racist trope exists here through the situation of it not being adequately established to be viewed in the ironic, textual terms Williams will later improve upon, there is yet a deeper irony in the work than what is usually typically critically appreciated. Williams writes Big Black to conform to White expectations of the character trope precisely to illuminate the absurdity and immorality of the White-supremacist's cultural vision. Although Big Black's intent is not rape, Williams intends to illuminate a common White assumption regarding Black, predatorial intent, and to expose the invalidity and horror of the situation of scapegoating.

Williams's comment about the distortions of desire related to political incursions on the private sanctity of desire appears here, and although Big Black's true longing and alienation can be missed, "Big Black" can still be read, trouble and all, as a narrative prototype for its early iteration of theme and style.

Big Black appears as a lonely character, who, while at the end of the narrative is ideally and possibly slightly better understood by an audience is still dangerously alone, appearing monstrous. Williams's 1930s iteration of the Southern idyll in "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" interrogates the stereotype of the Big Black figure to reveal the corrupt, White, capitalist power's tendency to cast a Black man as a monstrous work-object/other, with no will beyond rapist intent, imagining the figure into an extreme exile from any safe home within a White, Southern world. The situation of Big Black is a horrifying one and the story is intended to shock and horrify in a gothic sense. While it evidences aspects of the themes Williams will later explore, the story does not stand in Williams's canon next to his later, more sophisticated works, and the unresolved narrative elements are problematic. Yet, while the story and character are flawed, "Big Black" portrays the beginnings of an early writerly imagination and a start to what Williams would continue to investigate throughout his career as the fraught relationships within racism. Although "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" was not published in Williams's lifetime, it won an award in the 1932 University of Missouri's Mahan Story Prize Contest, and it inspired another (unpublished) story in the early iterations of the American gothic mythology of Williams, "Bottle of Brass." In "Bottle of Brass," the symbols of the sick, Southern world first appear, and here Williams initially calls cotton "the soft, blind whiteness" (*Notebook*s 21), correlating it with an economic free-market which claims neutrality while being governed by White-supremacist ideals, requiring particular placements of Black men and women (often

violently enforced) to maintain itself in benefit of a ruling class. The relationships between materialism/cotton, sexuality, and racism are developed in other works, such as the film *Baby Doll,* whose screenplay derived from the short story "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton" (1936), written near the time of "Big Black," with "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton" the short story also evolving into the one act play by the same name, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1945)[39]. The sterile hellscape appears in the Mississippi setting of the short play, where "dogs…howl…like demons over the prostrate fields of the Delta" (*27 Wagons Full* 23). Evil in the hellscape as it is first articulated in "Bottle of Brass" (deriving from "Big Black") is the system of Mississippi slavery, which drives the material terms that arbitrate power and threaten a character in Williams's place of exile. The exploration of exile appearing in Williams's earliest works recurs as one of the strongest thematic elements in Williams, through to the end of his career. Of the misguided novels of protest, Baldwin says, the literary aim "becomes something very closely resembling the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence into slavery" ("Protest" 16). Of the misrecognition of the other, and the drive to expel the guilt associated with the violence of historical subjugation (including slavery) that leads to an inadequate protest narrative, Baldwin writes: "[the protest novels] emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, [and] panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" ("Protest" 16). A difference in Williams's protest against American racism is that Williams does not preach or pretend. The Southern sunlight always burns in Williams, and he writes from and into the deep cultural shadows, where the promise of utopia has *never* reached. Williams's American dream is a nightmare from the start.

[39] See Chapter Three of this dissertation for a compete reading of these works.

The shocking explorations of racism infrequently arise as a primary critical discussion on Williams, despite the subject's proliferation throughout his dramatic world, just as the most provocative Williams works are often discreetly tucked behind other volumes on the Williams bookshelf. Williams himself took relief from the fact that his more disturbing works were published in private editions, with limited distribution by his primary publisher, New Directions (*Memoirs* 159). Although Williams was afforded liberties as the Civil Rights discussion in America yielded changes in laws and facilitated wider public expression, he was also pounding at the door of the conversation while it was still largely contained in private settings and shouting about injustice long before it was acceptable for any popular American dramatist to do so. For this, Williams experienced much public censure. What Williams calls the "carriage trade" class ("The History" 23) of the well-heeled Broadway theatre goers—the audience that Williams alternately loved, courted, hoped to educate and connect with or receive sympathy from, and in whom he often felt much disappointment and occasional contempt—did not respond favourably to Williams's more overtly political dramas when they were first produced. Williams's first major play *Battle of Angels* and its much-revised offspring, *Orpheus Descending,* were both cancelled after very short performance runs. In fact, *Orpheus* experienced the shortest run of any of Williams's Broadway works. This crushing event Williams recalls in *Memoirs* when he explains how the New York theatre critics "put [the play] down with a vengeance" (173). Although there is speculation that an over-reliance on symbolism and esoteric references in the plays confused audiences,[40] it is also strongly possible that White America was not prepared to face such stories of its own racism on the popular stage. Mitchell postulates that Williams's

[40] See Robert Bray's entry in Philip C. Kolin's edited *Tennessee Williams*: *A Guide to Research and Performance*, pp. 22-32, for a discussion on various critical responses to the plays' productions at the initial time of their performance.

comments on American racism "were at odds with popular attitudes of his time," and that "[f]or a young writer attempting to get his career going in the period from 1936 to 1944 (the period incorporating *Battle of Angels, Fugitive Kind* and "Big Black"), such themes may have been too risky, and may be part of the reason…[that, notwithstanding the significant narrative problems in "Big Black," some] works were neither published or produced" ("Williams Wrestles" para. 1). In fact, demands were made for *Battle* to be censored when it first appeared in Boston in 1940 (*"*The History*"* 24). Williams cites discomfort with his themes of religion and sexuality as the reasons for the censorship and early closure of *Battle* ("The History" 15-24, *Memoir*s 62). One can also imagine that it is not merely the sexual content of the plays with their religious questions that raised objections, but that the theme of sexuality was also tied to anti-Black racism and Williams's comments on the hypocritical horrors of the segregated South were unwelcome. Yet, always the revolutionary, Williams continued to write to expose and protest against what was infrequently discussed in polite, White, civic circles—that regardless of the actual sexual situations, a Black man's sexual condemnation is assured. Sherman says of *Orpheus* that the play is an "accurate reflection of its time and period" (2). While other popular dramatists of the era commented on class, aside from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), race was not a topic widely explored in popular drama. Williams was unique in specifically tying class and race together along with questions of persecuted sexuality as the effacements of love, making bold, political connections on Broadway stages. Williams's politics extended beyond the stage. He refused to have *Streetcar* performed at theatres which enforced segregation, a move consistent with the protest in his prose and drama against the tenet of the perversely inhumane politics of "social purity." Williams theorizes relational complexity in his drama, articulating the various shapes of the significant relationships between desire and sex; desire and love; sex and fear; fear

and hate; and fear, hatred, and love, along with the specific political manifestations of distortions on the various configurations of human longing. Williams's works exaggerate or distill the social constructions of racialization, racism, and their denials, to bring them into view, so that he can dramatically highlight their absurdities, their contradictions, their dangers, their immorality, and their ultimate failing to define a human being. This failure pertains to the impossibility of totally limiting, destroying, understanding, or even realizing full sympathy or communion with another. For Williams, a political system of othering is the height of failure, especially as it confers definition (or meaning) which seeks to destroy or confine some people to promote the social gain of others—a terrible foundation of racism.

Chapter Three

The Holy Other (Sexed) Symbol and Escape from The Fallen Kingdom: Desire, Death and Liberating Laughter in Williams

"I have a funny heart. Sometimes it seems to thrive on punishment." -Williams, *Memoirs*

"The danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger."
-Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Origin of Others*

I. Satire, Style, and The Holy Other (Sexed) Symbol

In several key works, Williams explores the racialized, cultural imagery of the Jim-Crow-era South as a critique of White power's representations of the exotic other in social America. Works which name the racist fear of difference as the political limit severing connection and alienating characters so that they are homeless wanderers are described by Hilton Als as being characteristically filled with: "Pathos, madness, emotional strain, and [the] naked need [that] shape and pierce his stories about race" ("Portrait" para. 2). Included in the representations are overly sexualized images and images of sexuality paired with violence, as Williams exposes the phenomenon of policing Black and racialized bodies in what Judith Thompson calls "the fallen kingdom of Williams" (2). While several works are serious in tone as Williams explores extreme states of emotional being in a tragic style, a political exploration of othering is also evident in Williams's parodic exaggerations of characters populating the violent hellscape settings of his drama in another stylistic stream of his work—that of high satire. A strong point in Saddik is to read Williams for his humour, especially in his later plays, situating his irreverence within a grotesque style and a form of camp that appears in the work as a comic reversal, turning

everything upside down (*Excess* 38)[41]. While comedic exaggeration is particularly apparent in the late works, Williams's elevation of the low and razing of the high also appears in his early and mid-career works, consistent with recurring Williams themes. In the satires, Williams turns the symbols and setting of his Southern tragedies into *Twelfth Night*-type mockeries of power, tearing up the roots of the systems of political organization and exploding the binaries and hierarchies in episodes of horrific hilarity. In his Forward to *Memoirs,* Williams writes: "Laughter has always been my substitution for lamentation and I laugh as loudly as I would lament if I hadn't discovered a useful substitute for weeping. Usually I laugh longer than I should, as well as more loudly than I should" (xvii). The laughter in Williams's satires is an abrasively loud laughter that exists sometimes instead of, but often alongside, tears in a style that allows Williams to peer into difference with increased Gothic permissibility. Williams's satirical drama can be considered as the drama of difference, in which desire between very polarized characters is a hinge on a door that opens not only onto an increased understanding of self, including an American, cultural identity, but also a questioning and potential obliteration of the restrictions of othering systems.

Reconciliation with difference includes an understanding of the mechanism of the encounter with the other. In her critical work on othering, Morrison asserts that there is no

[41] Saddik's work in *Excess* on reading Williams's so-called later plays (*i.e.,* the plays from 1960 until his death in 1983) in terms of the grotesque and carnivalesque provides a theoretical foundation for reading Williams's camp sensibilities. Saddik reads camp according to Charles Ludlam's Theatre of the Ridiculous ideology (which she says Williams referenced), which defines camp as "a kind of excess," and as "incorporating a sly sense of humour because of its inversions that speak to a particular, usually marginalized social group" (38). Saddik also reads camp according to Susan Sontag, interpreting Sontag as variously referring to camp as too muchness, and love of artifice, or extravagance (38). In *Excess*, Saddik closely reads camp in relation to *Kirche, Kuche, Kinder: An Outrage on the Stage* (1979), calling the work "a dismissal of authority and the dismissal of good taste" (38)—an interpretation which readily extends to other Williams satires. Also, while the late plays are her focus in *Excess*, Saddik also notes that Williams was working with his anti-realistic, Expressionistic and rebellious style as early as *Glass Menagerie* (5).

absolute other. First, there is the fact that beings are bound by individual manifestations of common human needs or desires, so that more similarities are shared between apparently disparate individuals than what political projects of othering will admit. However, also, significantly, Morrison explains the system of projection, in which aspects of one's own unknown face are unconsciously grafted onto other bodies and beings, so that others appear as inadvertent reflections of one's own prejudices, fears, hopes, and desires (*Origin* 38-39). In Morrison's estimation, especially before greater intimacy (developed over time) allows for one's uniqueness to become known in relationship, others often appear largely as one wants to see them. In this system of othering, Morrison argues, the stranger is also ourselves—which is also to say that relief from self-estrangement (with self-estrangement including being lost to what one truly desires) can be realized through an encounter with the other, when suddenly a revelation of a latent desire, or another formerly unrealized aspect of self occurs (*Origin* 38). Attempting to be open to the surprise of difference through a curiosity rather than an assumption about another can ideally facilitate a depth of understanding of someone who is both familiar and alien. The prospect of being able to see beyond one's immediate projections in an encounter with the other, Morrison argues, relies in part on vast exposure to complex imagery which respects varied, individual experience (*Origin* 35-37). Exposure to limited imagery is restrictive in that it increases the probability of misrecognizing the stranger through imagining that one knows what is yet unknown (*Origin* 37). Objectifying the other without a curious openness to the way the other might reveal themself is mutually limiting if all that happens in an encounter is that a static set of expectations are affirmed, instead of what can occur when a relationship between different individuals becomes transformative. To move beyond one's projections to more fully see the other, it is helpful to gain awareness of the mode of objectification and something of the contents

of projection, and this is what Williams reveals in what he calls his theatrical "anarchy" ("Something" 43). The stylistic choice to exaggerate the mechanics of difference through crafting extreme, grotesque, and absurd images brings the othering process into strong relief in Williams's work.

If it initially appears that Williams does not give a character complexity, or a rich interior life, or if one agrees with Harold Bloom when he says that while he "sketches archetypes, caricatures, [and] grotesques, …[Williams] cannot represent inwardness" (Bloom 4), it is not because Williams believes that any model for his drama lacks complexity. Williams distills the essential, emotional elements of situations in his Expressionist work and consistently considers complexity through the pairing of opposite figures and ironic themes in a text. Characters who appear, at least initially, to evince a singular dimension are drawn so in exaggeration, so that between them and their opposite type, a shocking picture of political objectification emerges. The layers of a character's complexity are revealed in relation to the political world the more the political world is exposed for its limiting factors. Characters reduced to objects within the system struggle against their objectification, and this struggle comprises much of the content of the drama, also revealing the depths of characters who stand out in opposition to the political world which codes them in ways that they resist. The nightmare-like images representing a White American fear of what are seen as the attributes of Blackness, or fear of the exotic other, especially related to sexuality, is a strong component of what Williams explores in his interrogation of sexual controls. As Williams centralizes sexuality to expose the racist castings of the Black or racialized figure as among the most hated and feared figure of the Southern cultural landscape, he also reveals an insipid White character and an organized system of debasement. It is not the case for Williams that American Blackness is debased, or even that it can be debased

by Whiteness. Yet, it is true for Williams that all are degraded within a system which organizes itself according to a racist, sexist, capitalist, stratified class, and restrictively religious political structure, predicated on dehumanizing norms and laws that unjustly restrict human relational expressions occurring in relation to sexuality, but also encompassing broader questions and aspects of character.

Williams's commentary on the conditions of racially divided American existence is disconcerting and the crude symbolism in the work is often repulsive. However, a critical reader or audience member must be careful to not misinterpret the symbolism, or equate a Williams critique with his reification of any trope. Whereas in Williams's tragedies, the racialized figure is viewed as a fearful predator and is hated, maimed, ostracized, or killed for his difference, in Williams's satirical works, the racialized figure is portrayed in heroic terms within the fallen and vulgar kingdom, as a sexual god with the ability to mete out extreme punishment or delight. Williams's dramas focus on racism as the violent, political limit relative to desire, with White supremacy painfully inhibiting loving connection and self-realization. Within the satires, desire is fulfilled in ironic inversions of the Puritanical Christian idea of sin, whereby redemption and the Christian promise of relief from suffering occurs through taboo sex. In "Desire and the Black Masseur," the typically hated, racialized figure becomes a holy figure, revered for his ability to offer sexual liberation. In *Kingdom of Earth*, Williams mocks the White supremacists' fear of miscegenation, as the racialized other becomes a sexual god with a giant penis, who pairs with a White goddess with giant, Venus-of-Willendorf-type breasts, and the characters collide to orgasmically inherit the earth. Williams attempts to laugh the White-supremacists into submission in these works in a shockingly bawdy style, evidencing elements of what Saddik says appears overwhelmingly in the later theatre Williams practiced, where he "engag[es] a kind of

laughter that bursts forth through pain to the freedom of exaggeration and excess—the grotesque, the camp, the irreverent" (21). Williams's loud cackle against the void of sexual silence proves his understanding of the transgressive power of speaking about social taboo, explained in Foucault's terms:

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (*History* 6)

Williams's satiric address self-consciously reflects the theme of the impossibility of cultural imagery functioning as a perfect container for or explanation of being, especially as it produces tropes that do not respect the integrity of the figures symbolized in the system, and hides various projections of hatred, fear, or fetishization related to sexuality. The satirical, exaggerated distortion of symbols in the work ironically offers Williams's characters a narrative moment of provocative freedom.

William's Black and racialized characters appear in shocking terms as exaggerations of the worst of the White cultural imagination, and his reflections on racial and sexual stereotyping are consistent with his metanarrative refrain as a critique of American cultural productions of meaning. It is not that Williams intends to or even can completely undo othering, but he intends to reveal and alter the particular framing that casts figures as negative stereotypes in service of extreme social control. Williams's parodic exaggerations of character within violent, dramatic situations in a sexual grotesquerie of pain and delight is a critique of personal and cultural abuses of power, in which he is pointedly aware of what Morrison calls the "American Africanist"

presence—a product of the White imagination's productions of images of Blackness that appear in American literature (*Playing* 5). In Morrison's account, much of the primary record of historical, literary obsessions representing American national identity and at least the record as it existed during Williams' twentieth-century era includes as its thematic focus: "individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics [*i.e.*, no pointed discourse on racism or the history of slavery]; [and] the thematics of innocence coupled with figurations of death and hell" (*Playing* 5). While Williams is the venerating inheritor of a literary history, at the same time he critiques the history through questioning the dominant narrative, and, in his commentary on racism, Williams mocks the historical, cultural account and develops a vision of hell that is explicitly based on racist divisions. Williams speaks to Morrison's concept that ideas of race are necessary to American identity (*Playing* 47), and he considers othering in Morrison's terms when she says that "textual/literary descriptions of race…all have justifications and claims of accuracy in order to sustain dominance" (*Origin* 3). Williams's recrafting of racist images through explosive, sexual situations occurring within a twisted, religious mythos is the narrative stage for his insights into the secrets and sublimations of a predominant American imagination and his parody of any claim to righteous dominance.

II. A Question of Tokenism and Setting the Satirical Stage

There is a critique of tokenism that must be addressed to ensure a thorough exploration of Williams's critical commentary on American racialization. In his sympathetic reading of Williams, Kolin shares his view on the political radicalism of the Southern works in which Williams casts Black characters as heroes: "Williams pushes beyond the stereotype of an otherwise racially marginalized character to express his views about the dignity and status of

blacks in an otherwise patriarchal, racially dichotomous South" (Kolin, "Race" 205). For instance, Kolin reads the Black porter character in Williams's one-act play *The Last of My Solid Gold Watches* (1946) as he "suggests Eliakim, the gatekeeper of the temple doors, and the Angel of Death" as an important and sympathetic helper figure (205). Kolin also notes that "Williams offers another sympathetic [Black] porter character in 'Portrait of a Madonna' [*sic*]…[and that through these representations,] Williams valorizes the timeless black experience over the shallow, white world" (205). In this sense, Williams elevates Blackness to a holy stature, juxtaposing it with the crass and injuring materialism of the White, capitalist culture in a theme which recurs in Williams, as Black characters are frequently idealized in a similar way. Nick Moschovakis says that Williams's characterization of Blackness is a type of Romantic, "primitivist" or purist association of Black characters with Nature and "divine knowledge" (para. 35).[42] However, from a critical-race perspective especially prevalent in contemporary film studies, the marginal role given to people of color in media, even as they appear as helpers, is problematic, as an indication of a record of people of colour figures having been largely inadequately represented or misrepresented especially throughout the history of American cinema. In her assessment in "Tokenism" from *The Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education* (2020), Megan Ruby explains an aspect of tokenism appearing in twentieth-century American film and television media particularly. While there is the problem of Black characters having been historically portrayed as villains, there is also a problem Ruby says whereby "people of color are only used [in media] in supportive roles and are rarely given their own storylines"

[42] See Nick Moschovakis's "Tennessee Williams's American Blues: from the early Manuscripts Through Menagerie" for a complete discussion of Williams's appreciation of and narrative working with "certain values of blues, jazz, and spirituals…in tension with contemporary attitudes toward its African-American cultural origins, [including] attitudes that were primitivist and essentially racist [due to their reductive nature], and that Williams to a large extent shared" (para. 2).

(676). The supportive Black best-friend character, or the historical, helpful, Aunt Jemimah-type mammy are examples where Black figures are placed in the narrative to further the emotional development or spiritual growth of a White character in an objectifying form that does not allow the Black character full complexity. In assessing American drama and literature, this critique can apply in part to Williams's use of the Black character in Kolin's terms. Williams typically maintains a dichotomy between a world of Black idealism and White corruption, and the Black characters, while ideal figures, usually have small parts in the drama and exist, if not to help or potentially liberate the White characters, then to expose the problems of the White world. Elsewhere, in *Orpheus Descending*, the character of the Black conjure man, a romanticized, magical, Black figure commonly occurring in twentieth-century, American popular media—akin to the early to the figure of the wise and noble "Indian savage" there to aid the misguided Whites on their spiritual quest—merely facilitates an understanding of White action in the play. While the conjure man is a distant, sage observer who functions similar to a Greek chorus commenter, and he has an important, even central role as a figure of trust in the drama, in Lumet's 1960 film adaptation of the play, *Fugitive Kind* (with Williams co-writing the screenplay), the conjure man character disturbingly appears as a narrowly racialized type.

However, while many racialized roles appear in the work in a relatively minor way, the characters are symbolically integral to the narrative, which includes as its focus the cultural drama of racial difference. In Williams's placement of Black or racialized characters, he is careful not to presume to comment on the interiority of Black experience, and he infrequently centres a racialized character as the main protagonist. Yet, in several works of similar themes from a collection of works set in the South, Williams's overt subject is racist Whiteness, and the Black or racialized characters function to expose the political system. In this sense, the political

world becomes a character as Williams's critique includes White experience which excludes or targets Blackness, with the problem of this management illuminated by Williams to be a moral error of the political, White world. As such, the Black or racialized other-character is Expressionistically objectified (alongside White characters) to symbolize the problem.[43] In the satires, racialized characters are given a very significant role in the narrative, and they expose an insipid White character related to sexuality, with the White character standing in narrative as an ironic symbol of the White, sexual world who reveals what is hidden or supposedly repressed in the culture, as a force yet driving segregationist limits. In these situations, the non-White figure is exoticized as a figure of independent, sexual power in relation to White sexual powerlessness. Williams establishes the dichotomy in grotesquely exaggerated terms to satirize what he believes to be the Southern, White fear of the racialized, fetishized, and exoticized other, exposing the nature of the fear as the cause underlying violent, White, sexual control. The irony of the White sexual obsession appears through the desexualized White character entering into a provocative relationship with an extremely sexualized, Black or racialized other, with the erotic, even violent tension providing the crux of the absurdity of maintaining polarizing, sexual dichotomies. In Williams's satires, inter-racial sex breaks down the sexual, gendered, class, and racist binaries and hierarchies that organize the Southern, stratified social culture. The theme of White sexual fear appearing as sexual powerlessness in the capitalist twentieth-century South is evident in early works such as the short story, "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton," written in 1935 and published in 1936. This work evolved into the 1945 one-act play, *27 Wagons Full of Cotton: A Mississippi Delta Comedy*, with the narrative providing the basis for the provocative 1956 Elia Kazan directed film *Baby Doll,* of which Williams wrote the screenplay. In each variation of this

[43] See Chapter Two of this dissertation for a complete discussion of Williams's critique of racialization in the Southern tragedies, related to sexual sanctions under White supremacist capitalism.

narrative occurring in a thematic progression, Williams embellishes the White fears of the sexually virile male other as a superior force either overtaking or seducing the White, female sexual prize, as a symbol for the overtaking of property and shifting the Southern economy away from exclusive, White control—due to the connection between White supremacist land ownership with heterosexual, female sexually as the seal. Whereas in the tragedies, the racialized figure is destroyed, Williams causes the White fears to come true through the sexual triumph of the racialized or exoticized other in his satires, and he breaks every social taboo to undermine the legitimacy of taboo in the sexually extreme works. Southern White fear and sexual sanction are repeatedly symbolized in Williams as the situations from which to escape, and expressions of sexual desire, with desire being connected to one's innermost experience of self, are viable avenues for evading political controls.

