

CHAPTER ONE

FROM PATHOLOGY TO GENDER DISSENT: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

In December of 1996 a new production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened at the Haymarket Theatre in London. It was directed by Sir Peter Hall, a pillar of the English theatre, and it starred the noted, Oscar-winning American film actress Jessica Lange in the role of Blanche DuBois. Big guns for a play first performed in 1947. Yet as critics of the Haymarket production indicated with varying degrees of hyperbole, *Streetcar* 'is one of the great American plays of the century,'¹ even 'one the great plays of the century,'² 'a masterpiece'³ and Blanche 'possibly the greatest part created for a woman in the modern American theatre,'⁴ 'one of the supreme roles of drama.'⁵ *Streetcar* is a work for which critics, directors, actors, theorists, and filmmakers maintain a tenacious interest that seems to be continuing up to the fag-end of the millennium. Indeed Tennessee Williams himself seems to remain a figure through whom considerable cultural capital can be exchanged. In 1992 the prestigious University of Minnesota Press published David Savran's study of masculinity in the plays of Williams and Arthur Miller, whilst in 1993 a new collection of essays *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire* was published, as well as a new coffee table biography of Williams, by Ronald Hayman.⁶ Another biography concentrating on the writer's early life, *Tom: The Unknown*

Tennessee Williams appeared in 1995.⁷ In the Summer of 1994 London's National Theatre staged a highly prestigious and sumptuous revival of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and he remains a consistently produced playwright. The cinematic adaptations of Williams's plays continue to be shown on television from time to time, and in early 1997 the BBC broadcast a season of them to mark the West End production of *Streetcar*.

Yet if Williams remains a figure that elicits notions of artistic greatness, worthy of revivals and national acclaim fourteen years after his death, he also remains implicitly understood as a homosexual, with an emblematic fixation on his women characters. The National's opulent production of *Sweet Bird of Youth* was the occasion for the resuscitation in the British broadsheet press of a discourse about the particular significance of Williams's female characterisations, a discourse which reappeared in critical appraisals of the Haymarket's *Streetcar*. In 1994 *The Independent*, which ran a full page feature headlined, 'Tennessee Williams and His Women', suggested that:

Williams's women, more than those of any other 20th-century dramatist, only truly exist in performance. That they are merely feminised men has been disproved time and again.⁸

That such disproving needs to be stated, again, might indicate that *The Independent* was uncertain how conclusive the denial has been. There's also considerable slight of hand here: the allusion to 'feminised men' feigns an indeterminacy about the

ideological narrative in question, which actually suggests that Blanche, Maggie, the Princess and company specifically represent the playwright himself. In her *From Reverence to Rape* Molly Haskell offers a more incisive and ingenuous account of *The Independent's* apparently disproved notion:

In the case of Tennessee Williams' women, there is little confusion. His hothouse, hot-blooded 'earth mothers' and drag queens - Blanche DuBois, Serafina, Maggie, and Alexandra Del Lago - are as unmistakably a product of the fifties as they are of his own baroquely transvestised homosexual fantasies.⁹

This suggestion that Williams's notable female characters were dragged up versions of himself seems tenacious, even when it is being denied or supplanted. For Alistair Macaulay, 'Blanche's displays of femininity are so self-dramatising, and her confusions about masculinity are so emphatic, that her role - as it is written - is very nearly that of a drag-queen, albeit highly poignant. Just how much self-projection was there for Williams in creating her?'¹⁰ Writing about *Streetcar* at the Haymarket in 1997 it seems clear that John Gross wants to acknowledge the denial, even as he finds it difficult not to recirculate and invest in the 'disproved' notion:

Even if [Williams] hadn't acknowledged as much, there would be no prizes for guessing how closely he identified with [Blanche]. It would be too cut and dried to speak of a homosexual subtext - she is emphatically a woman, not a man in disguise - but the story of her ill-fated early marriage to a young 'degenerate' (her sister's

word for him) strongly signals the presence of transposed homosexual feelings.¹¹

The Observer's Michael Coveney refuses even to acknowledge the sell-by date of the proposition in which he invests, that *Sweet Bird's Princess* 'can be viewed as a metaphoric version of Williams himself on a bad day'.¹²

These critical responses offer particularly clear examples of what David Savran has called the 'virtual ubiquity' of Stanley Edgar Hyman's notion of the 'Albertine strategy', which refers to Proust's Albert-made-Albertine transposition, and describes the transvestism of the authorial position.¹³ This transaction exemplifies a preponderant strain of knowledge through which homosexuality is socially understood, but which has not just sustained for mainstream critics: it has also become an enduring part of gay men's pleasures in plays like *Streetcar*. Blanche DuBois, Alexandra del Lago, Maggie the Cat and Amanda Wingfield have inspired and thrilled generations of homosexual men, like Mike Silverstein, who wrote his 'An Open Letter to Tennessee Williams' in 1971: 'You were among the first to teach me that women are my sisters, fellow-victims. Blanche DuBois, Hannah Jelkes, above all the Gnadiges Fraulein ... these were the first sisters I had encountered'.¹⁴ But it's not just sistership that gay men have found in works like *Streetcar*. The iconography of brutish, irresistible machismo that is crystallised in the character of Stanley Kowalski and refracted through those of Chance Wayne, Brick and the rest, has provided a defining imagery for contemporary homosexual culture, as Derek

Jarman has noted: 'The modern Queer was invented by Tennessee Williams. Brando in blue jeans, sneakers, white T-shirt and leather jacket. When you saw that, you knew they were available.'¹⁵ If *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be understood