In the discomforting short-story "Wagons Full," written within five years of Williams having written "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyl," the beginning of a narrative is formed which later more pointedly evolves into an explicit commentary on race. As in his serious, dramatic tragedies and the early sketch "Big Black," Williams exposes in this work the patriarchal, Southern sexual economy on which the capitalist projects depend. The story is written with characters of grotesque, symbolic caricature. The other here is not yet written as a racialized figure, but the parameters of othering are established in this short, troubling work, which comments on female sexuality in the Southern system. In the story, the character Mrs. Jake Meighan, wife of a planation and cotton-mill owner Jake Meighan, sits listlessly in the outdoor heat in a cloud of white, cotton fluff that flies around on the wind. She is sweaty and spread out like a vast, unconscious sickness, and Williams compares this character's female body explicitly to the Mississippi landscape of cotton crops as a symbol of America itself:

> The woman looked vaguely out across the country. The miles of white cotton, voraciously sucking the life from the soil, seemed to have left it desiccated and dull as an old woman at whose bosom the children have sucked again and again and on whose body men have lain til her breasts hang dry as locust pods in the summer wind and her emancipated limbs are crumpled beneath her swollen belly. The woman herself was not like the land but like the cotton. She had grown big upon the land. Like the cotton, too, she had reached her September season. She was full and bursting with ripeness. (46)

The ripeness is a characteristic that the "little man" who sits beside Mrs. Meighan as a "guest from the syndicate [cotton] plantation" (43), there at the Meighans' home to have his cotton milled by Mr. Jake Meighan, wants to pluck with his riding crop. The owner of the syndicate plantation, the visitor, is written as a dangerous character who wants to hurt Mrs. Meighan for sexual gratification (46). Mrs. Meighan, in her objectified state, is a provocative symbol of a Southern system reliant on women to fill specific sexual roles in a scenario that Williams writes as a type of rape, correlated it with a raping of the land through the over-production of cotton, consistent with the literary tradition of gendering land as female.[44] Mrs. Meighan, as other infantilized or desexualized Southern, female figures in Williams's critique, is powerless to initiate sexual action, or respond to an aggressive seduction, or even protect herself from the man. Sitting beside the plantation owner, she is exposed and agentless, her will (and any sense of personal desire) having been co-opted: "Cotton, cotton," she muttered. I feel like a big lump of cotton my'self!'" (44), and "[h]er eyelids fluttered dreamily shut" (44). Williams establishes at this very early stage of his career a theme that he will continue to revisit in myriad styles of the

[44] In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler says that the association of matter/materiality [including land] with femininity "can be traced to a set of etymologies which link mater and matrix (or the womb)…with a problematic of reproduction" (6-7). Butler links this representation [which appears in art and literature dating at least to the Classical age] to Aristotle's teleology (7).

Southern sexual economy as it is injuring to female sexuality, as well as to Black and other queer sexualities. Eventually, Mrs. Meighan tries to push the plantation owner away, and she tells him to stay outside, as she wants to retreat into the house, which she does (48). However, the "little man" follows Mrs. Meighan into the plantation house, intent on beating her, and she becomes "a tremendous sobbing Persephone" who "whimpers," "'Please, for God's sake… don't hurt me'" (48). This is an early iteration of a recurring statement in Williams that the cash gained from cotton is money earned in a corrupt economy for characters inhabiting the Southern hell.

The one act play, *27 Wagons Full,* a work which is more horrific than hilarious, is set at the Meighan's "cottage" near Blue Mountain in Two Rivers county, Mississippi, where the cottage's "fluffy white curtains gathered coquettishly in the middle by baby-blue satin bows" cause the place to appear as "a doll's house" (3). This work is an evolution of the narrative, and the "little man" appears here as an early version of the exoticized other, prior to the character becoming fully developed in the epitome of this satiric narrative progression in the later screenplay *Baby Doll*. As in the earlier short story, the wife of Jake Meighan, here named Flora, is a childlike character (infantilized in the Southern system) who rocks on the swing on the porch of the house. In anticipation of *Baby Doll*, the Jake Meighan character calls Flora "Baby," and she appears similar to the earlier Mrs. Meighan, as a character completely confined by the sexual parameters of the Southern economy. Flora's symbol is her "white kid purse" (3), which she loses at the start of the play and then later recovers to clutch against her body as if it can save her from the degradations of her world. The play contains a character referred to as "the wop," according to the derisive terminology used in the South to refer to Italians.[45] This character who will later turn up in *Baby Doll*, Silva Vicarro, is a wealthy man who arrives from the syndicate

[45] See Chapter Two of this dissertation for a discussion of "the wop" character as the ostracized, racialized, sexual other in a tragic context.

plantation at the Meighans' plantation and mill to have his twenty-seven wagons full of cotton milled. As in the later *Baby Doll*, Vicarro tries to get Flora to confess her husband's crime of arson for having burned Vicarro's mill to gain work, as Meighan loses economic control in the county. Vicarro's seduction turns violent, and Williams strongly suggests that he rapes Flora (off-stage)—an act which leads to a delirium or madness in Flora (23). Jake Meighan cannot recognize what has happened to his "Baby" after Vicarro assaults her, and the play ends with Flora cradling the purse as she begins to rock and absently sing "Rock-a-bye Baby" to the purse, which she calls "a baby" (28). The play ends disturbingly with Flora laughing and staring "raptly and vacantly up at the moon" (28) to symbolize her complete abjection in the cotton-economy.

In the evolved and more blatantly satirical critique of the Southern economy *Baby Doll*, Williams crafts an image of the exotic other as a potently sexual, male figure who is free of sexual constraint next to a sexually impotent, White patriarchal figure and a female, sexual prize who is either forcibly subject or willingly prone to the aggressively charming seduction from the racialized figure. However, a major difference in this narrative is the development of the sexual autonomy and empowerment of the female character, who appears at the start of the film as the teenage-bride Baby Doll, having been earlier delivered to Mr. Archie Lee Meighan (formerly Jake Meighan in the prior iterations of the narrative) by her now-deceased father for her "protection" after his death. Baby Doll (played by Carroll Baker) is a stronger, more developed and self-directed version of Flora/Baby from the earlier short story and one-act play respectively. Archie Lee Meighan (played by Karl Madden) is the pathetic patriarch who lives with Baby Doll at the decrepit Meighan manor, where white paint peels from the Corinthian columns of the Antebellum, Belle Reeve-type plantation house—a place similar to where Stanley pulled Stella from, and from which Blanche fled. Archie Lee's plantation is in ruins, he is financially

insolvent, and his mill is a broken-down wreck. The exotic other in the film is a more benevolent, clever, and less sadistic version of the earlier iteration from *27 Wagons Full*. The Italian exotic-other character, Silva Vicarro (played by Eli Wallach), is a wealthy land over-taker, newly moved into the area. Vicarro arrives at the Meighans' to have his cotton milled and then he seduces Archie Lee's wife. Baby Doll acquiesces to the seduction, and in her sexual encounter with Vicarro, Baby Doll "grows up." This action symbolizes how dependent the system is on female sexual disempowerment, as what becomes Baby Doll's empowered, sexual choice is the final event in Archie Lee's world falling apart. Williams's screenplay is a thorough mockery of White Southern power and authority disassembling in the post-slavery era. Kolin says that the narrative, "disclose[s] the vulnerability of the white infrastructure and…discredit[s] the customs of the bigoted society of Tiger Tail County" (14), with Tiger Tail in this work standing as the typical Two Rivers County that appears in several other Williams works addressing American Jim-Crow-era racism.

In the film *Baby Doll*, Vicarro is known as a "wop." While the "wop" character in the tragedy *Orpheus* dies for transgressing against the Southern, sexual order, here the exotic, racialized other triumphs by gaining the affections of Baby Doll who has formerly scorned her husband, Archie Lee. Archie Lee is the archetypal, Southern patriarch, appearing in the film as the disempowered man, running around on the lawn in the night with a shotgun, howling desperately for his wife, who is hiding up a tree with her lover until the two can make their escape. The character Baby Doll appears similar to Carole Cutrere from *Orpheus*, a vulnerable yet powerful young woman who rebels against the sexual system and makes an independent, sexual claim counter to the role assigned to her. Images of insipid Whiteness exist in the satires in contrast to images of Whiteness as a danger in the tragedies, and Kolin says of *Baby Doll* that

it is a work that "accentuates racial injustice at the same time it liberates black participation in a world of power" (4). All of the White, male figures of authority in the film are parodied as ridiculous and ineffectual, even criminal in their decrepit world. Some racialized figures in the work merely drive the narrative forward like a Greek chorus, watching and commenting on the main action from a peripheral position. However, these characters are all either morally or intellectually superior, as well as economically independent, existing beyond the reach of the patriarchal authority in Williams's ridicule of the White fear of the post-slavery loss of economic control. Williams's reap-what-you-sew statement in the film is that Southern decay and the loss of male, White power is what is deserved after the evils of slavery.

III. Racial Difference and Bridging Political and Philosophical Distance

In Savran's consideration of Williams's placement of "binary oppositions" (as in the case of characters of extreme difference), Savran says:

> [w]ith a remarkable consistency, desire is provoked [in the work] by differences in race, ethnicity, social class, and age…[and this] ensures the palatability of these desires for a culture ill at ease with the blurring of lines of demarcation between race and social classes. (125)

In the satirical works, the racialized other figure typically becomes the heroic figure, a character to be revered or feared as a god, a sexually strong character who stands outside the corrupt, White system and therefore has the power to alter the limiting system by exposing and/or disregarding its constraints. However, not all racialized figures are as readily valourised in the exaggerated terms of Williams's satires. The symbolic placement of extreme characters in oppositional situations, for the narrative sake of tempering restraint and establishing the possibility of character renewal through an encounter with difference, largely rests on the

meaning of desire in the narrative, which differs between the satirical and non-satirical works. While the majority of racialized figures in the satires are exoticized and evade entrapments to transcend political limits in an undermining mockery of White authority, with the taboo relationship between very different or ostracized characters providing the possibility of a healing boon, the racialized imagery related to Rosa and Papa Gonzales in *Summer and Smoke*—a non-satirical work—superficially appears to replicate an aspect of the problem that Williams typically writes against—which is that it seems to reinforce stereotypical tropes of the bad, ethnic-other. While Williams still critically considers and venerates aspects of exoticization in this work, and he contextualizes the character Rosa by writing about the difficulties of her political world—in this case: impoverished Mexico and a forceful father (213)—in *Summer and Smoke*, the Latina character Rosa appears unironically as the exoticized character, in a role which casts her as a pagan temptress who seduces a morally weak or uncertain man, John Buchanan. The relationship, rather than liberating both characters, leads to tragic demise for both Rosa and John. In the documentary on Rita Moreno, *Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It* (2021), Moreno, who plays the character Rosa in Peter Glenville's 1961 film version of *Summer and Smoke*, discusses the limited roles offered to Latina actors in mid-twentieth century Hollywood, which for women mostly consisted of sexual stereotypes not cast or directed with critical reflection or irony. Moreno describes the prevalent attitude: "you were looked down upon, or you were thought of as a sex object" (26:46). The Latina characters seldom spoke or had complex dialogue, but Moreno says that she took the roles because as an artist, she "had to make a living" (29:00). Moreno explains a common mantra on a movie-set directed at women of colour: "shut up and be sexy" (30:00). While Williams did not write the screenplay for *Summer and Smoke*, there is little difference between the dramatic and film versions of the character. However, the Hollywood

portrayals of Rosa and Papa Gonzales exaggerate the troubling placement of these characters in the drama.

While Rosa's strength in the drama is ambiguous, this ironically keeps her from being a mere negative, Latina stereotype. Although, aspects of her role, along with Papa Gonzales's role are still problematic. Rosa is another character in Williams symbolically established in a difficult love triangle, here with John and Alma, with each character situated in an extreme position relative to love and sex. The dramatic resolution occurs most favourably for Alma (the main protagonist in the work) when she adopts aspects of Rosa's characteristics (related to open expression of desire), which allows Alma to become a more mature figure, thus making aspects of Rosa's certainty in desire and sensual expression ideal. While Rosa does not benefit personally from her expression, between the polar opposite figures of Alma and Rosa, an eventual thematic compromise is made. The situation of Alma being overly reserved (to the point of sickness) in expressing her true passion, due to her very restrictive family situation and her religious father, is narratively contrasted with Rosa's exuberant, violent passion related to her father, Papa, whose passion is excessively violent and completely unrestrained. John, in rebelling against the strictness of his father's passionate control of the body (in a dictate similar to Alma's father in a clinical/medical or material rather than a spiritual sense), when he does not claim his authentic feelings of love and desire, loses his love in a sad end to his story. One of the main themes in the work regards the necessity of growing up and the challenge of individuating through wrestling personal control away from extremely limiting father figures.[46] The three characters (Alma, Rosa, and John) symbolize aspects of three extreme philosophical orientations and relationships to passion that their fathers emblematize related to love and sex: austere

[46] See Chapter One for a complete discussion of *Summer and Smoke* and the Alma character.

spiritual or religious restriction; extreme sensual indulgence; and strict material or moral abstinence. While each father is a difficult and tyrannizing figure, because Papa Gonzales kills John's father during the violent climax of the drama, he stands out in the narrative as the villain of the play. Gonzales is also described as a "stinking," drunken man (214) whom his daughter compares to a "pig" in his "dirty…love-making" (213). Papa Gonzales owns the Moon Lake Casino—with Moon Lake as Williams's constant symbol of love gone awry, or violence related to love. When Alma goes toward the Moon Lake Casino at the end of the drama to make her compromise of the flesh with a stranger, the place is under new ownership. With Gonzales gone, the violence of the place is tempered, and Alma can safely enter the Moon Lake world, where now something of sexuality and spirituality can reside in the same place, both within Alma's being and at the Moon Lake location. While Williams's questions in the work are interesting explorations of extremity and temperance, of love, passion, and compromise, Rosa and Papa appear expendable at the end of the narrative. Rosa simply disappears from the dramatic world after a violent climax, as John eventually disappears in self-abandonment, betraying his feeling by following the orders of his intractably installed super-ego. While Williams intends his philosophical inquiry to contemplate the complexities of exotic Mexico, the favourable aspects of the place and of exoticization appear buried in the violence.

Williams, who loved Mexico and spent much time travelling, living, and working there, began writing Rosa in 1945 during what is often cited as his tumultuous relationship with Mexican-American, Amadao "Pancho" Rodríguez y González, in a period when he might have been working out personal questions related to violent sexuality in the relationship. While Williams's dramatic Rosa is not a weak figure, and her character is not without sophistication or complexity, her despair appears connected to her racialization, and her Mexican poverty appears

as a judgement on the troubles of impoverished Mexico. Yet, Mexico also functions in Williams's canon as a place of mystery, an other-worldly place that tempers extremes in characters and offers at least the potential for balance and healing self-knowledge. Rosa and John's relationship ends in tragedy for each of them, with the tragedy connected to the emotional violence of John's father and the carnal and physically violent life that Papa Gonzales represents. Both men appear as godless characters in Williams's consideration of spirituality, and he intends here to illuminate this as a problem. Yet, the religious choice is not necessarily the better option, as it is equally confining. Williams often compares the strength of sensual paganism in his work to the weakness of puritanical Christianity, with the character unable to stand up to the demands of the flesh being one who is destroyed, especially as this character is extremely confined related to Christian puritanism. Rosa is initially the only character in *Summer and Smoke* who is unconfined and free in sensual expression, and this freedom is part of the ideal that Williams wishes to illuminate and venerate in the drama. However, aspects of Papa Gonzales's violence, or Rosa appearing in the extremely sexualized version of the flamenco dance (especially embellished in the film), cause the characters to mostly appear as the dark and dangerous exotic others. In the revised version of the *Summer and Smoke* drama, *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (1962), the Rosa and Papa Gonzales characters are excised, possibly indicating Williams's awareness of the problem of portraying the characters in such terms. Also, it is possible that a contemporary actor playing the Rosa role would bring more dimension to the character than what Moreno was directed to play in the film. Further, elsewhere Williams briefly considers two characters related to racialized poverty as vulnerable characters, with one character carrying the same last name as Rosa—Gonzales. In these cases, the characters exist as

sexual liberators, and their sexuality is not paired with violence, but with comedic relief from shame, censure, and isolation.

IV. Sexlessness as Sin in the Inverted Christian Allegory

In Williams, the incident of two strangers meeting is often presented as an opportunity for self-realization or an unexpected gain in fortune, punctuated by an extreme difference between characters and the ostensible unlikeliness and political charge of their connection. Especially if the relationship transgresses the political system's sexual sanctions, it can be momentary relief from restriction through the award of liberating, self-realization in the temporary fulfillment of desire. The greater the difference, the stronger the possibility of realization, and the more potent the political possibility. Certainly, encounters with strangers in Williams's work are often not ideal. Often, extreme violence occurs when difference cannot be reconciled, or properly understood or appreciated. However, throughout the work, notwithstanding the tragic situations where Williams intends to show the negative consequences of political confinements, Williams also suggests that tenderness, sympathy, and loving acceptance of the difference of the other have the potential to precede forms of estranging othering. Yet first, the social mechanisms that drive people apart must be revealed and disassembled, which is what Williams attempts in his provocative satires. Williams offers suggestions in works such as the obscure, early-to-mid career short story "Desire and the Black Masseur" and the late-career play *Kingdom of Earth* regarding how to exit the trap of negative othering through erotic collisions between characters of extreme caricature, in works exploring shame that question authority, and unravel limiting categorical (or stereotypical) distinctions of race, class, or sexual or religious orientation. The camp exaggerations in these narratives expose the sanctioning system by blowing it up through works of shockingly bawdy ridicule.

In Williams's telling of the broken world, completely free expressions of sexuality, like completely free expressions of love, cannot exist because, as Williams understood it, a segment of the world wants and works to gain complete sexual control (with the control extending to all facets of relationships). The control which Williams critiques is in part governed by White capitalist projects overseeing land ownership and is maintained by an authoritative appeal to restrictive religion. Yet, in spite of the tyrannical impositions, Williams's characters long for connection and search for home in one another, with connection appearing in the satires through taboo sexual expression. Along with the crude portrayal of Black sexuality in Williams's work, Williams focuses on other sexual stereotypes in figures that are similarly socially castigated within White, capitalist America. Characters who cannot, or do not fit the ideal type (*i.e.*, the White, heterosexual, Christian, married type) within the sexual system struggle in the narrative to realize a safe place or home for themselves and to affirm necessary and desired connections with others, and these characters are expelled from the Edenic garden in tragic calamities. However, in the satires of inverted Christian allegory, Williams writes of liberty from the binds of the fallen kingdom through sexually explosive expressions of consumptive bliss, or sexual scenarios that are shaped as unusual forms of Christian redemption and transcendence from shame. In many Williams texts, religion has a dual function of either possible entrapment or potential release. The duality of symbolism allows Williams a view that is both cynical and hopeful about the mechanisms of cultural artifice such as religion, which can either enforce social distances or ideally unite disparate characters through radical communion. In exploring Williams's investigation of desire, Savran says: "in all of Williams's work, desire is bred in the distance between the desiring subject and the 'image' that cannot be 'contained'" (125). Bridging (or attempting to bridge) the distance of racial difference through an intensity of desire between very

different (including racially different) characters becomes a place of potential, political liberty. In Williams's satirical Christian realm, shocking sex becomes a type of transfiguration, allowing trapped characters to transcend the limited and troubling attachments of the material world and its confining imagery through sexual release, in a comedic view of desire as extreme or violent, yet purgative deliverance.

The questions of ideal or debased racial and sexual types graphically erupts in Williams's mid twentieth-century short story (written in 1946 and published for the first time in 1948 in the Williams's first short story collection, *One Arm and Other Stories*), "Desire and the Black Masseur." While this work is not set in the South, it epitomizes Williams's satirical comment on fear, fetishization, and violence related to miscegenation, as well as queer shame in a capitalist/religious context. This work is a screaming example of what Als calls Williams's "erotics of difference" ("Portrait" para. 2), in which the sexual tensions that Williams believes delimit segregation and racist hierarchy, as well as homophobic restrictions are unmasked to reveal their violent and absurd conditions. Queerness and miscegenation exist in the same couple in this work, and the racialized figure's role is not merely as a support to White experience. Williams writes in "Desire" as he consistently does in his commentary on othering with self-conscious irony, reversing the order of institutional, capitalist power and religious orthodoxy. Subversion of racist and anti-queer effects occurs in "Desire" through homoerotic, inter-racial love, in uncontained images written in the unique way that Williams crafts stereotypes as extreme exaggerations, so that the types are no longer believable in rational terms. In his assessment of Stowe's protest novel response to slavery, Baldwin says:

> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*…is activated by what might be called a theological terror, the terror of damnation; and the spirit that breathes in…[the] book, hot, self-righteous, fearful, is

> not different from that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcise evil by burning witches and it is not different than the terror which activates a lynch mob. ("Protest" 15)

Williams parodies religious terror by crafting ironic images of sin in "Desire and the Black Masseur." In his championing of the outcast cultural figures in this work, Williams writes that sin is not being able to fully realize what one desires: "For the sins of the world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what the sufferings must atone for" (206). Williams absolves the White, queer character Anthony Burns who is "in search of atonement" (209) for his inability to claim his full desire, and he allows the character to realize self-actualization within an erotic church, where the character called the "Black masseur" metes out the priestly benediction of sexual pleasure and relief. The intensity of the action allows Burns to escape his feeling of insipidness by blissfully merging completely with his desire to be free of his sense of incompletion, as the masseur, who shatters Burns's insipid sense of self, momentarily transcends his own politically subordinate position to express the extent of his own unsanctioned power.

Whiteness is epitomized in the text in an extremely debased form, initially devoid of human feeling and driven by unconscious sickness unto death, in a desire that becomes wholly consumptive because of its unconscious, unclaimed, and unnamed stature. Yet, the eventual claiming of desire (which leads to death for the White character) symbolically kills the fearful, enforced restraint founded on exclusion, separation, and loss of self, and the death functions as a saving release. The Black masseur becomes a holy priest, and an embrace of homoeroticism becomes a momentary relief of confinement for both characters. The story is almost purely violent as Williams parodies the projections of savagery to undermine their effects. In "Desire," Williams does not recast any racial or sexual ideal, but he illuminates the fundamental problems of deciding power according to racial or sexual categorizations. He also suggests pathways out of

the traps of othering through orgasmic explosions in a comedy of horror and delight. Freedom for his characters, who are established in "Desire" as ironic Black and White caricatures, occurs through their respective self-claiming of desires and their indulgence in unsanctioned pleasure. In "Desire," Williams attacks the system of racial and sexual othering as the story exposes the limitations of social control as it is structured in a capitalist/commercial world, where injustices related to difference are largely maintained through religious appeal. The revelation occurs in a shocking, homoerotic, BDSM narrative, which subverts the social power-structure of the racist, segregated, and homophobic 1940s America.

The situation in the text of the BDSM fetishization of the character known as the Black masseur by his White client, Anthony Burns, and the subsequent erotic pummeling of Anthony Burns by the masseur, follows a common pattern of BDSM action in which one derives sexual pleasure from painful and/or punishing acts. This pleasure is based in a consensual choice to either submit to or enact violence in a sexual context, to reverse the power subjugations which occur in the supposedly non-sexual world, where a person is debased through being forced to conform to a limiting role without their consent. From the psychoanalytic perspective that Becker articulates, "perversion" (with perversion being defined as erotic expression on an extreme end of a spectrum) is a refusal to be subsumed into cultural norms, as an attempt at extreme individualism (230-231). BDSM understood in this sense as extreme sex is non-conformist sex and a politically willful, private act, as well as strong resistance to extreme confinement in the social world, or, as Becker says: "one's own secret way of affirming himself against all standardization" (231). In this context, BDSM domination/submission patterns are a personal claiming of one's individual power and identity, and a form of erotically charged, anarchistic revolt. The Black masseur initially beats his White client in a bathhouse which stands

as a symbol of insipid Whiteness, "right at the keyed-up mercantile nerves of the downtown section," in which all employed masseurs are Black men who appear like gods with the power to fling lightening (207). Unlike their "whispering…[and] apologetic" White patrons who wander the steamy basement "labyrinths of partitions, of corridors, and…chambers with opaque doors and milky globes over lights and sheathings of vapour [,]…as noiseless as ghosts…[whose] faces all wore a nearly vacant expression," the Black masseurs speak and move "with force and resolution" in an appearance of "authority" (207). In simplifying the action to a basic role reversal, Brian M. Peters in "Queer Semiotics of Expression: Gothic Language and Homosexual Destruction in Tennessee Williams's 'One Arm' and 'Desire and the Black Masseur'" calls this appearance in the story of Black authority and the pleasure the Black masseur gains from beating his client in a White mercantile world "the restructured dynamic of the master-slave relationship that prevails in many nineteenth-century gothic texts" (para. 2). However, Williams does more in the narrative than merely reverse racialized roles.

Counter to the masseur who is at least physically powerful, if not politically franchised, the timid Anthony Burns at age thirty is initially described as a completely powerless figure and a "little man" (209). He is also uncritical, emotionally undeveloped, and divorced from his own desire until, after having been sent for massage from a co-worker at the "huge wholesale corporation" of his stifling employment, he meets the masseur and gains a strengthening, erotic feeling (206). Burns derives pleasure from a common BDSM pattern of relieving one's self from bad feelings, such as guilt or shame, through violent, sexual acts, with the shamelessness of the sex act (or the shame in connection with the sex act) pursued for its purgative qualities. Williams writes of Burns that "in every move of his body and every inflection of speech and cast of expression there was a timid apology going out to the world for the little space that he had been

allowed to occupy" (205), and that, pathetically, he "had no idea what his real desires were" (206). This is until Burns learns of his desire for sexual atonement, to be beaten sexually by the masseur, which alleviates his sense of smallness. Although initially, this realization comes about unconsciously and "without intention or effort" (206), Burns comes into consciousness as the sexual violence begins, until "all at once a knot came loose in his loins and released a warm flow" (209)—which is sexual and self-awareness combined. BDSM action functions for Williams here as an element of camp reversal, in which the upside-downness of William's narrative world distorts power relationships, relieving both characters through mutual pleasure and co-opting the violence in the socio-political world. As Burns finds relief in submitting to the punishment he craves, so does the masseur find pleasure in submitting to the punishment he craves to deliver in a mutually erotic context of unrestrained authority, since, although the Black masseur appears godlike in the underground bathhouse, he is still confined there as a mere work object.

The questions here regard the general relationship between sexuality and violence, including psychological and political violence—which pertain to the limiting traps of essentialist othering sanctioned within capitalism. Particularly, Williams hones in on the expression of desire related both to sexuality and violence and on projections of fetishization in the underground world as forms of personal relief and freedom from the traps. The subterranean reversals in the bathhouse (to both the attempts at domination and sublimation, and the actual acts of domination in the upper, racially and sexually stratified world) are gifts from Williams to his two characters in the story. Williams relieves his characters of the burdens of limiting symbolization of homosexual/gendered Whiteness or Blackness, or of lowly worker, or slave and master, or of any partial expression of self and desire through what I am calling Foucault's bathhouse freedom.

Bathhouse freedom, as Savran interprets it as he cites Foucault on the sovereignty of pleasure, is the relief and freedom one feels from escaping the traps of conferred identity which exist as potentially violent, political subjugations (Savran 162-4). The relief is experienced as a type of completely private and personal self-actualization through the willful engagement in nameless acts of pleasure. Foucault's bathhouse freedom appears as "nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an eruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure with reality, and a whole new mechanism of the economy of power" (Foucault, *History* 5). The realization of bathhouse freedom as extreme, unsanctioned pleasure is shared between Burns and the Masseur in an economy of equality, through expressions of un-policed, BDSM sexuality—a true subversion of political power, as the subjective, sensory engagements in pleasurable acts, especially as they precede language, occur outside the domain of political articulation or objectification. In fact, the pleasurable actions are only latently symbolized in a religious context which subverts typical religious symbolism through irreverent, ironic exaggeration. What might be otherwise considered transgressive sexuality is claimed between the couple as empowering acts of pure being. Unlike in other works, where Williams explores the theme of desire as a painful trap, such as when Blanche is displaced by the intense desire between Stella and Stanley, or unrealized or overly thwarted and controlled desire leads to disembodiment born from emotional exile and loneliness in *Portrait of a Madonna*, desire exists in the "Desire" narrative as a type of revolutionary freedom, and narrative violence is used symbolically in an ironic counter to worldly violence. In the basement bathhouse setting of Williams's short story, the formerly unconscious and culturally taboo desires are claimed between the masseur and Burns as acts of queer defiance—which is a slipping out of the traps of imposed definitions, or evading the political tenets of othering. The couple moves from being objects in a controlled sexual

economy to experiencing themselves as subjects who claim personal desire outside of a market economy.

The narrative is a cheeky stab at structural power, which Peters says is a "critical representation…of homosexual desire in pre-Stonewall literature" (para. 31). "Desire" is a narrative that blurs all lines of signification related to othering categories, in scenes of shocking revulsion that evoke Saddik's reading of horrifying political realities in Williams. Saddik relies on Ralf Remshardt's description in his *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance* (2004) of the balancing effects of grotesque humour, and Saddik paraphrases Remshardt's explanation: "'sick' humor, [is] humor too diseased to allow for easy reconciliation" (*Excess* 8). Sick humour in Williams is also explained by Saddik as "[b]lack humour, which requires a precarious balance between the extremes of the comic and the cruel" (*Excess* 8). Saddik says that this dark and shocking humour can create "a liberating laughter that destabilizes boundaries and breaks through imposed limitations" (*Excess* 5).[47] In the disturbing narrative of sick humour, "Desire," a reader can detect an early iteration of the outrageousness (in Dorff's sense) that will evolve into what Saddik *et al*. call Williams's overt camp style, which grows out of and incorporates Williams's grotesquery. During the Tennessee Williams 2005 Scholars Conference panel on "Tennessee Williams and The Grotesque," Brian Parker offered a definition of camp:

> Basically camp is protest by way of exaggeration…It's a way of coping with something that is unbearably painful by exaggeration, by sending it up…[and] there is basically an element of sado-masochism in it, which is suffering turned into aggression, suffering turned into exaggeration, an in-your-face quality about it. (para. 18)

[47] See Saddik's *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, The Crazed, the Queer* (2015) for a complete discussion of William's shocking humour as theatrical anarchy.

Although the short story "Desire and the Black Masseur" does not explicitly incorporate the camp figures who appear flamboyantly in Williams's later works on racial othering, the symbolization of the characters Anthony Burns and the Black masseur are so exaggeratedly grotesque in their acts of brutal sex-play—which culminate in the ironic, horrifically violent, cannibalistic, religious atonement-rite at the end of the work—that they share characteristics with what fits into a camp category.

In a critique of Williams's commentary on race, Hooper says that while Williams reflects "white society's anxieties" (126), in "Desire" his disturbance of power does not actually overturn or circumvent systems of racialization, but merely reinscribes a hierarchy of race through a basic role reversal, and, Hooper argues, Williams also obfuscates racialization through collapsing race distinctions (124-6). However, The BDSM action between the masseur and his client does not merely reverse political roles designated in any power hierarchy; it shatters what Foucault names as the expurgated "authorized vocabulary" of power in which even "allusion and metaphor" are sanctioned (*History* 17). This shattering could have the potential to obliterate a distinct understanding of the separate elements of race, were it not for the narrative of the two characters becoming most fully themselves through their erotic relationship, which is their intimate encounter with extreme difference. The imposition of the binds of othering, binaries, hierarchies, and antipathies are undone in "Desire" through transgressive, homoerotic, ironically religious, and inter-racial love. Or, in Williams's simple explanation, "the giant loved Burns and Burns adored the giant" (209). The intersection of queer and racial politics appearing here (similar to other incidents in Williams's canon), with queerness referring to homoeroticism and miscegenation, or the freedom to love outside of White, heteronormative, Puritanically Christian bounds, is unreservedly expressed in "Desire" by a writer who elsewhere more subtly suggests

subversion. This example of extreme, Southern American Gothic literary permissibility is intended to alert the reader to the absurdity of the violent, religious demands of suffering as a frame for racial segregation and debasement, as well as homosexual debasement and other acts of emotional violence. The provocative text intends to cause discomfort in a reader by pushing stereotypes to extreme ends, so the limitation of categorical frames on being are revealed in their shattering. Ideally, the ironic laughter which might ensue related to the absurdity of the shocking ending can create a space for at least imagining other possibilities for connection or self-realization—a common trend in all of Williams's work, the comedy of too muchness.

V. Historical Context

In *A Queer History of the United States*, Michael Bronski argues that twentieth-century American racism is tied to homophobia and extreme laws against "perversion," stemming from the post-civil war "social purity projects" (132). Foucault explains that the twentieth-century compulsion to sexually classify grows from a seventeenth-century Christian mechanism of policing desire, which becomes a system of medical justification in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the name of "public interest," to further capitalist projects which force controls regarding how bodies and beings love one another (*History* 23-27). In this system, no human energy can be wasted and pleasure must be codefined and sanctioned as one of many "modes of production" (5). This codification pertinently concerns discourse related to the definition of sexuality, which become political arrangements (manifesting in laws and religious mores) regarding who is allowed to love whom, how, why, and in what context. The term "homosexuality," Bronski notes, was first used in the United States medical discourse in 1892, in the immediate wake of the Civil War, when the actions of queer and Black bodies were being heavily policed and categorized, especially in pathological terms (90). Williams writes on race in

the self-conscious, nineteenth-century, Civil War and early Reconstruction Era queer, political, Romantic tradition of Walt Whitman, who wrote of queer love which was both sexual and non-sexual and included loving friendship with one's self and between and among sexes and genders, which also freely crossed "the colour line" of Dubois's articulation—the sickness embedded in American society. David S. Reynolds notes in *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (1995) that Whitman openly opposed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and supported Abolition, noting that in "Song of Myself" (1892) the speaker of the poem momentarily enters the body of a slave, ideally in poetic sympathy with a socially castigated figure (148). Williams gives his White character in "Desire" the name of Anthony Burns, which is the name of a man historically recorded as a Baptist preacher from Virginia who escaped enslavement. Anthony Burns made the Fugitive Slave Act famous in a Boston court in 1854 when he was convicted of running away and forced to return as property to Virginia. The court's decision resulted in mass civic protest in the city of the free state of Massachusetts during an era when such protests were fuelling Abolitionist movements. This historical context for the disincorporation of the Anthony Burns character in "Desire" frames Williams's politically charged explosion of binary and hierarchical codes of social restriction and punitive laws governing bodies. Burns being eaten in an incident of homoerotic, inter-racial love is digested as the possibility of release from binding social codes, a recognition of both sameness and difference between two socially ostracized figures.

If the idea in Williams is to suggest with this naming that White, homosexual debasement is synonymous with Black debasement, or particularly with Black, homosexual debasement as the main determinant for both characters in the narrative, then a reader could wonder if Williams is collapsing distinctions between othering categories, therefore erasing differences and unfortunately possibly repeating something of the mistake he intends to expose. Just as Whitman

was clearly not the slave, the White Anthony Burns character's abjection in "Desire" is not identical to the abjection of the Black Masseur. However, while he refers often in his work to the shared situation of a "fugitive kind," who are the exiles and outlaws, the vilified, ostracized, racialized, or the over-or under-sexualized, there is still a strong awareness in the work of the unique socio-political position of a Black character *per se.* To what extent Williams consciously crafts images of Blackness reflecting the dominant culture's fear and prejudice, as well as the design of his respect for independent agency, is complex. Investigating the symbolic function of the masseur provides insights. Certainly the "black giant" (208) is initially merely an object in the White client's world. He appears more as a body than a person with critical thought, more a representation of Baldwin's critique of what White America fears as the projection of their own hatred and avarice, a Black man as the object of White paranoia, constricted by his role.[48] The masseur is written as a Black employee in a White world who speaks little and does not respond when questioned by the manager about his intentions, except to shrug (210). When Burns stands naked for the first time before the masseur, he objectifies the masseur, whose eyes "appear[ed]…not to see him…yet they had a glitter not present before [he was naked], a liquid brightness suggesting wet bits of coal" (208). Prior to their meeting, the masseur is situated as work object whose inner-will (or fire) is contained, just as Burns enters the bathhouse barely alive. The masseur appears to be mostly aloof or impassive in the text, until he first hits Burns who lies prone the table, and grins (208). However, at the point where he breaks free from the underground place where he exists in paid service of White men, the masseur becomes a character fully endowed with his own desires. The erotic freedom between the masseur and Burns lasts in the bathhouse until it is discovered by the White manager, who must contain it

[48] See Chapter Two of this dissertation for a complete discussion of White sexual fear and paranoia in Baldwin's terms.

according to his economy of racial hierarchy. Then, after becoming aware of the BDSM pattern between the couple, the manager insults them by asking the masseur if he thought he was in a "jungle," and he calls Burns a "perverted little monster" (210) and he ejects the couple from the bathhouse.

The masseur's agency appears in a surprising way after he leaves the bathhouse and the couple enter the masseur's home to continue their ritual in "a room in the town's Negro section" (210), where the erotic freedom becomes fully realized away from the controlled, White capitalist economy.[49] The masseur's home is positioned beside a church and the love affair between Burns and the masseur occurs during the season of Lent, where "there for a week the passion between…[the couple] continued," paralleled by the religious passion being commemorated nearby as the preacher from the church across the street repeats "the fiery poem of death on the cross" (210). As the masseur pummels Burns, the nearby priest shouts "suffer, suffer, suffer!" to his congregation (210). However, the action is not identically parallel, as Burns and the masseur are conscious of their desires and experience extreme gratification through fetishizing and enacting the ritual of punishment in an erotic context. The masseur functions here as a priestly intercessor who delivers Burns from his difficulties in a role similar to Kolin's reading of the Black porter helper-characters. Meanwhile outside the masseur's room, in the church across the street, the preacher and the parishioners are unwittingly caught in their drama of suffering: "The preacher was not fully conscious of what he wanted, nor were the listeners, groaning and writhing before him" (210). While the Masseur's room is a "death chamber" (211),

[49] This episode is similar to the event in Carson McCullers's 1946 novel, *The Member of the Wedding*, when the White, adolescent character, Frankie, enters the Black section of town for the first time, which is where her Black caregiver since birth, Berenice, lives. The extreme cultural difference between the White and Black worlds are made clear in the scene, which also punctuates the thematic happening of the love between Frankie and Berenice as being what truly connects them.

it is also the erotic church of sweet, hot bliss, while outside on the streets there is "the reek of honey" and a house behind the church bursts into a "purity" of flame (211). The parishioners are "involved in a massive atonement" and, as Burn is pulverized, "a woman [parishioner in the church] stood up to expose a wound on her breast. Another had slashed an artery at her wrist" (210) in a violence which seems senseless, until in a frenzied orgy of pain with either no pleasure, or deferred and uncertain pleasure, the parishioners "tumble…out on the street in a crazed procession with clothes torn open" shouting, "the sins of the world are forgiven!" (211). Within the parodic structure of the narrative, the sins of the world are doomed to repeat themselves within a capitalist/religious structure and social caste system that maintains othering binaries and decides human behaviour as sinful. In this context, sin being obliterated, with the symbol of obliteration occurring through the ecstatic dismemberment of one of the "sinful figures," is a liberating act which alters the idea of sin. While the group of parishioners are engaged in an unconscious ecstasy of wild violence within their Christian setting (with religion standing here as it does elsewhere in Williams to indicate its sublimation or control of free sexuality), with no direction or realization of their goal, the masseur consciously readies himself to "complete his purpose" in a sanctified sexual ritual. Burns asks the priestly masseur to finish the task, which ends in the masseur completely "devour[ing] the body of Burns" in a ritualistic, sacrament, leading to Burns's ecstatic death (211). As Burns loses his body, he loses his suffering in the burning world. Sex is freedom as Burns realizes orgasmic joy through a complete embrace of his desire in the church of queer, sexual coupling, and the masseur realizes an erotic height as the holy other in a mutually pleasurable, taboo, rabble-rousing collision.

IV. The Subversive Politics of Pleasure: Consumptive Bliss and Negotiated Transcendence

There is a tendency in the criticism to read "Desire and the Black Masseur" alongside *Suddenly Last Summer*—another narrative portraying insipid Whiteness through the queer figure of Sebastian Venable, who, like Anthony Burns, is also cannibalized—in what Clum calls "a parody of Eucharist" ("Sacrificial" 27), as Williams's representations of the danger of homosexuality, with cannibalism in both cases appearing not as an ecstasy, but instead as punishment for homosexual desire. Other theorists similarly read the deaths in negative terms. Peters says that within the "Gothic semiotics" of "Desire," the "downfall of the queer character" occurs "because of society's limitations and scorn of male-intimacy" (para. 1). Peters reads the text "Desire" as an image of "subverted…[homosexual] desire" (para. 1), in relation to another death of a queer character in Williams's short story "One Arm"—with the latter as a work of "homophobic discourse that reflects mid-twentieth-century mainstream society" (para. 9). Peters states that the "Desire" narrative "asserts an inextricable bond between psychological disorder and homosexual desire" (para. 21), with the ultimate result in "Desire" being that Anthony Burns is "destroyed by the actualization of…[his] homosexual desires" (para. 31). Saddik, in "The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and *Suddenly Last Summer,*" says that in the Williams works that show punishments for desire, "only the homosexual acts are punished by cannibalism [, and that] Anthony Burns…and Sebastian Venable…are literally devoured by the objects of their desires, indicating a commentary on the nature of homosexual relationships in society" (348). Clum reads Anthony Burns from "Desire" as a martyr figure, indicative of "Williams's vision of religion, of guilt, and the need for atonement at the heart of most of our basic needs" ("Sacrificial" 31). Finally, Bak in "*Suddenly Last* Supper: Religious Acts and Race Relations in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire'" says that "Anthony Burns is a very loose autobiographical sketch of Williams during his early

discovery and internalized rejection of his own homosexuality" (134). As well, while Bak believes that the instances of othering exist in Williams "to allegorize…a certain desire for metaphysical wholeness, for completion, which is only impeded by the social need for othering," (126) he also says that the narrative "Desire," along with *Suddenly Last Summer* "refract Williams's own potential fears and prejudices" (125). While Bak admits that "Desire" is a "most gothic" work written as an attack on "the hypocrisy inbred in…[the] Puritan model" (123) that shows the delusion of "Self/Other binaries" (123), he also says that, "in invoking the distorted image of the Last Supper…to unfetter human desire from its proscriptive Christian dogma and, moreover, in equating that desire with blackness, Williams proves unable to escape his own racial othering" (124). Certainly, Williams investigates the issue of homosexual punishment and othering in the work which represents cultural fears and prejudices, including anti-miscegenation and homophobia. However, while a reflection of the terrorizing, punitive culture exists in the work, the fact of the extreme pleasure of the homoeroticism and the placement of the miscegenation in "Desire," especially as the themes appear in similar, satirical works indicating pleasure as sweet, political subversion is not fully considered in these critical views.

Some of the strength of the criticism citing the homophobic discourse in the work lies in how closely a reader (or a viewer, in terms of his staged theatre or screenplays) identifies Williams with his characters, or how much Williams's psycho-biography is taken as the foundation for the narrative. Of course, it is impossible to entirely separate the writer from his characters and parallels are more than incidental coincidence. Yet, Savran illuminates the problem of foisting an assumption onto the queer writer that he is completely synonymous with his characters, or that his characters are written as stand-ins for his own hidden (and possibly self-rejected) homosexuality—an expectation not conferred onto straight writers in their crafting

of fictive narratives (116). Certainly, there is validity in Clum's astute assessment of the early works on the relative invisibility of the homosexual character in Williams in the several tragic instances where the gay figure is dead at the start of the play, with two of the figures dying of suicide. For the characters Allan Gray from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Skipper from on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*,[50] their homosexuality is discussed by other characters in the narrative, but it is not personally enacted on the stage. Also, the deaths of the gay characters in these works can be read as being related to or due to their homosexuality, in reflection if not of Williams's personal rejection of homosexuality, then as his statement of the homophobic, cultural censure. However, to merely read what Clum calls the "grotesque death" ("Sacrificial" 29) of the homosexual character, such as what occurs in "Desire,"—but which Clum notes usually occurs offstage, as "dead gay…[men's character-stories are] relegated to exposition ("Sacrificial" 29)—as pure punishment of the queer character is to miss the celebratory aspects of homosexuality that Williams audaciously writes into the satirical work as brazen, political destabilization. O'Connor notes the relative freedom Williams realized in his short fiction to express homosexuality generally, compared to what he was able to express on the stage in his early works (*Law* 58). And of course, as social permissibility increased, all of Williams's work became more openly reflective of queer expression. *Memoirs*, for instance, is unabashedly, playfully, and celebratorily gay. While "Desire" is a singular work, it is an early narrative of overt, shameless, even delightfully (or at least comedically) explosive homoeroticism. Notwithstanding the fact that by Williams's own admission there is a little of him in every character, or that all characters exhibit aspects of emotions or states that Williams understood through personal experience (Williams, Forward to *Sweet Bird of Youth* 95), it

[50] See Chapter Four of this dissertation where I argue that Sebastian Venable dies in a sort of passive suicide in relation to taboo sexuality.

betrays both the force of Williams's career-long critique of confining, political structures and his master craftsmanship as a literary writer/dramatist to imagine him as fully identifying with the abject figures in his work, or with any figure, or writing as if he believed the (self) punishments for homosexual desire were deserved, or that guilt and shame related to sexuality were the only conditions of homosexual desire. Certainly, Williams is aware of guilt and shame related to sexuality, including homosexuality, and every play or story includes questions of the complexities of guilt and shame, especially related to sexuality and religion. However, Williams also strongly questions the punishments of the world (including self-punishment) in his life-long project of speaking against the mechanisms of shame and self/other denial, and his satires are deliberately shameless.

In Williams, death becomes relief from the hellish world and the erotic becomes a church of hallowed communion, supplanting not difference under any homogenizing eye of God, but the political mechanism of division and harsh judgement as it manifests in religious ideology, which appears in the story not as salvatory, but ridiculous. In "Desire," the masseur is the holy other and, as he is initially wholly unknown by Burns, he is also wholly desired, because no part of him is already gained (or understood). Burns gains an understanding of his own desire in relation to the other, and this causes him to die to the world that would not permit him or the masseur their full existence. Clum argues that in Williams, "liberation can only come from death" ("Sacrificial" 32). The gateway to heaven (or at least release from the hellish earth) for Williams in the satires, however limited and still mysterious the passage may be, is through the religion of an erotic union, where characters might briefly realize the *at-one-ment* they seek—the sudden bathhouse freedom to know thyself in part through intimate knowledge of another. The supposedly unbridgeable political or racial difference is bridged through an appeal to homoerotic

love in the irreverent, Christian-esque ritual that ultimately brings about a peaceful end to suffering. The peace which follows the final act of consumption in "Desire" is signalled in the text through "the serenely blue" sky and "an air of completion" that the masseur experiences after he has fully consumed Burns (211). However, while Burns is relived and released from his insipidness, the situation for the masseur at the end of the narrative is more ambiguous. While Burns is able to escape confinement, the masseur is left to endure in the same world, and for a time, he is also homeless. Thompson argues that Williams's "re-enactment" of "sacrificial atonement and rebirth…[which occurs in various configurations in the canon] rarely culminates in fulfilled or successfully realized aspirations" (3). Thompson says that enactment of the flawed or failed ritual in various works "renders ironic the relationship of mythic symbolism to character" (3). Applied to "Desire," this means that the atonement ritual in "Desire" is not completely effective, as Burns being able to escape while the masseur remains in a confining, political world means that transcendence is limited. At the end of "Desire," the world is restored to its banal or debased version of itself. In "Desire," the lonely masseur, carrying a picture in his pocket of Burns, moves to another city to become employed again as a masseur and exists "impassively waiting inside a milky white door" for another insipidly White figure to return for the possibility of another liberating, queer ritual of atonement to resume (211). That the "answer" to the problems of the earth is, as the narrator claims, "perfection…slowly evolved through torture" (212), is awareness of the imperfections of human connection in need of some sort of salvation, and a suggestion of the boon of a breakdown of the senseless destruction applied through the painful cultural mechanisms of debasement and division.

In several of Williams's queer, erotic narratives, consumption functions as a moment of illicit, personal freedom for a politically confined character in an instance of resisting cultural

sanctions and transfiguring queer shame. Notwithstanding the death of Sebastian Venable from consumption in the drama *Suddenly Last Summer*, where Sebastian expires in a frenzy of fear and avoidance of self-realization, appearing through a grotesque act of cannibalism (as Williams' allegory of human violence), several other instances of the death of queer characters happen in a moment of consumptive, homoerotic bliss. In these unions, taboo homoeroticism and miscegenation are instances of the little death becoming the big, defining death swoon for a queer character in camp-like situations, whereby engagement in what is most taboo results in deliverance from a world that typically punishes or injures difference. Savran explains that repeatedly in Williams, "differences in ethnicity and race prove to be…the most potent, inflexible, and explosive sources of desire" (125). The narratives of explosive desire are examples of Williams's provocative political anarchy in art. In each instance, the death appears as a version of religious ecstasy that liberates the character from a world of lonely confinement. The 1941 short story "Mysteries at the Joy Rio" (published in 1954) and the 1953 short story "Hard Candy" (published in 1954) are works that, like "Desire," can be considered as transfiguration narratives, whereby what is reviled in the dominant culture (*i.e.,* homoeroticism and miscegenation) becomes redeemed through a moment of seedy, sexual delight. Like "Desire," "Mysteries" and "Hard Candy" are extremely discomforting works. Williams provokes his audience through confessional-type exposures of what is most hated and hidden as the products of shame within a restrictive and shaming culture that obliterates identity (or seeks to obliterate identity) through misrecognition of or severe judgments against the "abnormal." Williams establishes a question of shame in the works as an appeal to his audience to bridge the challenging distance between participating in public censure, or assisting to relieve the characters of their burdens, through a murky, narrative passage into increased understanding of what is

usually blocked from view. While Williams crafts shocking narratives, he also implicitly implores his audience to listen and respond with care.

In "Mysteries," a character sharing a last name with Rosa from *Summer and Smoke*, Pablo Gonzales, relives his sexual initiation with his early benefactor, Mr. Kroger, a "fat and strange man" (99), whom Gonzales initially meets at the "third rate cinema" (103), the Joy Rio theatre, as a young man newly "illegally come into the country from Mexico" (99). Both Gonzales and Mr. Kroger are vulnerable characters in the culture and they find their peace through living a life together, centered in part on the "sad, lonely things" (which are the taboo acts of sexual fulfillment) that occur at the Joy Rio theatre (102). Gonzales and Mr. Kroger live together for three years until Kroger's death, when Kroger leaves Gonzales his clock and watch repair shop in his will, and Gonzales assumes the Kroger role. The narrative justifies its confession by stating that shame can be relieved if "*some one* person" who is "trusted" can listen to the details of the story, which is Williams's intimate whispering in the ears of his audience, who, of course, are many, with the implication being that storytelling and empathetic listening can shift public censure. Yet, the details of the happenings of the place are difficult to hear, as they include murder in the upper balcony of the Joy Rio. Although, by the time Gonzales is an old man entering the theatre to play out his version of Kroger's old role with him, the theatre has been reformed. Yet, "the reformation of the Joy Rio was somewhat less than absolute. It had reformed only to the point of ostensible virtue, and in the back rows of the first gallery at certain hours in the afternoon and very late at night were [still] things going on of the sort Mr. Gonzales sometimes looked for" (104). Gonzales enjoys being swallowed by in the theatre's darkness and the sensual happenings that recall Burns's bliss from "Desire." Just as Burns "felt more secure at the movies than anywhere else. He loved to sit in the back rows of the movies where the

darkness absorbed him gently so that he was like a particle of food dissolving in a big, hot mouth" ("Desire" 205), so does Gonzales delight in the pleasurable absorption. Gonzales, who at the time of the narrative is an elderly man dying from a heart condition, enters the Joy Rio for a final time and rushes past the "*Keep Out*" sign (102) on a rope blocking the stairs to the upper balcony to meet his angel of death in a forbidden section of the theatre. Gonzales pushes past the young usher, who hurls a homophobic slur at him, to merge with the spirit of the theatre, his benefactor, lover, and initiator:

> the angel of such a place is a fat silver angel of sixty-three years in a shiny dark-blue alpaca jacket, with short, fat fingers that leave a damp mark where they touch, that sweat and tremble as they caress between whispers, an angel of such a kind as would be kicked out of heaven and laughed out of hell and admitted to earth only by the grace of his habitual slyness. (103-4).

The dark angel of the cinema seduces Gonzales in a death embrace, a final consumption recalling the words of Kroger's earlier instruction to Gonzales regarding how to wait patiently for relief from longing: "The gentle advice went on, and as it went on, Mr. Gonzales drifted away from everything but the wise old voice in his ear, even at last from that, but not till he was entirely comforted by it" (109). The death as a natural end to Gonzales's life is also a stolen moment and an instance of tenderness offered to the character in a narrative environment largely hostile to the events of his life.

The short story "Hard Candy" is a similar narrative, with a momentary, end-of-life, erotic freedom contained within the seedy darkness of the Joy Rio theatre. Set again in the "third rate cinema" (340), where Mr. K (or Mr. Krupper), "a man of gross and unattractive appearance with no close family connections" (335), who is thought of by his distant family and passers-by on the

street as either disgusting or merely an "old man" (338), enjoys a secret life of seducing male lovers in mutual acts of consumptive bliss. Williams entices his readers to follow Mr. K into the upper balcony to regard the sweet, weird world of sexual mystery. There, against the backdrop of cowboy movies, Mr. Krupper, "a bird of a different feather" (339), meets a dark, beautiful, and vulnerable young man, also from Mexico. The sad and lonely Mr. Krupper, who "knows that he is fat and ugly…[and] knows that he is a terrible old man, shameful and despicable even to those who tolerate his caresses, perhaps even more so to those than to the others who only see him. He does not deceive himself at all about that" (345), pays an exotic other who speaks to him briefly in Spanish prior to what will be the last moments of Mr. Krupper's life (345). The narrator describes the following events: "When around midnight the lights of the Joy Rio were brought up for the last time that evening, the body of Mr. Krupper was discovered in his remote box of the theatre with his knees on the floor and his ponderous torso wedged between two wobbly gilt chairs as if he had expired in an attitude of prayer" (345). That the journalist reporting on Krupper's death misrecognizes the final moments of Krupper's life is an appeal to audience sympathies to correct the record and give the despised Krupper his place. Williams plays with a reader's expectations in both the "Mystery" and "Hard Candy" narratives, eliciting what might be a common response of revulsion to question whether the reader will side with the disrespectful child and her family in "Hard Candy," Krupper's only relatives who have "hatred and contempt" (337) for Mr. K, or whether a reader will respond to the ridiculous with bitter-sweet laughter and compassion. Savran speaks against a reading of "Hard Candy" as a homophobic narrative: "To read 'Hard Candy' as a story…about the pathetic demise of a guilty homosexual is to reduce the complexity of the work and to underestimate the subtlety of Williams's strategies as a writer…"Hard Candy" is structured as an act of disclosure, an

unwrapping of a mysterious sweet" (114). The sweetness of the mystery is revealed through the candy wrappers stuck to Krupper, which is the limited way he might become known to the world, just as Gonzales or Burns and the masseur's pleasures do not fit the world's understanding of unsanctioned relationships. Williams lifts the curtain onto this queerness in a moment of narrative freedom beyond the coding that typically binds the social rules, attitudes, and American laws that separate people.

V. Fully Queering the Kingdom

Over a decade prior to the 1967 Loving v. Virginia, Supreme Court decision officially overturned the American anti-miscegenation laws that legally prevented inter-racial marriage, Williams began his satirical exploration of the legal tenets of miscegenation in the 1954 short story "Kingdom of Earth." The revised story appears in dramatic form, premiering in 1968 as *Kingdom of Earth (The Seven Descendants of Myrtle*), four years after the 1964 American Civil Rights Act ostensibly intended to end legal discrimination based on race, including segregation and restrictions related to Black property rights. In assessing the political parameters of the narrative *Kingdom*, Kolin explains: "racial inequities and the ravages of colonization…lie at the heart of *Kingdom of Earth*" ("Sleeping" 143). The apotheosis of Williams's thematic exploration of the fears of Black sexual virility, White male impotency, and the White terror of Black land ownership—or elements of the legacy of what Morrison calls slavery's "gothic damage" (*Origin* 83)—exist here in another example of William's grotesque work in a series of Southern satires. The narrative[51] jab at White-supremacy, what Williams calls his "funny melodrama" (*Memoirs*

[51] Note: Since both works are nearly identical, except that the short story is more openly sexual (including Lot and Myrtle having sex, which is an event that does not occur in the play), the following discussion will refer to "the narrative" or "narrative" as a singular entity encompassing both the short story and the later drama. In short, "*Kingdom*" (as an abbreviation of the play title) will also be used to refer to general thematic content. When a significant difference between the short story and the later drama exists or must be noted for clarity, it will be indicated in the text, or by parenthetical reference.

40), uses Christian symbolism to play with the idea of puritanism and sin, again rewarding the characters for what would normally gain public censure—illicit, non-marital, inter-racial sex. Set in the recuring, racist homeplace of Williams's Southern imaginarium, Two River County (elsewhere known as Two Rivers), Mississippi, the fertile delta is here threatened by a biblical-type flood. The question of who will remain to save the family farm and re-populate the earth is central in the work, which Kolin says explains how the hold of colonial dominance "has deep economic and legal roots…[and that b]y calling attention to these injustices*, Kingdom of Earth* raises…cultural consciousness about the rights of the dispossessed" ("Sleeping" 152). Whereas the other satires more diffusely study the topic of the White fear of the loss of land ownership through a "Black takeover," the *Kingdom* narrative explicitly makes this theme its central focus, when through lustful satisfaction and delightful sexual pleasure, God grants the boon of Black land ownership to the racialized character.

Williams crafts this satire in the midst of cultural change, including shifted and shifting, American mid-twentieth century laws. O'Connor discusses Williams as he writes in the "language of disgust" (20)—the irreverently shocking language of political provocation—as this language relates to homosexuality and laws limiting sexual expression. The comment can extend to Williams's ideas on the law as it relates to racialization and anti-miscegenation, as the Jim Crow period shifted into the Civil Rights era. O'Connor states:

> The power of such language, particularly as it was applied to the shaping of public attitudes about sexuality in the postwar period, indicates Williams's place, front and centre, in debates about social and political difference, as the mid-century's cultural and

> judicial containment transitioned into the contemporary shift toward equality and tolerance. (61)

The *Kingdom* narrative is a parodic exaggeration of the language of disgust, fitting into a bizarre and bawdy camp category meant to unmoor racial and sexual stereotyping from its supposedly authoritative seat in civil discourse, as a mockery of White power in a carnivalesque, political reversal. The story centres on Chicken, the "wood's colt" character rumoured to have "part ni**er blood" ("Kingdom" 368) and his half-brother, Lot. Similar to the Catherine Creek character in Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* (1951), Chicken finds it safer to disavow his ancestral Blackness and instead claim Indigenous heritage (Capote 7). Chicken claims to be part Cherokee as a more romantic explanation for his dark skin, that might also ideally gain him safety in the county and a sexual/loving relationship ("Kingdom" 368). However, a drop of questionable blood is the cause of Chicken's status as the lonely, disinherited son on the Mississippi farm, which was left to Lot by their father in his will (after the father died), due to Lot's Whiteness. While Chicken is the labouring steward of the land, he is yet technically homeless. Although he does all the work, Chicken is unable to gain financially from his labour due to belonging to a Black mother. However, while Lot has inherited the farm as the only "racially pure" son of the land ("Kingdom" 369), he is a feeble character dying of tuberculosis, and he is unable to participate in manual labour or take care of the farm. The fate of the farm (as Lot is dying) resides in the sexual centre of Lot's newly acquired wife, Myrtle, as her body becomes the site for deciding whether the property will remain under White ownership, dependent upon her loyalty to Lot or her taboo coupling with Chicken.

Chicken is a figure symbolizing what Morrison in *Origin of Others* refers to as "The Colour Fetish."[52] Morrison says that the "one drop" (41) colour fetish is emblematized in Southern American Gothic work, where questions of a character's status are determined by degrees of so-called racial purity and inter-racial love producing mixed-race children becomes a strong narrative conflict (41-2). Morrison writes: "In much of American literature, when plot requires a family crisis, nothing is more disgusting than mutual sexual congress between the races" (42). Williams's *Kingdom* narrative plays with the fear of the racialized figure as a character of disgust by writing Chicken as a vulgar, sex-obsessed character who will eventually gain the female prize and triumph in the conflict with his impotent, White brother. Chicken claims that a Black man dispossessed with "no money, no property, no success in the world" and not "a drop to drink," or "a single crumb" of food could still get a "square deal out of life" as long as there was still a "naked woman" on the bed ("Kingdom" 372). Chicken's desires to both have sex and own property are dependent on the acquiescence of Myrtle and the sexual success of their relationship. Myrtle is a White, female version of Chicken, a garishly made-up, Marilyn-esque, camp figure dressed in polka-dots, wearing tight pants, with dyed, blonde-hair, who appears in Williams's description as "an imitation of a Hollywood glamour girl which doesn't succeed as a good imitation" (*Kingdom* 127). Since sex is what can lead to land ownership, with conflict over inheriting the land as one of the main questions of the drama, and the White fear of land loss is what Williams lampoons in this narrative, Williams portrays sexuality in the short story in extreme terms of disgust, with Myrtle and Lot "grunting together like a pair of pigs in a stye" ("Kingdom" 372). However, since Myrtle's feelings toward Lot become more maternal and

[52] See Toni Morrison, *Origin of Others*, "Chapter Three: The Colour Fetish" pp. 41-5, for a complete discussion of how the colour fetish appears generally in American literature, as well as how she handles questions of colour in her own literature.

platonic than sexual, and she is much more sexually attracted to Chicken, she decides that she would rather sleep with Chicken (*Kingdom* 376). In a narrative twist, Chicken has been able to force Lot into handing over the deed to the property. However, now that Lot is dying, he wants Myrtle to gain the deed back from Chicken so Lot can then sign the farm to Myrtle in his will, thereby ideally keeping the property out of Black hands. Yet, Myrtle's lust for Chicken will eventually cause the farm to become Myrtle and Chicken's collective inheritance.

In his assessment of what he believes are the limits of Williams's queer *Kingdom of Earth* narrative, Savran says that there is no realization of any utopian promise of erotic bliss in the work and that Williams's revolutionary sense falls short of producing an alternative beyond the masculine sexual domain, as he reasserts the "phallic economy of desire" through the character of Chicken (169). However, queer sexualities largely drive the outcome of Chicken's phallic gain. Clearly, in Williams's Two River(s) County, there is a reliance on free or cheap Black labour, and the fear of Black land ownership (*i.e.*, the loss of free or cheap Black labour) is exaggerated by the possibility of queerness and assertive, female sexuality in the play. While superficially, the death of Lot can be read as being in-line with homophobic cultural discourse, in Williams's provocative *Kingdom* narrative, death of the queer, White character is what opens a space for Black flourishing in a mockery of the Southern, White fear. Lot's effeminacy causes him to appear as another insipid, White character, impotent within heterosexuality, as are the other insipid White characters in the Southern satires who all fear loss of authoritative control and land ownership. Chicken's sexual satisfaction with Myrtle is tied to his revenge against his brother. While he calls himself a "lustful creature" who cannot help himself (*Kingdom* 378), Chicken also admits that he wants to have sex with Myrtle in part to get back at Lot for Lot having gained the better portion in life (376). Williams's joke in the narrative of sexual salvation

is his parody on the concept of sin and redemption. After Chicken prays for intercourse, Chicken and Myrtle have sex, and Chicken thanks God for their union, which appears as a form of salvation (376). Chicken's inheritance has a holy sanction.

Williams crafts the situation of the mutual, explosive attraction and the consensual love affair between the inter-racial couple as being what will grant Chicken the Kingdom (*Kingdom* 371). Since her husband cannot sexually satisfy her, Myrtle's only hope for sexual fulfillment becomes through her union with Chicken, and since the "white tablets" that she takes to quell her desire are not enough to stem the flood of her attraction to Chicken, she succumbs to her passion (*Kingdom* 203). Chicken and Myrtle have explosive sex in the house while Lot dies in the parlour, dressed campily as his mother (*Kingdom* 212). Kolin says that, "the so-called perverse acts between Myrtle and Chicken take on an almost religious quality rather than something unnatural, revolting, or suspicious. Sex becomes a means of salvation for Chicken and Myrtle…their love-making [is] the only thing approaching perfection [in the county]" ("Sleeping" 158). The campy sexual god and goddess of Chicken and Myrtle usher in a new world of sexual blessings, where fellatio becomes a holy benediction. In the play, Myrtle and Chicken fall in love in an oddly playful, happily-ever-after ending, as Williams narrates the absurdity of the situation of property rights being tied to race and once again elevates what is reviled in the culture as transcendent, erotic bliss. In the final few lines of the play, Chicken says to his new love, Myrtle: "Produce me a son. Produce a child for me, could you? I have always wanted a child from an all-white woman…I want to look at my—Land…Chicken is king!" (214). Chicken and Myrtle subvert heteronormative marriage (which is typically only sanctioned when White) through their raucous fecundity.

VI. Replacing the Ideal

The intensity of the emotional catastrophes related to the need for characters to connect and whatever thwarts connection, or the conflicts the protagonists struggle to overcome, appear in Williams's works related to sexual and political extremes with desire as a constant symbol of possible connection. Williams exaggerates difference (and distance) through grotesque, queer images to indicate an intense separation between characters, based, in part, on political classifications. A longing for relief from existential isolation exacerbated through political confinement often manifests for a character as desire. If the character's desire could be realized or satiated (*i.e.,* if a connection between characters could occur), it would mean a possible end to distance and loneliness, but also release from the political system which justifies separation through the alienating and often dangerous imagery of othering. In Williams, the realization of desire has the potential to obliterate the system of division and shatter the imagery that separation is predicated upon. Unlike Stowe's appeal to white sympathies for the poorly mistreated Black character, who, Baldwin says, appears in Stowe's "protest works" as a sort of Blackface, or a White version of Blackness brought under the saving umbrella of Whiteness to offer White readers feelings of relief or momentary sympathy in a sentimental relieving of a guilty conscience ("Protest" 13-17), Williams shocks his audience out of racist ignorance or complacency through extreme images of othered characters who question the power hierarchy. Williams's works exemplify Morrison's assertion that "[r]ace has been a constant arbiter of difference, as have wealth, class, gender [and one could add sex and religion] – each of which is about power and the necessity of control" (*Origin* 3) by way of disturbing or overturning power and revealing a lack of control over the possibility of what might be free in human connection.

Racialization, Morrison argues, is in part dependent on the production of cultural images, as in the appearance of literary symbols. Morrison states that to maintain an American image of White purity—or an ideal, typically straight, male, all-powerful, heroic figure—it is necessary to project an image of Black savagery. The manufactured images of savagery, Morrison argues, serve to psychologically justify and deny the actual savageries of slavery and other colonial subjugations, so that they do not enter the literary or critical records, except in terms that do not interrogate, but recapitulate racist othering (*Origin* 5-8). If there is an interrogation of a White ideal in American literature, Morrison says, it necessarily occurs in relation to what she terms a ubiquitous "Africanist" presence (*Playing* 51). This presence is what, to degrees and in manifestations not acknowledged until recent criticism (and first expressed by Morrison), have compelled significant American writers in their considerations (*Playing* 51-52). A question of the relative psychological safety for a White character in historical American literature, Morrison states, is relative to the implicit positioning of "Africanism" (*Playing* 51). Following Morrison's logic, although White characters in much of historical American literature might experience estrangement in their narrative realms related to their lack of manifesting ideal characteristics, their presence as figures who *could* return to a central cultural place is taken for granted, and this is understood relative to the Black outsider. Williams questions the primacy of the presence of an American ideal in his work, as well as any central cultural place. For Williams, the ideal (as a White configuration of literary heroism) is a tortured and torturing position, necessarily dangerous, and limited and limiting as the sad inheritance of, in part, a Christian Puritanism containing a capitalist economy as the legacy of slavery which restricts basic human existence and relating. William's narratives tell the stories of a process of marginalization, and he distorts narrative assumptions through crafting extreme images that provoke questions of the system of

division. Savagery in the satires appear as the sweet undoing or at least the troubling of limited stereotypes and cultural imagery. Williams repeatedly demonstrates that desire is a life force that cannot be bound (although it can be binding), and in the satires, the tension which can terrorize his characters appears in the canon as a source of delight. This suggestion of the significant power of pleasure is a record of Williams as a queer political revolutionary.

Chapter Four[53]

The Time the Furies Wept: Transfiguring the Body of Excess in Williams

"What is it like being a writer? I would say it is like being free…To be free is to have achieved your life." -Williams, *Memoirs*

"what we are looking for…in art is some consolation for our sadness." -Nicole Krauss, "History of Love," *Bookworm* interview

I. Revolutionary Romantism: The Queer, Poetic Self

Narrative is a pact made with chaos, a tacit, if temporary peace. Storytelling, in Ernest Becker's sense, is a form of self-organization, consisting at least partially of narrative choices that are reconciliation with life conditions that one otherwise could have extreme difficulty being with.[54] In several of Williams's works, the lonely character of castigation, the homeless, queer character who loves or would love out of bounds, the one who is punished for difference and cannot find safety still searches for a home through creative expression. This character is a literary figure erupting with excess related to sexuality and language (including excessive lack), a figure who seeks safety through self-location (in part through language) and relationship, which, when extremely thwarted, leads to disembodiment, madness, and sometimes also death. One of the primary themes in Williams up to at least the beginning of his late-career period (with his middle-career period typically said to end in 1961 with *Night of the Iguana*), exemplified in works such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly*

[53] Parts of this chapter have been previously published by Kirsty Cameron as "Romantically Speaking to Save the Suicidal Self in Tennessee Williams and Mary Shelley." *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 51.1, 2018, pp. 19-37.

[54] See Becker's *The Denial of Death.* See Chapter One of this dissertation for an explanation of Becker's theory of self-organization/identity related to language/narrative.

Last Summer and also extending into his late period at least through the major work, *Vieux Carré*, pertains to questions about the limits of language and what storytelling, poetry, or art does or can do, including how art can exist as consolation for the isolating pains of living, or the grief of loss. If, as Saddik says, true connection is impossible in Williams, in part because he shows how the self is unstable, and overdetermining desire is not enough of a connector between shifting characters (*Excess* 47), and language is not enough of a container of human chaos,[55] then Williams still demonstrates that possibility in narrative is what can fill the space of the longing to connect. Language, like love in the Platonic sense, is a reaching, and the idea that language can be a perfect container for self-expression sufficient so as to facilitate complete and lasting connection between stable (*i.e*., sanctioned) selves, Williams asserts, is as absurd as the expectation that one can be defined through imposed sex/gender categorizations. However, the capacity for language to organize a poetic moment of connection, Williams also shows, depends largely on whether this moment is shared and on how the expression is received. A speaker needs a receptive audience to be heard.

[55] In the "Benevolent Anarchy" chapter in *Excess*, Saddik describes Williams's dramatization of the violent impulses of the irrational states of human being that she says cannot be exactly mimetically represented, but are characterized through the grotesque and dramatic gesture, especially in Williams's later works. However, while much of the critique focuses on the late works, Saddik also reads earlier works in similar terms. Saddik says that through the figure of Sebastian Venable in Williams's mid-career-period, 1958 play, *Suddenly Last Summer*, a character who cannot be bound by language, Williams demonstrates his idea that "we are all equal in the end, as we fall to the chaotic powers of nature" (62). Also in "The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and *Suddenly Last Summer*," Saddik says that in "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*, two works featuring homoeroticism and consumption, while characters may long for an end to fragmentation through "the ultimate 'union' with the other" (that might be realized through desire/a sexual encounter), character/self-identity is "precarious" (351), and the violent/consumptive desire which Williams narrates in these works are his proof that "the most significant moments of communication and "connection" exists outside of linguistic boundaries" (353). Saddik elsewhere says that Williams's drama explores the "the brutality of human nature stripped of cultural artifice" (*Travelling Companion* xiv-xv), which has implications for the limits of language's ability to express or contain a self. See Chapter One of this dissertation for a discussion on how poetry/language impacts the potentially unstable, narrative self, related to disembodiment, madness, and metaphoric homelessness in terms of safety in the self and material world, as well as terms of political confinement and queer resistance.

Much of Williams's drama consists of characters' besieged attempts at communication, in exploration of relationships between language, political definition, and the complexities of desire and the human need for connection. In his explanation in a letter to Elia Kazan in the early days of their association about the central tragedy of *Streetcar*, Williams says: "I will try to clarify my intentions in this play. I think its best quality is its authenticity or its fidelity to life. There are no "good" or "bad" people. Some are a little better or worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts" (62). The lack of understanding of one another in *Streetcar* is similar to the fundamental tragedy throughout Williams, based on assumptions made about characters who are too tightly fitted into static roles, founded on a misunderstanding about the complex, contradictory nature of human being, which ultimately and queerly resists categorization. Williams repeatedly critiques cultural systems that encourage misunderstanding, in part through their enforcements of facile definitions of character and maintenance of assumptions that lack careful consideration of what is actually going on in the individual heart. Political categorizations that limit queerness (as queerness pertains to self-definition in Sedgwick's sense and to the complexity of desire related in part to safety in love[56]) are what language in Williams resists as an extreme danger. Language is only one means of potential connection in Williams, and it is not an exhaustive expression of self for a Williams character. However, when a breakdown in understanding with its attending violence occurs, poetry is often upheld for its design to possibly amend the painful split. While sometimes it is the spinster character as a poetic character navigating the difficulty of being in a body in a hostile political environment, or being estranged in love that Williams focuses on in his

[56] See the Introduction and Chapter One for a thorough discussion of Sedgwick's definition of queerness and my explanation of how this pertains to identity, complex desire, and relative safety in relationship.

interrogations of language, the artist or creative figure is another character in the work who can be read in relation to broader questions of language attachments.

The artist figure in Williams is a transgressive character whose queer existence is politically inconvenient and disruptive to a violent and silencing cultural order that misreads and discourages difference, especially as it pertains to aesthetic values, and categorizations of being based on sex, gender, class, ethnicity, and race. The idea that language or art can completely restore one's alienated self to the protective angel of eternity, or that language is an ablution of total and lasting self-renewal is not a Williams offering. There is no guarantee in Williams of full union with the beloved, a stable self, or any complete return of the (often lost) object of affection. However, in Williams, even as communication and connection break down, art in the form of expressions of self, such as what exist in poetry, narrative, or story exists as a world of possible and meaningful attachments that function as a vital spine to a character, even a so-called mad one. E.M. Forester's famous passage from *Howard's End*: "Only connect!...Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer" (para., 3, Ch. 22) is exemplified in Williams's work as he illuminates the poetic as something alive and generative in language, even if lasting identification or full communion with another cannot be entirely realized in words. Williams's own Romanticism is a spirit of possibility in which tragedy occurs when one's attempts at communication (and therefore connection), or creative expression cannot stand up to disassembling violence, such as the violence of being limited by externally imposed, categorical and sexual definitions of being inhibiting relationships and self-expression. Williams constantly holds up potential in language next to violence and silence. His drama demonstrates the ways that aspects of language stand up to the unstable self, temporarily organizing the self in nodes of

connection that are beautiful or meaningful in part because they are so brief or poignantly mediated.

II. Williams's Romanticism

The inability to be expressive within both sexuality and art ends in death for Williams's poetic characters. A character is confined within sexuality, and this restriction parallels a confinement in expression. If the character is still able to be poetically expressive, but is extremely confined, like Lucretia and Blanche, then the situation might end in madness instead of death. However, a character utterly confined in both sexual and creative expression dies in the narrative. Sebastian Venable from *Suddenly Last Summer* is a figure thus doubly trapped. This leads to his inability to stand up to the intensity of his life, which is symbolized by Sebastian's consumptive death in which he is literally cannibalized in the narrative and metaphorically swallowed by loss, which appears related to a sense of suicide. Williams does not explicitly explore suicide *per se* in his canon (as the characters in his drama are technically killed). However, an uncustomary pairing of works between Williams and Mary Shelley illuminates a similar preoccupation with the phenomenology of poetic and narrative expression as related to issues of Romantic suicidal consciousness and death. The similarity evidences a shared Romantic theory of art related to imaginative, narrative identity, which situates Williams as a Romantic artist whose concerns have nineteenth-century roots and affinities. The theory may be understood through Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept of a narrative self. This is a self largely organized by language, whose dissolution corresponds with a deadly silence. For Kristeva's narrative self, an inability to address adequately or recover from loss through satisfying significations in language leads to a "living death" state of despair, which is the crux of a type of suicidal ideation, sometimes leading to suicidal death (4). Over a century before Williams

explored the mediating effects of writing and art on the artist in his rich canon, his Romantic progenitor asked similar questions related to literature and storytelling in her novella, *Mathilda* (written in 1819 and published in 1959). Particularly, Williams's play *Suddenly Last Summer* shares much in common with *Mathilda*. In both *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Mathilda*, the psychologically violent limit on the Romantic figure of the creative self, who is also an adult-child constrained by an incestuous-type parental relationship, becomes either a suicidal wish or a suicidal way of being and then actual or impending death, with a trace of the artist/child's legacy remaining in forms of sadly truncated literary expressions. Suicidal consciousness in these texts symbolizes the failures of writing and storytelling to save the sensitive person. However, this tragic effect is not ultimately the failure of art or expressions in language. If creative expression is limited to the point of suicidality (or a living-death type of despair) the question becomes: what limits expression? Both Williams's and Shelley's protagonists cannot write enough or speak enough to save themselves because their narrative identities have been overly confined by other narratives. Specifically, the unspeakability of taboo desire adds to the previous parental limits placed on identity to the extent that language cannot amend any loss of the self in a Kristevan sense. Williams and Shelley employ a similar, archetypal Romantic character in texts demonstrating a shared belief in the vitality of writing, and a critique of the destructive restrictions of narrative freedom. However, while both *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Mathilda* highlight sad ends for their poetic characters, they still point to a hopeful possibility in poetry and art.

Although there is much critical debate over Williams's designation as a Romantic writer, reading Williams in relation to Shelley offers a view on his Romanticism which locates Williams's ideas about art and also addresses questions about his possible skepticism regarding

language's limits related to vital, human connection. While language might break down as an effective communicator, and characters might remain displaced from home or alienated from one another, and an artist may go mad or die, the spirit of art remains as the potential regeneration of being through imagination, especially through shared narratives. Since Shelley's contribution to a Romantic discussion of narrative is significant in both the lesser known *Mathilda* and the more popular *Frankenstein*— and this theme is strongly resonant in Williams, with *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Mathilda* readable as inverted, parallel narratives—it is poignant to view Shelley in light of a latent, Romantic, intertextual-reference proposed as a theory of art whose foundational Romanticism echoes in Williams. Williams's relationship to Romanticism is complex; his lifelong themes in a canon of over 100 plays (including the one acts), collections of short stories, essays, novels, and books of poetry continually evidence a preoccupation with questions about language and art also associated with the British Romantic period. These questions relate particularly to the power of the poetic imagination, language's transformative affect, and faith in art's potential to express significant meaning or truths, if only to capture a momentary, emotional reality or feeling state. Yet, Saddik states that Williams rejects Romanticism's idealizations of poetry and art, especially according to what she says is his view (especially realized in his later works, but still evident in infancy in his earlier dramas) that "language, images, [and] all forms of representation are inevitably inadequate and cannot contain emotion, impulse, [or] desire" (*Excess* 6). Saddik states that Williams is grounded in Expressionistic explorations of distortions of the body and of being, which deny any possibility for these distortions to be intelligibly contained by artistic forms (*Excess* 6). Saddik also reasons that Williams's focus on sexuality and violence as life's "bizarre excesses" highlights cultural absurdity and undermines the Romantic idea that truth or ease can be discovered through language or art (6).

However, Saddik's argument for Williams as a non-Romantic writer contradicts theorists such as Harold Bloom, whose close study of the twentieth-century American Romantic literary tradition leads him to state that Williams writes according to a "High Romantic paradigm" inherited from Hart Crane, P.B. Shelley,[57] and John Keats (3). Nancy Tischler also argues for Williams as a Romantic writer, stating that Williams believed in the "redemptive power of beauty," including beauty in language, and in the artist as a most valuable human figure ("Romantic Textures" 61). In illuminating Williams's literary relationships with William Wordsworth, Keats, and P.B. Shelley, Bloom, Tischler, and other Williams scholars might easily place Williams alongside his Romantic predecessors, in a line of writers who consistently claim what is declared in P.B. Shelley's "Defense of Poetry"—that if there are any meaningful truths to be discovered about human existence, they are best understood and described through poets and poetical expression. Contrarily, Saddik argues that Williams's works reflect the inability of conventions of language, such as poetic expression, to adequately contain or assuage the chaotic pains plaguing Williams's characters (*Excess* 62). Saddik explains that the playwright particularly decentres language in his late period in symbolic works of "anti-realistic marginalization[s] of language" as the ultimate realization of a theme begun in his earlier works, in the vein of Antonin Artaud's Absurdist Expressionism (63). The connection centres on Artaud's view that any literary or theatrical repetition, including themes, or styles such as Romantic literary traditions, is a spiritual—even a suicidal—death to art, and an unfortunate limit to the creative imagination (Artaud 76). In this sense, according to Saddik's reading, Williams cannot write in the Romantic tradition and maintain an Artaudian "chaotic liberation

[57] All references to "Shelley" in this chapter will be to "Mary Shelley." All references to "P.B. Shelley" in this paper will be to Percy Bysshe Shelley.

from the rational," which includes skepticism about potential in language (*Excess* 63). Saddik states that *Suddenly Last Summer* exemplifies Williams's critique of language, as the play illuminates the situation of the inability of poetry to counter the horrors of chaotic nature (62).

Yet, while Williams's protagonist in *Suddenly Last Summer*, the poet-child Sebastian Venable, dies during the summer in which he does not write any poetry—possibly symbolizing a failure in the life-supporting function of poetry—Williams's overriding critique in the play is of that which confines poetry and personal expression, including restrictions on sexuality. Poetry and sexuality are equal identifiers of Sebastian's autonomous self, and their confinements become the ultimate limit on his self. The limit extends to the point of Kristeva's "living death" state of suicidal despair, which leads to real death in a cannibalizing murder related to narrative restrictions placed upon Sebastian by his mother, Violet Venable. The themes associated with Sebastian are consistent with a common exploration in Williams, evident in such characters as the poet-son Tom from Williams's first major play, *The Glass Menagerie*, and the character Writer in *Vieux Carré*. In each play, the poet-sons' identities as artists, along with their sexuality, are threatened by mothers (or mother-types) in incestuous-type relationships. Just as the father presides over the material and physical safety in Williams, the mother is often the guardian of language or poetic expression. While each situation of writing is a troubling one for the writer in these interrogative works, the potentially transcendent Romantic conceptions of human freedom and identity-maintenance related to writing and art are still emphasized in each circumstance, with the saving functions of language and art upheld. Although Tom is terrorized by his choice to leave his extremely consumptive mother and his dependent sister, Amanda and Laura, in *Menagerie*, and the play reflects on the sorrow of Tom's tough compromise, he leaves knowing that an independent life is the only way that he can preserve the autonomy required for both a

sexual and creative life. The play is a chronicle of the memory of his escape, and his story is held by Tom alongside the loss of his beloved sister. That Tom's story of Laura is now his only and extremely significant attachment to her is emphasized in the final moments of the play when Tom laments: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (Williams, *Menagerie* 124). The story of Laura is made more important by the loss of Laura. Tom's artful expression, his memory, and his imaginative preservations are what define his character. He is as he poetically remembers.

The character Writer from *Vieux Carré* is the one artist in the canon who experiences a gleeful, if bittersweet escape, when after he tears away from the restrictive mother-figure Mrs. Wire, and is sexually awakened through his first homosexual encounter affirmed by the artist Nightingale, he is free to pursue his art as a queer, travelling writer. The play ends with a sense that the storyteller (here symbolized by the character Writer), while still a marginal figure, is a cultural observer, a writer among the writerly "shameless spies" (Williams, *Vieux Carré* 95) who will realize a life-saving freedom through creative expression. Writer's penultimate monologue expresses the bittersweetness of carrying forward with that which is lost: "They're disappearing behind me. Going. People you've known in places do that: they go when you go. The earth seems to swallow them up, the walls absorb them like moisture, remain with you only as ghosts; their voices are echoes, fading but remembered" (115). Clarinet music as another artistic voice in the play sounds prior to Writer's final line, as a call to the character that it is time for him to move on from his recollections, as, similar to Tom whose memories create the drama of *Menagerie*, memory in *Vieux Carré* is the basis of the play, and Writer has told his story. The play ends with Writer's line: "This house is empty now" (115). The house is empty, but that emptiness is what filled Writer's imagination and made him search through narrative expression

for the bones of what remains in the afterlife, handed over to a witnessing audience who might now give a second life to the ghosts. Tom and Writer's narrative reflections each comprise a poignant world made more beautiful by the tragedies being situated in the past. The characters could not help themselves then, the distances could not be bridged, but now there is understanding: Life was hard, the choices were difficult, the observations were painful, and the remaining story is a gift. While *Suddenly Last Summer* identifies challenges related to poetic expression, and Sebastian does not live to write more poetry, the drama still illuminates a Romantic hope for possibilities in poetic language and art to express liberties in and of a narrative self, aided significantly by a sympathetic audience—with the horror in the play caused by thwarted expression.

The questions of potential in art and narrative identity and poetic expression are never fully resolved in Williams, but they remain as tensions regarding ambiguity and hope about creative possibilities. Williams's questioning framework is consistent with Shelley's critique of restrictions on narrative expression and the self, with the essential force of Romantic language pertaining to its remedying power when personal expression is unrestrained. The complexity of Williams's Romanticism is partially expressed by Lynda Dorff, who scrutinizes what she calls Williams's "deeply conflicted attitude toward the . . . [R]omantics" and Romanticism through her exegetical readings of certain Williams poems (77). In her argument against Tischler's Romantic designation of Williams, Dorff says Williams maintained a "problematic . . . relationship to [R]omanticism and its poetry" (77). While Dorff concedes that Williams does not entirely reject Romantic ideals, instead choosing to passionately rewrite them as a type of "revisioning," she also emphasizes the difference between his poetic and typically Romantic poetics (85). Dorff contrasts her reading of Williams with her outline of British Romanticism,

stating that throughout his career, Williams increasingly "rejects[s] the . . . pattern of descent and return found in [such Romantics as] Wordsworth" in a disavowal of Romantic "notion[s] of transcendence" (78). Much like Saddik, who reads Williams as critiquing language for being non-productive of truth, Dorff says that for Williams there is no underlying metaphysical order or truth to be revealed through metaphor because the world is always shattered, or fragmented. Reality is a stew of violent chaos, needing metaphor as a container and an imagined form of hope, or something to which to aspire (82). Dorff says the Romantics saw the world as providing metaphorical order in raw potential, to be crafted or accessed by the poet in illumination of an already present, hidden, or secret metaphysical state of affairs (83), and "Williams demarcates his own anti-redemptive, grotesque-lyric territory" (78). However, Shelley's Romanticism, as evidenced in *Mathilda*, elevates poetic language and narrative identity while also critiquing them. Metaphor as a container for identity in Shelley is beautiful and also annihilating, depending on the possibilities for communication. While Dorff reads Williams in relation to what she calls the "post-romantic poetics of Rimbaudian disorder" (78), an account of Shelley is not factored into Dorff's description of the British Romantic imagination, although reading Williams in relation to Shelley illuminates their shared Romantic terms.

Shelley's work is devoted to literarily sculpting changeable psychological affect in an effort to make intelligible the raw, often chaotic realities of the body, as well as the difficulties of existence, including grief, and loss, with questions of suicide and death as symbols of failure in communication. Language in Shelley does not simply uncover a hidden order, as Dorff says it does in other Romantic expression (78). Language for Shelley does not reveal ultimate metaphysical reality, as in P.B. Shelley's view. Instead, in Shelley, language is what makes painful experience tolerable by providing understanding in the form of abstractions and shared

stories, which might facilitate transformations of sorrow and a sort of transcendence over plagues of chaos and potentially annihilating grief. Hope for transcendence, or at least acceptance, is found through artistic affect, with writing, literature, and storytelling providing necessary, healing functions. Therefore, in Shelley, problems in language or a total failure in language is death for a character. These themes in Shelley's Gothic works are similar to those in Williams's, with the two sharing a Romantic vision regarding personal experiences of chaos and isolation and attempts at order and connection, especially through writing and the ability to express identity and experience freely.

Williams's views on art and self are in sympathy with Shelley's non-didactic theory of art and self, which forecasts later psychoanalytic theories of self as related to the creative imagination, narrative expression, and suicide. Shelley's theoretically complex Romanticism, similar to Williams's, centres on the problem of an archetypal, Romantic literary character. The writers are united in their use of an artistic, suicidal character, limited sexually, especially related to taboo or impossible desire. Kristeva articulates the parameters of the poetic self, or the expressive, narrative self, as connected to the desiring self. Kristeva describes the situation of language related to desire, stating that all writing is amatory in the sense of it being an extension of an attempt to recover a lost object of affection, such as a disappeared lover, or a parent lost to death (6). Language is thus animated with desire. For Kristeva, compensation for loss can occur through speaking or writing, as language can form a bridge from painful isolation back to a world of connection—except in some cases of extreme grief that are related to a conflict in the loss of self or the other. Occasionally, according to Kristevan semiology, grief can become a deep melancholy, potentially leading to a suicidal silence (10). Melancholy in this context becomes a despondency related to communication, whereby a writer retreats from any possible

hope for recovery in or connection through language, sometimes to the point of suicidal death. In this system, a loss of writing or communication signifies the annihilated self (10).

Kristeva's description of suicidal despair related to creative expression well describes the situation of the Romantic literary figure who is troubled with taboo desire, a figure that occurs in Shelley, Williams, and elsewhere in the Romantic canon, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In her Introduction to Shelley's *Mathilda,* Michelle Faubert asserts that Shelley's novella is grounded in Goethe's proto-Romantic novel on suicide as "the textual source for the high-Romantic figure of the isolated, melancholic artist, who is too sensitive, too *feeling,* to exist in a cold and brutal society" (26). Goethe's Werther is confined due to taboo desire and marked as a socially outcast figure. He is a character with an intense poetic imagination, and strong feelings that become destructive to the point of suicidal death. Werther's love for Lotte tortures him, and it is only partially relieved by writing letters to his friend, Wilhelm. Due to Lotte's engagement to another man, Albert, Werther's love is doomed in a taboo situation of impossibility, corresponding with his general social displacement. The situation escalates to the point of Werther's total social eradication through suicide. Werther is highly and literarily expressive of his feelings, believing that "the heart alone is the source of happiness," but he is alienated from what he feels is a too-cold and insensitive environment (Goethe 59). In total despair and with no countering outlet in poetic expression or sufficient communion with his beloved, Werther kills himself (111). The death of the Romantic artist figure begs a question regarding the limits of art to save the sensitive self.

This Romantic character-type exists in Williams and Shelley as ambivalently related to creative expression. Both Shelley's Mathilda and Williams's Sebastian are literary, Romantic, and outcast character-types, queer types for whom taboo desire becomes a restriction. Sexual

liberty in *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Mathilda* is fundamentally connected to the freedom for a character to exist autonomously, independent of parental constraint, autonomy that is also connected to freedom in and of literary and personal expressions of identity. While the latent incest between the male poet-child Sebastian and his mother, Violet Venable, is less overt than the passion expressed by the young Mathilda's father toward her in what she calls his "unnatural love" (107), the situations are equally confining, leading to extreme social displacement for each character. As much as Mathilda is overdetermined by her father's incestuous love for her, Sebastian is confined by his mother's incestuous control over his whole existence, especially his sexuality and poetic expression. Violet describes her relationship with Sebastian as a type of partnership of equals, as in a married couple, culminating in her leaving her husband to support her son's poetry and act as sort of midwife to his art, as she said he could not write without her (75-6). Yet, while tightly bound to and by his mother, Sebastian the poet only produces one poem a year for 25 years, and he remains unknown publicly as an artist, with only his mother and the few distant associates she approves of being aware of his poetry (14). While Sebastian dies at age forty, he is memorialized by Violet as a child, and most references to him by her are infantilizing, consistent with her total control of her son's identity. Mathilda is similarly confined by her father, and is therefore unable to express herself freely. Mathilda calls herself "a creature cursed and set apart" by her story, explaining that she bore "a gloomy mark to tell the world that there was that within my soul that [which] no silence could render sufficiently obscure" (107). The suicidal silence for both characters in Kristeva's terms also indicates the opposite possibility for language to act ideally as a counter to the silent, killing place, thought of by Kristeva as a psychic phenomenon in which the wastes of internal conflict related to problems in the environment and loss merge with sadness, as in "Job's ashpit in the bible" (Kristeva 15).

However, in both *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Mathilda*, writing, art, or expressing the truths of their experience could provide relief for Sebastian or Mathilda, except when they face a greater constraint, leading to suicidal silence. In Mathilda's extreme suffering related to her father's taboo love for her and the loss of her father to his suicide—the story which she believes she cannot openly share and later can only limitedly express in a letter to a friend—she compares herself to Job in her apparently insurmountable trial, and shortly thereafter decides on a plan to kill herself as a way to end her "death-like solitude" (84). Sebastian's conflict related to his loss of sexual vitality parallels his limited poetic expression, becoming a loss of total vitality, and is related to his mother's extreme control. The Romantic sense of another possible life in language, while providing each character with limited relief, is still too inhibited in each situation to allow the characters the vital freedom of full self-expression.

The degree of suicidal consciousness for these characters correlates to the degree to which both Sebastian and Mathilda are limited in their identity through language. Each text makes a case for the positive possibility of self-identity constructed through narrative via the imagination. Imagination leading to language in this context corresponds with a Romantic veneration of imagination as the highest generative expression of a poetic truth, as the story one can most live with, or (particularly in Shelley) as an acceptable compensation for lack. However, while the possibility of ideal imaginative freedom exists as a place of constructing and maintaining identity, the difficulty arises for the characters when their stories of self are constrained through opposing and ultimately silencing forces. Although Mathilda is not a poet *per se*, as is Sebastian, most of her existence, including relational attachments and her death, are mediated through writing, literature, and stories. At various times throughout the narrative, Mathilda refers to herself in literary terms as a character in literature, or as one who is made up

of stories. At the opening of the narrative, Mathilda announces that she is in a "strange state of mind" as she prepares to confess the "mystic terrors" of her situation of self-destruction, declaring on the edge of her own death: "It is as the wood of the Eumenides none but the dying may enter; and Oedipus is about to die" (41). In describing her fall from a place of a sacred relationship with her father to the hellish depths of enforced silence once his incestuous love for her is revealed, Mathilda explains her situation in archetypal terms: "Like Psyche, I lived for a while in an enchanted place . . . when suddenly I was left on a barren rock . . . while I . . . inhabited a universal death (57). Faubert asserts about *Mathilda* that "literature itself becomes a major focus of the narrative . . . [and] Mathilda is created by texts both within the novella and outside of it, [as] an odd metatextuality that blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality" (24). Similarly, Sebastian's character-identity is made up of stories told about him in an argument between his cousin, Catherine Holly, and his mother about his nature. While Sebastian and his story are the narrative focus of *Suddenly Last Summer*, he is already dead at the opening of the play, as Clum states are several of Williams's queer characters ("Sacrificial" 29), lost to any opportunity to speak for himself. The attempt to alter Sebastian's story, his situation, his reputation, and especially the account of how he died during a summer vacation is the centre of his mother Violet's obsession, as she wishes to hide her son's queerness. Existing as the ostensibly rational governor in the play, Violet emblematizes a silencing cultural force refusing to acknowledge both unsanctioned sexual and poetic expression. Yet, Violet's control of her son's literary output, as well as of his sexuality and all other aspects of his existence, becomes undermined by stories told by Catherine, whom Violet unsuccessfully attempts to discredit as mad to prevent her from speaking about Sebastian's taboo homosexuality. All that is learned about Sebastian in the play is through conversations, mainly between his mother and the

psychiatrist, Dr. Sugar, whom Violet hires to lobotomize Catherine in attempt to silence her, with the rest supplied by Catherine's incendiary stories (27). The sense of mediated identity also occurs in *Mathilda*, transpiring through its first-person narrative, dictated by Mathilda in the form of a suicide letter to her sympathetic poet-friend, Woodville. However, Mathilda is only partially realized, or is perhaps blurrily realized, through telling her story in the letter because the text never reveals whether Woodville actually receives the letter. Both characters suffer when they cannot sufficiently articulate an identity separate from how they have been restrictively defined, and their narrative selves become trapped.

Mathilda's self-realization accords with the sensitive, imaginative, literary-child's history of primary attachments as mediated through literature and stories, which become partial attachments through want of human communion, underscoring Shelley's belief in the significance of shared narratives. In lack of parents, or friends, and living with an emotionally cold and distant aunt, Mathilda's childhood attachments are primarily to imagined stories, the daydreams she develops while wandering by herself in nature. Mathilda describes her development of an isolated self in relation to literature, stating, "As I grew older books in some degree supplied the place of human intercourse" (50). She explains the effect of her literary education and isolation:

> I was a solitary being, and from my infant years, ever since my dear nurse left me, I had been a dreamer. . . I wandered from the fancies of others and formed affections and intimacies with the aerial creatures of my own brain – but still clinging to a reality I gave a name to these conceptions and nursed them in hope of realization. (51)

Words considered in solitude form extreme bonds for the child, as in the case of Mathilda loving her father without having met him beyond a brief moment in her infancy (51). Mathilda's love for her father centres on a letter he left behind when he abandoned her as a baby, and she initially forms a relationship with him exclusively through his written words. Similarly, Mathilda's father's attachments to his estranged daughter are formed through his imagination of her. When Mathilda's father returns sixteen years after leaving her to resume their relationship, he reports perceiving Mathilda for the first time in non-human terms, saying she appeared "more like a spirit than a human maid" (160). This description of Mathilda as a near-disembodied figure is comparable to the description of Sebastian's relative disembodiment, as he exists only through stories told by the mother who cannot recognize her son. Both characters are children understood through an imposed narrative lens, but they are not wholly understood and are not able to assert themselves outside of the limits of their parents' imaginations. *Mathilda* repeatedly evidences passionate affections between Mathilda and her father born from imagined realities, or as largely disembodied stories. Mathilda's father falls in love with her when he idealizes her in the image of Mathilda's dead mother, Diana. At the family's Yorkshire estate during a trip out of the city, Mathilda's father shows her the empty rooms in the mansion formerly inhabited by her mother (61). Mathilda and her father walk through the property's gardens in the evenings, and Mathilda's father implores her to stay up to read to him from literature, as his wife Diana had done, according to his growing image of his daughter as his former wife (62). This mistake is another indication of how relational attachments are strongly mediated through art, expressing the reach of language in relation to love. Yet, the bonds of affection partially supplied through poetry still want further sympathy in evolving stories open to personal revisions.

Sebastian is similarly trapped by rigid narrative: he is constructed through other people's conflicting stories, as well as by literature through his own writing in a very slim volume of poetry. Catherine, having been with Sebastian when he died, tells the most credible story of Sebastian's death—which is also a truth about his identity, connected to his taboo homosexual desire. However, since Violet Venable wants to control the public script of her son's life, fearing a besmirching of both his and her reputations, she cannot allow Catherine to share the story of sexual taboo. In part, Violet's over-identification with her son as an idealized sexual type means that the taboo story is also a violation of her character, betraying her role as an ideal guardian. As well, outside of writing, where Sebastian is hardly self-realized, he is described as faintly human, an insipid character. Catherine describes Sebastian as having a weakened heart, always dressed in white, unable to tolerate loud noise or the sun, sick with anxiety, trembling, and unable to eat anything but a diet of white pills. Besides not being adequately poetically productive, his only appetite (when away from his mother, who typically organizes his food consumption) is a sexual hunger for young men, which he cannot access without using Catherine as a lure (80-1). America's extreme legal and social censure of queerness is symbolized in *Suddenly Last Summer* through the enforcement of the silencing mother, Violet Venable, who in her incestuous-type control cannot recognize her son's separate sexuality and co-opts it, making it equal to her own as if they were married, restricting Sebastian's desire in a way that is similar to her restriction of his writing. When Doctor Sugar questions Violet about Sebastian's sexuality, Violet responds according to the delusional story she maintains of her son, calling Sebastian "chaste," and declaring that she was the only person who could "satisfy the demands he made of people" (25). Violet's idealization of her son will not permit her to regard him as a sexually autonomous being. Violet's investment in idealizing Sebastian incorporates even his imagination and private

reflections, similar to how Mathilda's own imagination and identity (including her sexuality) are co-opted by the force of her father's own imaginings and his incestuous love for her. Neither Sebastian nor Mathilda retain enough personal vitality through their own writing or expression, and they are unable to recover from their experiences of lack or loss of autonomous selves, leading to death.

Had the characters been able to communicate their situations of confinement sufficiently, the pains might have lessened. However, the taboo nature of their experiences prevents free expression. The problems of expression for the characters are compounded by their want of shared narratives, with problems in language becoming a death-wish and death. In her pioneering work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman states: "Certain violations of the social compact [such as incest] are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable" (1). Both Sebastian and Mathilda's inabilities to tell or alter a difficult story about crushing constraint leads to their social isolation and despair. Sebastian's complex confinement in sexual expression is also his literary limit and the ultimate limit on his life. Mathilda cannot speak openly about her experience except through a letter, written in a state of suicidal despair on the edge of her death. Sebastian stops writing poetry and similarly fades from life in a passive suicidal swoon. Both Shelley and Williams strongly suggest that language could act as adequate compensation for chaotic situations, such as taboo desire, incestuous sexuality, or other problems of embodiment, except when the restriction of not being able to express the taboo story prevents recovery.

In her discussion of Shelley's use of language and storytelling, in "'Kingdom of Shadows': Intimations of Desire in Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," Diana Edelman-Young says that the narrative of *Mathilda* is one of chaos breeding invention, as a type of narratively inscribed

Oedipal-reconciliation for the girl whose father fell in love with her (118). The story of taboo desire, told for the first and only time in Mathilda's letter to Woodville is, according to Edelman-Young, a dramatization of her body and her own death, a type of self-control or self-assertion (118). Edelman-Young sees a libidinal compromise in the letter to Woodville as a type of triumphant self-assertion through language (119-20). Writing the letter offers Mathilda a moment of relief before she dies, and it is the only relief she has experienced since she discovered that her father fell torturously in love with her, after which he killed himself to relieve himself from the shameful agony of this desire, leaving her to dwell solitarily in the aftermath of a story she must keep secret. Edelman-Young sees Mathilda's confessional suicide letter to Woodville as a sort of fight against ideological impositions, or secret-keeping, and a form of authentic connection (121). However, the letter is also a mediated expression confessing the death wish for one who has not formerly been able to freely share herself with others, and the reader is left uncertain of Woodville's response. While Mathilda still wants a connection that could inspire her will to live, she believes her intractable story is incompatible with living. Her desire for an open friendship is overshadowed by her more pressing desire to end all desires, which she can only limitedly express in writing, along with the horrors that have severed her from society, casting her into her lonely wilderness of grief. She explains the difficulty of living with a story she cannot share:

> Who can be more solitary even in a crowd than one whose history and the never ending feelings and remembrances arising from it is known to no living soul. There was too deep a horror in my tale for confidence; I was on earth the sole depository of my own secret. I might tell it to the winds and to the desert heaths but I must never among my fellow creatures, either by word or look give allowance to the smallest conjecture of

> the dread reality. I must shrink before the eyes of man lest he should read my father's guilt in my glazed eyes. (83)

Mathilda lives sadly bound by her secret, and she comes to believe that, should she live, she must live falsely, which is an abhorrent idea for this "Nursling of Nature's bright self" who is intent on moral purity (83). Lonely and isolated, existing in extreme shame, Mathilda longs for a friend. However, since her story is transgressive, when empathizing Woodville comes as a viable confidant, Mathilda is too inhibited to tell him the truth of her experience. Mathilda remains silent until when she is probably at the end of her life, very sick with "consumption" (*i.e.*, tuberculosis), and she writes the letter to Woodville which tells of her secret (*i.e.*, the basis of the epistolary narrative of *Mathilda*), which is a limited self-recovery in language.

The situation of personal identities silenced by imposed narratives is the problem neither Sebastian nor Mathilda can resist, appearing as consumption metaphors related to suicidality in each text. As Faubert indicates, Mathilda's father's desire for his daughter becomes wholly possessive: "The father's failure to recognize Mathilda's autonomy appears in all its depravity through his desire to possess Mathilda sexually" (18). Since Mathilda's entire self is consumed by her father's possessiveness, and she is now the total object of her father's troubling affection, she is pushed into a despair that she cannot alter or undo through language, in part due to how much her self-identity (including the taboo love with her father) has been constructed by her father's narrative. Mathilda becomes convinced that her self-identity is an identification with her dead father, as he has defined her. Mathilda longs to wed her father in death, saying: "In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in fancying her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in eternal mental union we shall never part" (112). The taboo of

incestuous passion enforces a silence on Mathilda that causes her to believe that her story is incompatible with her living, yet she longs to speak the truth. Mathilda even attempts to court Woodville into dying alongside her, so strong is her desire for union and to communicate her experience, which cannot be uttered while she is alive. Mathilda confesses that in life she has learned and is governed by the language of despair, but in death she and Woodville would wake as angels, with Mathilda able to express freely the truths of a story no longer tainted by worldly judgments (103-04). Kristeva similarly refers to the suicidal fantasy of returning to the lost object of affection using the metaphor of a wedding, stating: "One can imagine the delights of reunion that a regressive daydream promises itself through the nuptials of suicide" (1). Mathilda imagines her wedding as entering a marriage to the truth of a story whose pains cannot be relieved by living in her silent despair. Woodville refuses the suicide pact, leaving Mathilda to write her letter as the only means to communicate herself to her friend. Yet, Mathilda finds only very limited release and a truncated form of self-definition in writing her suicide letter, which also reveals the story of her previous traps in language. These traps lead to Mathilda becoming suicidally swallowed by despair.

The consumption metaphor indicating the loss of self as a tenet of suicidality is equally forceful in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Unlike in Williams's satires where consumption is erotic bliss, here eros is thwarted and consumption is a terrifying image. Violet makes much of Sebastian's search for God, as she believes this point elevates his stature as a poet driven to manifest higher ideals through art. Violet explains that her son saw God one day, in the terror of a sky blackened with birds that were swooping to consume a fleet of newly born baby turtles on a beach as the turtles raced toward the water to begin their independent lives (20). This metaphor for natural terror is repeated through the text, beginning with the description of Sebastian's

mother's garden as a "jungle tumult" (9), which Violet guards, and including Sebastian's flirtation with elements of personal wildness, including sexual desire, but it also refers to Violet's psychological terrorization of her son and his image – or his entrapment in her narrative. The consumption metaphor repeats itself in Sebastian's violent end, in part as an expression of his inability to resist Violet's restrictions of his artistic and sexual expressions—or what would determine his independent existence, counter to his faintness and suicidality. Sebastian's death is ultimately a symbolic representation of problems in language, personal expression, and communication. Suddenly one summer, while on holiday away from his mother for the first time, Sebastian is killed by a group of wildly frenzied, cannibalizing street-children whom he previously feared and shunned. The children do not speak language that is intelligible to Sebastian. Instead, they loudly sound sets of drums and cymbals, and they scream, sing, chant, or screech raw, chaotic sounds—like the sounds of Sebastian's mother's garden at home, guarded over by Violet, or the screeching birds on the beach, eating the baby turtles (84-92). Catherine describes Sebastian as being "paralyzed" in relation to the chaos, with his weakened heart experiencing palpitations (90). Since Sebastian's own desires, including his poetic impulse and sexual desires, have been so constantly controlled and thwarted by Violet, he is unable to speak to, contain, translate, express or avoid the chaos of himself and his surroundings, which become wholly and violently consumptive. Catherine explains that Sebastian refused to go inside to avoid the cannibals, but he instead began to run as if he wanted to be chased, until he "screamed just once" before being overtaken (91). Sebastian's inability to experience release through the free expression of his own identity is represented by his death in the text. Sebastian is metaphorically consumed by his own inability to resist death, in a passive fall into self-annihilating chaos, akin to Kristeva's silence of being, characteristic of a suicidal consciousness.

The metaphor of devouring or becoming devoured emblematizes the impossibility of existence for the unreconciled, creative character, as related to consumptive despair and death within psychologically violent situations that prevent autonomous, sexual, and creatively expressive freedoms.

There are other instances of problems related to confining narratives and limited communication in Williams and Shelley which emphasize both the power and potential danger related to narrative-identity, dependent upon who is doing the defining, or on how stories are able to be shared or received. O'Connor writes of ostensibly discredited language still bearing a painful, poetic truth related to Blanche in *Streetcar,* comparing Blanche's ostracization and silencing to Catherine's, saying: "In both plays the confinement hinges on a story of an unmentionable act, a violation of an accepted societal taboo" ("Babbling" 17). Herman's assessment of healing related to psychological trauma depends on the situation of shared narratives, pertaining to fostering intimacy with others, in part through speaking openly and having the story believed (134). The difficulty for Catherine and Blanche is in being believed in the face of forceful opposition. Blanche is the suffering, Romantic character who speaks poetically, venerates poetry, and is nonetheless redeemed by poetry while she is horribly ostracized—a point which is potentially clear to the audience, but misunderstood by other characters in the play. Shelley similarly addresses the theme of narrative restrictions in her 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*, which features themes of literature and storytelling. In "The Pathology of the Romantic Subject and Mary Shelley's Cure for Melancholia in *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda*," Mark Edelman Boren and Katherine Montwieler consider the novels together as Shelley's critique of the isolated Romantic subject, potentially lost to sad egotism, reflecting primarily on the artist-self in isolation. Boren and Montwieler also read Shelley in relation to an aspect of

Kristevan melancholy, particularly with reference to Shelley's suggestion that the artist cannot exist in isolation: "Although solitude is necessary for intellectual and creative development, Shelley suggests the survival and emotional health of the self also depends upon authentic intersubjectivity and community" (1). Kazan, in his play-notes which he prepared in anticipation of directing *Streetcar* for its Broadway premiere, says that one of Blanche's central conflicts is her egotism, her sense of separateness formed and maintained through a romantic fantasy, or an imagined story of herself as being set apart (46). Blanche is clearly unique in her creative expression. She is the character who epitomizes exquisite wit, humour, and skillful poeticism in the play. She is the play's artistic voice. However, she is isolated and, in a sense, walled off by language as she cannot share a common referent. Williams often writes of the loneliness of the creative character in want of communion. Certainly, Shelley wants communion related to storytelling, and her texts refer to storytelling's place in managing the healing bonds of community.

If the artist is dangerously alone, then Shelley's focus lights on the necessity for freedom in personal expression in attempts to connect with others. While the tragic results in *Frankenstein* fundamentally spin out of Dr. Victor Frankenstein's decisions and he is personally tortured by the events, the narrative of silence due to fear and shame is emphasized through the son-figure: the doctor's created monster. The monster becomes the most extreme figure of abjection in the text in that he cannot communicate with anyone. The inability to communicate results in extreme and pervasive danger that begins with the monster's lonely isolation, which resembles Mathilda's isolated state. However, Shelley repeatedly suggests ways out of the trap of isolation for her characters, such as through literature and shared expression. While reading literature and listening to other people's stories instils empathy in the monster, proving

language's potential to foster humanizing bonds, the monster remains trapped in mere sympathy with literature and disconnected from humans. Here the monster resembles the sensitive, Romantic figure of alienation. The monster explains that reading Goethe's *Werther*, as well as Plutarch and Dante, and listening outside the cottage of the De Laceys to their stories "accorded well . . . with the wants that were in [his] . . . own bosom," but he still despaired of his lonely state (113). While the creature is informed by stories, in want of communion or sharing narratives with others, he remains uncertain of his identity, his purpose in life, and his place in the world. The creature's alienation becomes another type of social death, or social suicide, compelling the monster's rage through his realization of becoming lost in the silence of complete aloneness, enforcing Shelley's directive that art is best as a language of connection.

The issue of the force of language as it navigates wild, psychologically precarious, or violent terrains and the question of what becomes lost when language cannot act as a correction are the Romantic preoccupations of Williams and Shelley. In her famous Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Toni Morrison said: "We die. That may be the meaning of our lives. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (247). In a sense, language is a bulwark against death. Both Sebastian's and Mathilda's abilities to define their own meaning are severely altered by parental limits and restrictions around the telling of stories, related, in part, to taboo sexuality. Writing or creative expressions in and though language are self-assertions against the chaos of existence and various limits of psychological violence. An artist creates against the fact of the erasure of death, that final silence. Williams, for instance, wrote almost every day of his emotionally tumultuous life. Shelley wrote many significant novels, despite the deaths of several children and her husband. There is something in personal expression through language that becomes like a thread, tying a person to life. The literary arts can alter the bonds of truth about

one's existence because of the ways in which language initially creates or contributes to those truths. While confinement related to art and expression are the resonant themes in Williams and Shelley, there is yet hope. Even if writing is incomplete, writing still thematically forms a type of secondary embodiment in both writers, in which the generative, or life-giving, property in text and art is at least a drive toward psychic wholeness, especially if the story can be shared. Williams explains his purpose in writing to address "the crying, almost screaming need of a great, worldwide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better, well enough to concede that no man has a monopoly on right or virtue any more than any man has a corner on duplicity and evil" ("The World" 84). Catherine in *Suddenly Last Summer* reflects the uncomfortable necessity of unrestricted identity, including free expression in sexuality and art. While Violet employs Dr. Sugar to violently cut the taboo story out of Catherine through lobotomy, Sebastian's story is still told. The play ends with unconfined narrative and poetic expressions as the final authorities on personal identity in the last line of the play, expressed by Dr. Sugar, when he says of Catherine the babbler, "I think we ought to at least consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true" (*Suddenly* 93). Shelley's veneration of language and writing is equally great. The reader is instructed in lessons of empathy when reading of what civilizes the monster in *Frankenstein*, as literature inspires his human-like heart. Although the characters Sebastian and Mathilda are consumed by what they cannot resist through writing, both characters still indicate imagination and art's redemptive, elevating qualities, toward a possible, healing connection.

There is a kindred exploration in *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Mathilda* of the theme of the broken world, with art, especially writing and shared narratives, posited as that which might piece it back together. Both Williams and Shelley strongly suggest that language could act as

adequate compensation for chaotic situations, such as taboo desire, incestuous sexuality, or other problems of embodiment, except when the restriction of not being able to express the taboo story prevents recovery, indicating the need for receptive listening. Both Sebastian and Mathilda's interior worlds are violated to the extent that language as a viable outlet to alleviate anxiety, loss of self, depression, grief, and isolation become usurped by the killing plague on imagination and expression, which in Williams and Shelley is also the death of self. Williams's personal understanding of his own writing process is well expressed at the midway point of his near fifty-year career, when he credits writing with releasing him from "a sense of meaninglessness and death" (4). In the same essay, which is also the forward to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams also calls writing "my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge" (*Sweet Bird* 1). Shelley similarly credits writing with sustaining her. As a significant writer, daughter to significant writers, and wife to a significant writer, Shelley's preoccupation with the phenomenology of writing, literature, and storytelling is germane. Shelley states as much in her "Author's Introduction" to the 1831 revised publication of *Frankenstein*, in explaining her writing and storytelling process from early childhood as vital to her experiences of being (*Frankenstein* xxi). Shelley's *Mathilda* is a meditation on narrative affect, a meditation that occurs repeatedly in Williams's work from the Modernist period, which is most often credited with reflecting literary metanarratives. Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* explores the terrors of voicelessness in a Romantic tone similar to the strongly resonant voice of Mary Shelley.

III. The Saving Lie of Poetry and the Sheltering Poetic

An instance in Williams's canon where a character is confined within sexuality while still retaining prolific use of language as at least a potential liberator, depending on whether her

message is received, is through the character of Blanche from *Streetcar*. Williams cultivates this character as one figure among other spinsters who use language to try to secure at least a tenuous place in the material, with the force of the lack of material safety leading to possible madness or death for a Williams character. Saddik says that "the eruption of violence in Williams' work is often a manifestation of the fear and frustration of being trapped in language" (*Excess* 43). Since Blanche's language is her only shield in a hostile situation, she succumbs to the violence of her environment (including her terrorizing inner-world) through the alienating compromise of madness. The limit related to language is here again related to isolation, as the community in the play does not believe Blanche and ultimately discredits all of her uses of language, including the creative. Lack of receptivity in the play limits the efficacy of language and creative expression as potential alleviators of Blanche's isolation. Blanche's character, while understood in terms of the spinster confined through heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist sex/gender roles of the early to mid-twentieth-century, can also be considered related to the effects of language and Williams's overriding idea about the significance of storytelling and art, with poetic affect being necessarily related to embodied experience. In Williams, the more disembodied a character, the greater the force of language as an expression of the difficulty of the split that language is uniquely suited to mend. One who is very removed from herself or isolated within the group can ideally rely on language to reunify her. However, Blanche is pushed back and prevented from crossing the ideal language bridge that would connect her, and she is ultimately forced into madness as an effect of the communal efforts to silence her. Yet, the strong suggestion in *Streetcar* of at least the hope that Blanche will be heard, and the necessity of her sanity being directly related to her being heard, evidences Williams's Romanticism as a hearty revolt against silencing systems.

A question of fidelity in language is coloured in Williams by its inflection relative to principles of art. In his assessment of the narrativizing function of the artist, Williams says: "It is the responsibility of the writer to put his experience as a being into work that refines it and elevates it and that makes of it an essence that a wide audience can somehow manage to feel in themselves: 'This is true'" ("Too Personal" 167). Art (often in the form of poetry or poetic use of language) functions in Williams as a mode of communication which carries the potential for human connection, even if an immediate connection does not occur. If the audience relates to the character's message, then an idea about the significance of connection is enforced, and, however latent, language then still functions as a possible, empathetic bridge. A sense of the resonance of truth as a creative construction that is yet faithful to human experience is distilled into the language of emotional essence through metaphoric imagery. In this sense, poetry can tell a universal story even as it appears to recall the singular experience of one poet. The writer, or sensitive, artistic character-type in Williams—a Blanche Dubois type—is the figure who both reveals and shields various pains of human experience with language that wounds and therefore bears the potential to heal, depending on whether the truths find shelter in a receptive listener through an empathetic response. Williams examines the artist/sensitive character as a major figure in his drama as the one who illuminates for an audience an image of human tragedy that often cannot be remedied, except through a moment of artistic affect, as when the metaphorical aspect of one's story resonates in a moment of mutual understanding and relief from isolation. After Mitch kisses Blanche and she says: "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!" (116), the audience feels her deep relief in having her wish to be in safe union come true, and the idea of one finding shelter in the embrace of another is poetically expressed by Blanche (and therefore

by Williams) as a holy moment in which God becomes a metaphor that need not be objectively verified as true to have a momentary, miraculously transfiguring effect.

In the case of Blanche, the fading, sensitive portend of death in *Streeetcar*, one of the central questions of language pertains to her contradictions, which are not resolved within the play to any peaceful conclusion, but which, while ultimately tearing her apart in the unforgiving world of the play, still stand up to the interrogation of an audience. What of Blanche's affected speech does not simply disappear into non-sensibility to the extent that her language appears inconsequential within her world, since she is discredited as a liar? In *Streetcar*, Williams dramatizes the situation of obfuscation (or fabulation) through language as a type of grace. This situation is apparent in Blanche's fantastical telling of her supposed new beau, the oil baron, Shep Huntleigh, whom she says is coming to rescue her. While the story is placed in the narrative by Williams as a metaphor for the empty-promise of the saviour-patriarch,[58] the story is also a metaphor for potential grace in art and imagination. Although Stanley knows that Blanche is fabricating the story, Shep is not coming, and the story is technically a lie, the fantasy exists for Blanche as a saving shelter (153-57). Of course, the shelter is no lasting refuge, just as the Godly (poetic) moment of Mitch's sheltering embrace could not protect Blanche past the instant, but an instant of relief, Williams says, is extremely significant if its contents are held in memory and carefully examined for motivation and their potential effects, with the goal and result of creative construction often being the realization of a place of temporary cover for a vulnerable character in need. The embellishments of narrativization as elements of art often have a saving function, as Williams explains in his essay on dramatic affect, "The Timeless World of a Play":

[58] See Chapter One for an exploration of the metaphor as it relates to the politics of patriarchy and Blanche's political resistance.

> In actual existence the moments of love are succeeded by the moments of satiety and and sleep. The sincere remark is followed by a cynical distrust. Truth is fragmentary, at best: we love and betray each other in not quite the same breath but in two breaths that occur in fairly close sequence. But the fact that passion occurred in *passing,* that it then declined into a more familiar sense of indifference, should not be regarded as proof of its inconsequence. And this is the very truth that drama wish[es] to bring us. (60)

There are other instances in Williams of the truth being softened in a narrative moment to a character's advantage. When Mrs. Wire, the dyspeptic landlady of the boarding house in *Vieux Carré,* threatens the dying artist character, Nightingale, Writer admonishes Wire to go easy on him, protecting Nightingale who is in denial about the severity of his tuberculosis and is technically lying about the fact that he is dying from the disease. Wire wants Nightingale to acknowledge the truth about his condition, but Writer tells Wire that Nightingale's lie is his "last defense" against the too-terrible truth of his lonely and imminent death (74). Wire retorts: "The truth, there's no defense against truth" (74). However, Wire's demand for truth in this situation appears as another brutal aspect of her character, and the audience sympathizes with Nightingale's desire for dignity, which Writer asserts is to be achieved through allowing him in his final moments to mediate his own death through a story about what is happening, although it is a fantasy.

Williams's works emphasize the tension between the poles of the wounding or potentially healing language related to wounding or potentially healing realities. Blanche pulls her audience into her contradictions and the contradictions in the play through fantastical or deadly realistic descriptions of experience, where audience decisions must be made about trust and allegiance, paralleling the choices the other characters must make in the play as they decide whether

Blanche is a character worth respecting, listening to, or protecting. Despite the sullying claims, and the suspicion of her lying, Blanche's troubling behaviour, or the charges against her due to her obfuscations, Blanche's speech functions as Charles Altieri's resounding "judicious pointing" (237) from the stage, whereby the dramatic moments emphasize emotional necessity and reality through poetic affect, and call forth an emotional, ideally a compassionate response from an audience. Williams is clear in his communication to Kazan about the play: "I don't want to focus guilt or blame particularly on any one character but to have…[*Streetcar* presented] as a tragedy of misunderstandings and insensitivity to others" (63). In his reading of the way that Williams allows Blanche her dignity (and ultimately her credibility) during her final exit in the last scene of the play through her declaration to an audience in poetic speech, despite her having been discredited and dismissed as mad within the world of the play, Toles says that:

> Blanche is as careless and damaging in her words and judgments as the other characters in the play, but she is still, for Williams, the imagination's chosen emissary and prophet. From the outset, she inhabits a language so resilient and expressive that it transfigures her demeaning situation into something estimable, something allied to beauty. ("Kindness" para. 26)

The questions for an audience are whether and how to respond with sensitivity to Blanche's need, to avoid repeating the sort of violent judgments that so tragically occur in the drama. Poetic beauty is a compelling force, and metaphor is a potential pathway to intimacy. One of the most famous lines in American drama, the words Blanche declares as she is lifted from her place of terror on the ground by the doctor who gently pulls her up and then extends a steadying arm that Blanche gratefully takes hold of, the last words Blanche speaks in the final moments of the play,

"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (178), resound as Williams's most pertinent question, the call at the heart of all his drama. Will the audience respond to this vulnerability with a kindness that Blanche's world lacks?

The doctor is a symbol of a receptive listener, a character whom Williams positions to show the possibility of one consciously coming into communion, even with the most difficult of figures. The ease rests on the doctor's lack of force, his lack of turning away, his openness to Blanche, his willingness to assist her with care. Toles says that the doctor's respectful stance in relation to Blanche functions thus: "Instead of exposing Blanche and further shaming her, his action serves to expose his own person to her in a way that validates her capacity to judge it" (para. 38). This instant, if it is not enough to restore Blanche to sanity, is still a powerful moment that causes the audience to wonder if Blanche may have been saved had she been earlier met with similar support. Through the doctor figure, Williams offers his audience an opportunity to similarly sympathize, to enter into a position of receptivity also, a potentially healing stance. Toles describes the effect of Williams's revelation in *Streetcar*:

> All of the great plays…ultimately center, as this one does, on one or more exalted moments of seeing and being seen…[and t]his shared emphasis suggests…that what the mystery drama may be best equipped to illuminate is the mystery of seeing others momentarily in their wholeness, without impediment or distortion." (para. 38)

This sentiment echoes William's own words on the illuminative effect of drama from his essay, "The Timeless World of a Play," when he says that since "[c]ontemplation is something that exists outside of time…[as does] the tragic sense" (59), a character may become revealed "within the limits of our emotional equipment" (61) in a moment that can expand both the limits of

vision and one's emotional equipment. Since an audience member is free to reflect on and respond to the character in a private moment from the quiet safety of one's own seat, or later in imagination as the play is recalled, ideally unimpeded by any immediate pressure, which, in regular human discourse Williams says can alter the process of seeing, an audience member might be able to see more of and give more to a character than what one can normally do with a fellow human. One might feel free to more generously offer up more of one's own emotional self in a moment to the emotional reflections recognized in a character than what one might feel safe enough to risk giving to a stranger or even someone close, especially if the character is a troubling type. This offering is expansive, as it potentially increases compassionate understanding (59-62). This is also to say that a character who is revealed on the stage potentially reveals something to an audience member of her own propensity for viewing, her capacity for vision, the state of her own judgments and the limits, questions, or needs of her own emotional being. The drama of *Streetcar*, in a sense, turns an audience member into another character, who can then decide how to respond to the validity of Blanche's feelings and her rightful claim and need for protection.

In part it is the "shimmer and glow" (92) creative nature of Blanche's language and her attempts to control her own narrative that the other characters in the play will not abide. The event of Stanley raping Blanche, as well as Blanche telling Stella the story of the rape, both occur offstage, emphasizing that the heart of the horror is hidden from view, and Blanche's stories—all that she has to defend herself with—are either repeatedly misunderstood or denied throughout the play because they do not fit the rigidly narcissistic stories the other characters tell to organize their own worlds. Blanche is severed from consensual reality for want of shared narratives. Language is Blanche's only tool for expression, and as her story is too unpopular or

dangerous to be held with care, Blanche, at the height of her injury, goes unheard and therefore unnurtured by the people closest to her. Since Blanche's words cannot ring true in her environment, or her speech (related to the rape) points to a meaning too terrible to be accepted by her sister, Stella, Blanche's redemption and the very integrity of her character are left to her audience's regard and sympathies. It is not until Blanche's last safety has been denied her, when her story is discredited and any attempt at communion with her sister eradicated, that Blanche finally crosses the line between worlds and enters the impossibility of any opportunity for restorative relationship—a state which is also called madness. Blanche appears in the final scene of the play as consumed by delusion, very far from the world, and, except for during the brief moment with the doctor, her language becomes an emptiness, a displaced echo, as Blanche is revealed as being lost in what Foucault calls "the void within which the experience of madness resides" (*Madness* 126). The inability of the violent order to make a safe home for Blanche is Foucault's "effective causality of a world that cannot, of itself, offer a solution to the contradictions that it has given rise to" (*Madness* 137). The only way to cross the void is through a mutual, imaginative leap, which requires a belief that the risk is worth taking. However, the unacknowledged madness of the *Streetcar* world forces confinement for the individual who is alienated from common language within established, consensual bounds of reality, and this, Foucault says, is the psychodynamic crux of madness (138-9). That Blanche's poetry becomes finally withered as her charms are exhausted by an unforgiving crowd is a sign that the refuge of language largely depends on it establishing a safe home. The difficulty in communicating across great distances is presented by Williams as a danger, but not a futile effort. While it might not always be enough to save a character, attempting to tell the story of one's self at least has the potential to be healing, but much depends on the presence or receptivity of a listener. Blanche

knows the “treasures” of her heart (156), but she cannot express them in any language familiar or acceptable to her group, and so they are apparently finally diminished, distorted so that she can no longer hope to share them.

Creative use of language can be a shabby cloak or a meagre defence against the chilling wilderness of mad silence. If one could hear the inner dialogue of Blanche’s grief spelled out neatly in unmistakable tones, stripped of all affectation, poetry, or fabulation, she might become accepted by the other characters as more believable, but she would not necessarily be more attractive to them or worthy of being saved. She still could not be guaranteed love or a safe home, for she would still carry the ugliness of certain brutal truths in her body and, unless she is silent or performs as a perfect victim, her rejection is assured. While Blanche is dismissed, language still holds her up as she is “only passing through” (173) the violent room. And while Blanche is banished and will remain gone, she leaves something behind. Her story will resonate as an echo, although it was not believed during the time of her telling it. When Stanley sinks to his knees, reaching for Stella’s breast in the last moments of the drama as Stella decides how to live with both her own and her husband’s lies, the future conflict is predicted (179). Forgetfulness is the real delusion. Death will still come and Blanche is now an intractable third in the marriage of the couple. Within a shifting terrain of distances, between various facets of individual and communal expression, no system can gain a total purchase on truth.

IV Bridging the Orphic Distance

Williams writes about distances that cannot be bridged and gaps that cannot be filled, except possibly through an anarchistic spirit of art, a possibility symbolized by the snakeskin trace of “[w]ild things” that Carol in *Orpheus Descending* says after Valentine is killed at the end

of the play, "leave…behind them" (*Orpheus* 125). The trace is also discoverable in the sound of Carol's laughter fading from the audience after she escapes Sheriff Talbot and runs offstage in the final moments of the drama (125-6), or in the rise of music that Williams cues to sound above the scene of Val being immolated in the hellish place, as the possibility of a poetic spirit evading the persecution for one who does not conform to the established order. On one level of understanding, the sociological, a lack of connection between characters in the drama, *Orpheus Descending*, is due to political structures that Williams calls out as the patriarchal, White-supremacist, heteronormative, puritanically Christian, and capitalist confinements governing the Southern world. Metaphysically and emotionally, the gaps are what the rough, false, political categorizations are erroneously built upon—misrecognition, lack of understanding, and confining judgments over curiosity, or the silencing systems that art resists.[59] The distance between the desiring subject and the object of desire in Williams is an Orphic distance, as while the characters exist either in perpetual states of homelessness through exile or madness, or they are killed, and while a figure can never be completely relieved of the burden of their own separate and isolated self, there is through recollections of the poetic story a spirit presented of the sad loss of love and an insistence of legitimate, human need which might inspire a tenderness in response, or the type of kindness Blanche seeks.

The character Valentine Xavier in *Orpheus* is an artist (a musician in *Orpheus* and a poet in the earlier incarnation of the play, *Battle of Angels*) who loses his beloved, Lady, as she also loses him when the two both die, but the spirit of their outlaw love is the story commemorated in the drama, as if it still lives. Val is as Orpheus from Ovid's version of the myth, who says to

[59] See Chapter Two of this dissertation for a complete exploration of *Orpheus Descending* as it related to political distance/racialization. See Chapter One of this dissertation for a discussion of Carol Cutrere from *Orpheus Descending* as a politically inconvenient, queer spinster character.

Hades after he has entered the underworld and charmed the god with his music to plead for his beloved, Eurydice, to be returned to him from the underworld, "If fate denies us / This privilege for my wife, one thing is certain: / I do not want to go up either; triumph / In the death of two" (*Metamorphoses* 235), as if Hades had kept Orpheus trapped in death. In one of several incidents of Williams's reworking of the myth in the play, or his playing off the myth—as, in Ovid, Orpheus loses Eurydice for a second time and is permanently separated from her when he breaks his pact and is sent back to the surface of the earth, while Eurydice remains in Hades—both Val and Lady enter death together, at the same time. In Williams's *Orpheus*, Val and Lady are killed by Hades who appears in the form of the Jabe Torrance figure (along with his cohort), which, since the play's setting of Two Rivers County is a hellscape, strongly suggests that Williams allows the couple to remain together, at least in spirit, and that as they escape through death, they transfigure hell and return to light. In the original myth, Orpheus's art moves the god and his consort, Persephone, and changes the laws of the worlds. Ovid writes: "And with his words, the music / Made the pale phantoms weep" (*Metamorphoses* 235). This event is recorded as if it is the beginning of music, the first time it has truly been heard, for while Orpheus has long been a player: "That was the first time ever in all the world / The Furies wept" (235). The chthonic spirits who bear no pity for human suffering, nor care for the grief of human heartbreak, and understand nothing of the passion of human love are moved by Orpheus's lament for his dead wife. They are so moved that they alter eternal laws, to permit Orpheus's grief in song to resound ever after on the surface of the earth as a force of change, the possibility of easing human suffering, and an opportunity to have some version of the lost beloved restored through authentic longing expressed in art.

In a 2022 radio-program documentary episode on the Orpheus myth, "Don't Look Back," CBC program "Ideas" host, Nahlah Ayed, prefaces the exploration of the myth with a clear statement: "a myth, it's been said, is a story that's always happening and therefore says something about how we live right now" ("Don't Look Back" 1:03). There are ways in which aspects of the message of the myth of Orpheus are alive in much of Williams's drama. Many Williams plays are set only a few steps away from the cypress grove where listeners, for a moment, are beckoned to leave the old world behind and enter into an imagined circle that, through narrative, permits the distances to be bridged. Thompson says of *Orpheus Descending* that the play is overloaded with "symbolic references [which] are not organically evocative but intellectual and often esoteric, [so that] they can be apprehended only as puzzling or extraneous in performance" (93). Thompson's telling is that Williams's *Orpheus* is less an instinctive play appealing to the collective unconscious of an audience and more a deliberate, intellectually constructed and probably unrelatable overlay (93). Yet, there are ways that Val parallels Orpheus so that even those who are unaware of the myth might feel sympathy for the lonely wanderer, the sensual, fugitive musician and former hustler who lost his heart in the Witches' Bayou at age 15 when he was ushered into a life of carnal suffering that left him soulless and lonely, except through the comfort of his "life's companion" (49), his guitar, until he meets Lady, and the pair fall genuinely in love. However, since the love is transgressive, in part because it breaks the rules of the Southern, sexual order, the political world will not bear it. Lady, who is like Eurydice in her inspiration of Val to stop wandering, is also like Eve, who has plucked the fruit and is now punished for her transgression. The possibility in the love appears in the drama to each character in the couple as an end to all former pains, as if they could be reborn in love, until the love is

prevented by a destructive, jealous, consumptive force that wants power and cannot respect difference, individual choice, creative expression, or freedom in love.

Ayed says of the original myth that "Orpheus is a ghost story, and a love story, and a story about art and music and how they get made" ("Don't Look Back" 0:43). Williams's drama tells the story of an impossible love, or a love that supposedly does not last the attack of dissent. Val looks back in violation of the order to leave town, remaining in the confectionary with Lady to help her open it instead of trusting that she will follow him—a moment of doubt from this normally confident, prideful Val/Orpheus figure as his fatal, human flaw, especially emphasized in Lumet's 1960 film version of the drama (with the screenplay co-written by Williams), *The Fugitive Kind*—and through this hesitation in carrying them both to safety, they both lose their lives. Ann Wroe says of the Orpheus myth:

> It symbolizes the way the artist when he finds something, when he's suddenly inspired, when he sees beauty, when something really speaks to him, he loses it when he tries to seize it…that you have something in your head that you actually can't bring down…somehow it's going to get away from you because it's something that lives. ("Don't Look Back" 16:20)

However, Williams's message about love in this drama is as in Dylan Thomas's famous line from his poem "And Death Shall have No Dominion" when Thomas says: "Though lovers be lost, love shall not" (8). What lives on in Williams's *Orpheus* after the lovers die exists in memory, which, as in Williams's other plays about artists, *Menagerie* and *Vieux Carré,* is where the play begins in its original incarnation, *Battle of Angels*. *Battle,* as Williams's original *Orpheus,* opens a year after the events of the tragic narrative in a museum after Val and Lady have died, in the setting of the former Torrance Mercantile Store, which now houses the

memorabilia of the "sensational events which had taken place there," including Val's snakeskin jacket (his symbol), which is suspended from the ceiling (*Battle* 5). While this prologue is removed from the final version of the drama, *Orpheus,* which begins prior to the murders, *Orpheus's* narrative still ends after the murders with the idea that the spirit which animated the love in the story is alive and will renew itself. There is also a sense in this work that what is always getting away and cannot be grasped, alongside something in art, is the perfect acquisition of love, or complete connection with the beloved—that which art often speaks to or works to amend. The impossibility of naming or taming love, of utterly defining a character, or of truly and fully knowing or seeing one's self or another, except, as Toles says, as what might happen in a mysterious instant, is what Williams records in this drama, with the revelation of recognition between Val and Lady acting as a brief, poetic flash that, while it might immediately burn out like a star, still lights the dark world.

In Martin Sherman's Introduction to a 2012 New Directions published edition of *Orpheus Descending,* Sherman discusses the play in the context of its contemporary politics, saying: "I always find it interesting that it is Arthur Miller and not Williams who is labeled the social realist. I doubt that the American theatre has ever had a more acute social realist than Tennessee Williams. The confusion is that he is writing realistically about poetic people" (2). The poeticism in this play refers to the lyrical expression of archetypal characters who are trying to raise a paradise in a swampy hell. In the moments before she dies, celebrating her fortune of having become pregnant with Val after a lifetime of extreme loss, Lady says: "I have life in my body, this dead tree, has burst in flower!" (122). However, the warped politics of the mercantile place will not permit such flourishing in love. The drama reflects the politics of the time in which it was written, but it also resounds allegorically as a record of the beauty, terror, horror, pity, and

the great human error and the great human need for love that Williams is always writing about. The political in Williams often frames the poetic, particularly centering on the restrictive politics placed onto the sexual body as what separate and isolate characters in need of communion, as the poetic resists such violent limitations. Williams regards the supposed split between the non-poetic (*i.e.*, the supposedly rational) and the poetic (the supposedly irrational) as a false dichotomy and proves the absurdity of systems of would-be strict definition that neglect the actual complex contingencies of embodiment, contingencies that in Williams's view can be expressed in communicative efforts through language that is necessarily imprecise, but still potentially resonates through recognition of shared, emotional experiences.

Characters reduced to a sexual body in Williams can find a partial freedom in the work through poetic expression. They are born in the liminal spaces, like the birds who Val says "live their whole lives on the wing" (*Orpheus* 48), as symbols of an artistic spirit that cannot be confined. The poetic sense of character is the sense which plays out in the drama as the Orphic distances that are Romantic openings onto worlds of meaning that are not singular, or fixed, but are instead alive with possibility. Val tells the Christian visionary painter, Vee Talbott, wife of Sheriff Talbot who paints her Expressionistic view of Two Rivers County without understanding its meaning: "You made some beauty out of this dark country" (75). Like Val, Vee is an outsider, a visionary artist-witness who paints truths that reflect her world, guided by an inner light, as Vee is going blind (72-73). This is a humble moment of cheeky acknowledgment for Williams that there is something of art that has a life of its own, and this life is what an artist is always most only reaching for and might not ever have full command or understanding of. However, through Vee, Williams shows the necessity of art as a counter to common, unquestioned cultural narratives, as Vee's art tells an honest story that wants to be heard of the political and religious

corruption and hypocrisy of the world that claims to be Christian, while committing and permitting the most horrific, violent, racist acts and grave injuries to human safety and love.

Williams emphasizes the tragedy of the severing and injuring distances through dramatizing an apparently strong division between the speaking, creative being and the sexual being, whereby if one aspect is exaggerated in a character, the balancing element is apparently sublimated or forced into confinement, with attempts in the artist-figures of Sebastian, Blanche, or Val to have the two supposedly opposed states come together in holistic expressions of sexual and loving desire/need and art. Each time, as the characters are prevented from realizing or benefitting from shelter, as they either die or are forced into the madness of extreme isolation with no hope for return within the world of the play, the lingering possibility that Tom from *Menagerie* and Writer from *Vieux Carré* realize remains. However, if the artist escapes with their full self-expression intact, the gain also comes at a cost of loss. As the myth of Orpheus expresses the living potential in art, it also shows the inevitability of lovers being lost. Yet, while the artist dies, he still sings, as there are echoes of an original, poetic voice, the voice of poetry and song, expressed in myriad tones and manifestations in all poetry and song, in a constantly evolving and inclusive human story with resonant points of connection. Williams dramatizes the sometimes tragic and essentially human eventuality (tragic or otherwise) of one necessarily coming to lose everything one loves, of almost always being at some distance from one's self and others, of never being able to completely recover what of love is lost, or being able to fully return to the blissful oneness of the garden, the embryonic state that Ginsberg in the final stanza of his beautiful poem "Song," which begins with the line "The weight of the world is love," commemorates as communion with the beloved in the lines:

yes, yes,

that's what

I wanted,

I always wanted,

I always wanted,

to return

to the body

where I was born.

Inevitable loss, Williams says, is our earthly predicament, our fallen state. The rigid attempts to control both love and loss are absurd in this hellish place, as nothing can fully satisfy the human craving for safety, and the generic difficulty of maintaining perfect faith in whom or what one loves will persist. Yet, in *Orpheus*, as in other works exploring art and the artist that all equally uphold the poetic, Williams Romantically suggests that art is the gift of a partial return, as it provides an opportunity as one of the closest ways one might come into communion with a distant other, through a momentary identification or oneness available through narrative.

Freud's analysis of the creative writer is that he sees in the artist-character a playful impulse discoverable in children as "the beginnings of poetic creativity" (25). Freud reasons: "The child's favourite and most intense occupation is play. We may perhaps say that every child at play behaves like a writer, by creating a world of his own or, to put it more correctly by imposing a new and more pleasing order on the things that make up his world" (25-26). The "new and more pleasing" in Williams is not always realized, but it is always suggested as a possibility, a question of what might happen were one to remain open to the various ways a character may reveal themselves, and what implications this might have, were one to take the

expansive vision one can gain through art into the rest of life with less defensive fear. Every time it is presented, the drama provides an opportunity for an audience to respond openly to the elements of being that can never absolutely fit description, and therefore can never be truly contained, although they are temporarily composed through narrative in various poetics of self-expression through complex expressions of character. In Sedgwick's system, the gaps and distances in definition are places of queer potential. Excessive sexual, emotional, imaginative, narrative-forming, and loving potential is the queer domain and the artist and art poetically narrate the liminal spaces and provide shapes and faces to the mysteries while acknowledging the impossibility of complete expression. The power of artistic imagination in Williams is a Romantic identity that sings of the significance or necessity of free self-expression as being vital even to life! In Williams's artistic aesthetic, the mechanism of at least reaching for awareness creates a triad, when after death is transfigured, and madness is made intelligible, and sex is contextualized, there is left over: love, art, and queerness.

Conclusion

"The Strange, The Crazed, The Queer" and other Troubling Beloveds

The sense of queerness that I work with in my reading of Williams is Sedgwickian in terms of the possibility of a character realizing a relative freedom to not be defined according to strict sexual terms of political origins. In this context, the White-supremacist, heterosexual, patriarchal capitalism which is especially restrictive to homosexuality, Black or racialized sexuality, miscegenation, and women's free sexual expression—including the freedom to exist as non-sexual or non-sexualized figures—is the limit that I read in Williams as being necessarily connected to limits on other forms of expression. My dissertation begins and ends with Williams's questions of the restrictions of the normative, nuclear family, as various injuries to love and self, and moves in the central chapters into the heart of what he centres as the twentieth-century American, sexuality-based conflict related to Othering, which is at the core of several significant and lesser-known narratives. My exploration describes the thematic impetus behind Williams's characters' exiles and their desires to return to Eden, or discover a home in the material world, safe in themselves and in their relationships with others—with attempts negotiated through language's myriad affects, from personal, poetic lyricism, through satirical mockery, to realizing art as resolution to loss. Throughout his canon, Williams questions language-based, cultural productions of meaning, including especially in his brazen, politically critical satires, the prevalence of dominant narratives with their reliance on stereotypes. As several Williams's characters rely on lyrical poetry in their attempts to claim an identity, they speak against social confinements with a rebellious, poetic spirit. The less obviously poetic characters whose language is more limited, and who also experience confinements of self-

identity within political narrative traps, are also those who struggle to personally claim and express meaning and desire. This challenge becomes the primary conflict of the drama.

My understanding of Williams's sense of Romanticism is as it relates to self-identity and queer expression, with implications for political and imaginative freedom. While art might be a compromise, as its idealism merely suggests a possibility for social change that might not manifest outside the drama, the artistic expression is still radical (or at least profound) when the suggestion is that poetry can provide intelligibility to madness, or possibly facilitate relief for a character who has experienced great loss—as what appears in *A Streetcar Named Desire, Portrait of a Madonna*, or *The Glass Menagerie*. The characters who expose and alter perceptions of stereotypes in provocative, satirical works such as "Desire and the Black Masseur" or *Kingdom of Earth* de-centre the sanctioned stories of sexual America and offer a world of revolutionary, political possibility. My reading of Williams's Romanticism is that it is both intellectual and emotional, and that it still upholds the irrational as it pertains to a private, imaginative (*i.e.*, poetic) freedom that cannot be politically bound by strict, categorical (*i.e.*, rational) definitions. Williams's work reflects both cynicism and hope in complex, poetic expression consistent with elements of the dark comedy, skepticism, and critique of language that Saddik says especially drives his later works (*Excess* 4-5). The potential freedom that exists in language in Williams's context does not appear as uninhibited expression. The political limit is always evident in the work, and poetry does not always save the character in peril. However, repeatedly Williams demonstrates the possibility that the limit could be altered. Individual, poetic affect, or creative expression, or subversive, queer expression as symbols in Williams are evidence of a spirit of being that, while it might be attached to a body highly contained or possibly injured or killed due to sexual politics, cannot be completely eradicated or controlled.

This makes Williams's characters and dramas Romantic in Berlin's sense, and in the sense of social critique, it makes the characters and dramas messengers of queer resistance.

The cultural systems which define and control beings based on sexual limits are illuminated in Williams as products of existential error and the height of political violence. The extent of the violence appears as a type of attempted soul-murder, through efforts to silence or bind the wild, irreducible, and singular sanctity of the individual human heart. Williams's scapegoats often become victims as they are reduced to a mere sexual body by systems of power, which he repeatedly shows to be a misrecognition of the complex being, who is either miscast, outcast, or, if not severely injured or killed in the drama, then is left unsafe and forced into abjection in their worlds in the saddest situations of love-loss and homelessness, except in rare moments of brief or faint connection. The problem is, as Williams exposes it, in part one of definition, as Williams queerly writes against the erroneous assumptions that a being can be characterized through a limiting, political categorization, or as if any supposed definition or stereotype can completely identify or explain a character. Williams often admits to working in the challenging, but honest domain of ambiguity, which, while discomforting for an audience—as the dramatic terrain is one of emotional intensity and uncertainty—is truer to life. This is so even as Williams crafts extreme caricatures or grotesques in his labyrinthine narratives, since, in all his work, he exposes the shadows of cultural assumptions, or complicates a character (sometimes, as in the satires, simply by showing them in contrast with another character or the limiting, political environment) in a way that facilitates a view beyond the dangerous vision of a "type" as it is seen in isolation, as repeated through various political, othering campaigns. As Williams explains: "Every moment of human existence is alive with uncertainty" ("Critics" 78), and the possibility of characters envisioning responses to other characters that could alter their

difficult and painful trajectories is always presented by Williams, although human tragedy most often prevails. Characters in Williams are often figures who want to do better, or realize more, gain what they lack, protect themselves, or give what is required, but they cannot find a way out of their limiting entrapments—the unfortunate, cramped places that they have been forced into. If a character is given an opportunity for relief in Williams, it is usually through a kindness of the Hannah variety, or a moment of revelation of what human relationship can do, an instance of someone's courageous reaching beyond themselves to another which creates a space of safety. That the moment is fleeting, nearly impossible, or prone to attack or disassembly is what makes it stand out to the audience, an ideal to be hoped for. The characters who suffer most in Williams's work are those who do not gain this moment of relief. While Williams offers his audience an opportunity to come into sympathy with his characters, and to see deeply into their worlds, he does not demand that an audience perfectly follows his logic, exactly agrees with him in a compassionate response, or even completely likes the characters he writes. Williams is not looking to repeat the moral judgments of the world. Williams wants his audience to see more than they did before. In a mid-career essay, Williams offers his ideas about the inevitable variability of audience response:

> The truth about human character in a play, as in life, varies with the variance of experience and viewpoint of those who view it. No two members of an audience ever leave a theatre, after viewing a play that deals with any degree of complexity in character, with identical interpretations of the characters dealt with. This is as it should be. ("Critics" 76)

Just as there will be differing opinions between audience members about a character, it is also highly possible that a single audience member could leave a Williams drama with conflicting ideas and feelings about one dramatic character.

While increased understanding of a character can lead to the type of forgiveness and the shelter that most Williams characters need—what he shows they are deserving of (as vengeance is what he writes against, but does not support)—there is no certainty that an audience will grant safe passage. Kazan stresses the importance of Blanche being played "as a heavy" (48) at the start of the drama. Kazan articulates Blanche's contradictions and the important revelation beyond them:

> [Blanche is] bossy yet helpless, domineering yet shaky. The audience at the beginning should see her negative effect on Stella and want Stanley to tell her off. He does, he exposes her, and then gradually as we see how genuinely in pain, how actually desperate she is, how warm, tender, and loving she can be…how freighted with need she is—then we begin to go with her. The audience realizes that they are witnessing the death of something extraordinary…of her own integrity—and thus they feel the tragedy. (48)

Williams presents the full complexity of Blanche. Yet, Blanche's sexual history, her neurotic difficulties, her own apparent narcissism (if this critical view is not carefully thought through), and her antagonism in the former world of marital bliss could cause an audience member to walk away from the play believing, according to the widespread cultural phenomenon of blaming the woman for courting her demise, that Williams's "Tiger-Moth" ("T. Williams's" 137) "got what she deserved." Alternately, Stanley, as a rapist, could be viewed as strictly a sub-human monster, as if an audience member, having entered Stanley's world of losers and winners and remaining content with its boot-strap logic, could dismiss him in the world of seven-card stud as purely a

"brute," not deserving of human sympathy. However, while he is undoubtedly a dangerously violent patriarch, and his actions are deplorable, Williams also writes Stanley as an affable, funny, ironically honour-bound character striving to protect his family, a man who loves his wife and needs her with violent despair. Not only does Stanley misunderstand Blanche, he misunderstands himself. He mistakenly believes, as his patriarchal world has conditioned him to believe, that what he takes is his right to have. Yet, the world that was supposedly made for him has destroyed them all. And while Blanche, however, knows more—perhaps in the canon, Blanche knows the most—this knowledge, because no one dares to witness her in it or share her emotional burden, cannot save her and eventually crushes her. As Herman and many following traumatologists articulate, and as Williams so poignantly and repeatedly shows in his work, a violated, injured figure needs a community to heal. Williams bravely risks that his audience will repeat the judgments that his characters face within their worlds when, without flinching, he exposes the hearts of even the most troubling characters along with the aspects of their character that are easiest to hate. If the characters in Williams do not become reformed, or experience relief, this is an expression of the extent to which these characters are still in need. It is not that Williams assures his audience that redemption is possible for everyone, but that he shows how most everyone is in need of redemption. And that this possibility of redemption occurs as but a momentary flicker, a faint hope, a shade of other aspects of character or situations that seem intractably troubled and troubling (perhaps doomed) is not "proof of its inconsequence" ("Timeless World" 60).

Writing characters who are difficult to love proves something of the necessity of love. The graceful are not lacking in grace, and most Williams characters are muddling through their existences with occasional bursts of goodness, poetic beauty, all still searching for grace or a bit

of light in the dark. The light, when it comes, arrives as it is shared through relationship with another character, however brief or mediated the encounter. Kindness, Williams shows, is always what is needed most. Williams's characters are reaching for love, and this is the appeal that Williams presents to his audience. Significantly, Williams establishes the political structure of his characters' worlds, the conditions which push them toward injury. Williams so clearly establishes the parameters of human tragedy that an audience might walk away discomforted, but also moved to reflect: There but for the grace of you go I. In a late career interview, Williams answers the question of whether he eventually forgave the difficult man of his father in the end, saying that ostensibly he did, as he now recognized the misunderstandings that had existed between them while his father was still alive. In reflection, Williams says, his father was much nicer than he knew ("Interview" 12:31). The versions of Big Daddy in the drama and the question of whether this figure will also understand and forgive the son parallel versions of the consumptive mother in the narratives, from a line of Southern women in the work whose worlds gravely let them down, with the suffering being what is tragically passed along. Williams writes in a hopeful attempt to stop the perpetuation of emotional, human injury. He wants peace in the family. In all the work, perhaps especially in the family dramas, there is an imploring message: Everyone is guilty, and no one is to blame, and so this is a call to establish and protect a space of recovery, a place where the weary can dwell in one another, in art and contemplation, and, if only for a moment, rest.

The opposite of love—with love as an aspect of the complexity of desire in the work, which includes erotic expression and stands in Williams as what is vital to life—is not death. Death appears in the work alongside love as love's necessary shadow, and as an opening onto transfiguration sometimes through erotic possibility, the possibility similar to the possibility in

art, as expressions of the mythic state of perpetual renewal. Instead, the opposite of love in Williams is a barren, lonely type of homelessness, sometimes symbolized as madness, which is worse than death. If erotic possibility allows for one to escape political confinement, or if a character is not totally thwarted leading up to connection, then the possibility of connection (or the rare event of connecting) still comes at the end, too late to amend the former earthly pains for the character. Yet, the mythic, transcendent sense at least suggests the possibility of another way of being. The erotic impulse is paired in Williams with death as the narratives momentarily hold both, but eros in Williams seeks transcendence through love that, while Williams throughout his canon critiques religious hypocrisy, is of a Christian spirit. The idea of the resurrection, of birth in death sometimes (but not always) occurring through erotic bliss, is also freedom of expression paired with artistic expression and Romantic possibility through imagination. The twentieth-century America that Williams writes is a lonely and often terrorizing place for characters who are subject to various confinements, estranged from themselves and others. The primary, allegorical stage for Williams's drama is an earthly hellscape, his Kingdom of Earth, but Williams also suggests that the garden is just out of sight, and maybe can again become imagined into view.

Williams's works focus on the error of the ubiquitous punishments of excess, or punishment of simple relationships and the innocent desire to connect outside of sanctioned bounds, with persecuting aims justified through religion which, Williams shows, as it appears punitively, warps ideas of forgiveness and communion that religion often wants to realize. Williams demonstrates the poetic heroism of characters who escape confinement in flashes of God in the world through poetry. In answer to Søren Kierkegaard's question of the resolution of ambivalent dread being related to a singular, ultimate choice— in terms understood by Becker,

who describes Kierkegaard as he anticipates modern psychoanalysis (67-92)—Williams radicalizes the system by choosing two possibilities: God *and* art. This vision is Romantic, and even as connection breaks down and language does not make entire light of the world, in Williams, language is often the best in the worst situations. The character of castigation in Williams becomes redeemed in and of poetic expression, even in twisted expressions of madness, as in a type of Freudian upholding of a sane, poetic logic that potentially expands the limits of the rational (and socially sanctioned) cultural order. This queer, expansive potential is related to imaginative freedom and creative expression, and it is ultimately connected to personal freedom, even to life. The definition or label of "queer" slides around, and queerness can function linguistically to denote aspects of what is pre-cognitive in a being, pre-conceptual, closer to instinct and the deeply emotional places of seemingly irrational attractions and attachments—that which cannot be labelled or bound. Williams said of his making art: "I think of writing as something more organic than words, something closer to being and action" ("The History" 26). Language leaks out of the traps. Queerness denotes what exists in potential, in a state of negative capability, alluding to that which is coming into being, and Williams poetically conceptualizes this queerness in relation to love as a possibility, so that love *is* possibility and an open stance toward relating freely. While Williams would not have called his dramatic explorations of life "queer" explorations, his works exist as queer containers which ironically work to obliterate containment. To be reconciled with queerness, or to be expressive within queerness, Williams implicitly states, is to exist in liminality, sometimes in grotesque dimensions, in at least a reaching for freedom, which includes the potential for sexual freedom and freedom in creative and loving, relational expression.

Queer style and meaning structure recognizes, as Williams does, that realism as it appears through cultural images (including tropes and stereotypes) is always at least partially a fiction, and sometimes a violent fabrication, and that dramatic distortions (including the grotesque) are often more apt in articulating the complexities of emotional truths and best to expose the limits of any attempt to claim knowledge of a character. Williams exposes the American unconscious in his work, sometimes in its gravest ugliness and depravity, and he illuminates the hatreds that force so much political restriction. Poignantly for Williams, within racist productions of imagery (or within the cultural milieu that produces and repeats such imagery), the image must be shattered, which occurs through a shocking reversal or revelation in the narrative to prove the image's tragic insufficiencies. Most symbols in Williams can be considered for at least their dual function. In Williams, the garden can be a blissful paradise or a consumptive, fiery hell; a Christian ritual can be damning or liberating; sex can be punishing or redemptive as Williams queers his world in shocking questions of typical, narrative assumptions. Of his attempt to illuminate Williams's style, Savran says:

> I hope to identify and credit a radical—and deeply utopian—potential that is…finely woven into the fabric of Williams's work…a profligacy of words that disrupts traditional notions of narrative continuity and dramatic form, in company with its double, a profligacy of bodies that disrupts postwar moral and sexual norms. (145)

Repeatedly, Williams disruptively establishes the stereotype to undo it, dissolving it in the Moon Lake place of broken dreams and confused desire, where sexual and love unions are usually broken down. Rarely in the satires, Williams's corrupt and broken Eden becomes a momentary heaven, a blissful place where political categorizations are suspended in a state that Saddik might recognize as "a distortion of the laws of superficial reality in order to access a truth that can only

be grasped through metaphor and symbol" (*Excess* 24). In Williams, art is a place which does not demand non-contradiction, as it accepts the negative capability sense of uncertainty, which also means changeability and hope for redemption, or a forgiveness possibly realized through increased understanding, which acknowledges paradox as a condition of human existence, sees irony as either a closed door or an open window, and regards beauty as a form of truth always straining against the plot.

While the work is filled with violent happenings, Williams wrote to counter human violence, and although Williams does not sing many comforting lullabies about the chaotic states of human events, he is still dearly hopeful that something of his narrative can break through the terrors. Each work is underscored by raging hope through characters who try to bring some beauty into the world, in part through expressing a truth that does not deny the body, nor express it as it is strictly politically imagined and marginalized, but sees it as it exists, in connection to human feeling and passion that encompasses, but extends beyond the sexual. In one rare romantic comedy, through the character Serafina Delle Rose, in the 1950 drama *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams writes a version of his sister Rose that gives her an opportunity to experience what neither she nor the other versions of her in characters in "Violin Case" or *Portrait of a Madonna* can realize. In *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams writes a version of a holy-mother figure who, after reconciling with extreme loss—including loss of her religious faith after being duped in love by her husband who then died—recovers faith and revitalizes her spirit through joyful love and eroticism. Williams dedicates the play to his beloved, long-term partner in life and work, Frank Merlo. In *Memoirs*, Williams says: "The Rose Tattoo was my love-play to the world. It was permeated with the happy young love for Frankie and I dedicated the book to him, saying: 'To Frankie in Return for Sicily'"—a place Williams adored and frequently lived and

worked in (162). It is significant to note that the happiness for Serafina occurs outside of marriage and that her church-sanctioned marriage, while producing a beloved daughter, also produced for her an agony of grief. In Williams's assessment of Anna Magnani, who plays Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo* and Lady in *The Fugitive Kind*, Williams says:

> I often wonder how Magnani managed to live within society and yet remain so free of its conventions. She was an unconventional a woman as I have known in or out of my professional world, and if you understand me at all, you must know that in this statement I am making my personal estimate of her honesty, which I feel was complete. (*Memoirs* 162).

This honesty includes vulnerable expression of loneliness and need, but it also expresses her exuberant laughter and love for life, in a character that was much like Williams's. There are several pictures of Magnani in *Memoirs,* of Williams and Magnani together, along with Williams's sweet and funny quips and commentary. Williams even quotes Magnani in the Forward to his book. Williams loved Magnani, and while the original character Serafina was not written for her, he wrote the screenplay with Magnani in mind. Serafina is wonderfully played by Magnani in a drama that allows both Williams and his sister to break through the other side of grief, to live another passionate life in art and exist as if outside of time.

Sedgwick's protégé student and queer theorist, José Muñoz, speaks of the organization of queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (*Cruising* 1). The difficulty of the present, according to Muñoz, is that it has not actualized the queer potential which Muñoz says is horizonal, stating: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer" (1), with the implication being that if we become so, queerness will come into being through our relationships

with one another. This concept of relational connection as part of what structures the queer domain is also the domain of psychoanalysis. In her memoir-esque *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), while Sedgwick does not directly state that love is what healed her, she alludes to this through various haiku-type expressions interspersed throughout the narrative, and through a final image in the book epitomizing the healing project of psychoanalysis in which she engaged with her therapist whom she refers to as Shannon—the person with whom Sedgwick identifies in deep friendship, loves and is loved by. Sedgwick's text reflects a process of one approximating knowledge (including knowledge of self) and accepting it provisionally within a queer container that must always admit provisionality related to definition. The effect of Sedgwick's coming into the light of self-awareness (which is also a state of rest) is understood by a reader as the cumulative result of the literary memoir, *A Dialogue on Love*, with the meaning alluded to poetically in the lines. The coming into being of the subject through psychoanalysis is the production of a relational self, with the idea that the selfing-project requires relationality. In Sedgwick's story, love binds the therapeutic, psychoanalytic process and therefore is healing both to Sedgwick and Shannon through a bond of mutual trust, respect, understanding, self-expression, and care. Sedgwick explains the result of her therapy through a metaphor. She describes looking back on a clod of pine needle mulch that she had accidentally slipped on and kicked into a clump while walking on a little incline, early to her therapy appointment outside of Shannon's office, and of seeing Shannon coming behind her, lifting up the clod of mulch, then lovingly repositioning the bit of earth back into place. Sedgwick records her reflections in contemplating this image and concludes that it resonates as a symbol of Shannon's care of Sedgwick's self beyond what she had formerly viewed or known herself to be, reminding her

that the foundation to her process of careful self-examination is the relationship with Shannon, what allowed her to see more (218-20).

Like a poet-dramatist analyst and analysand both, Williams mucks around in the dirt, roots, and mulch of human love, longing, hate, sex, and suffering and exposes what is in most need of care and recovery. For Williams, it is through imagination, as what occurs in poetry and artistic expression, where one can best reposition the examined clod, tamping the earth back into a shape that, while changed, still has potential to protect and promote growth. Williams's narratives offer fragmented characters the freedom to coalesce and stand for a moment as a symbol of potential through love, which can also exist as the poetic freedom to decide beyond the limits of materiality. I label this as Williams's poetic and queer defiance. In her forward to *Not About Nightingales*, Vanessa Redgrave compares the stature of "the great English poet-dramatist, Shakespeare" to "the great American-poet dramatist, Williams" (ix), for their shared ability to show the world to itself. Williams shows the world to itself through first kicking into the dirt, and then lovingly placing the displaced clod of earth into his audience's hands.

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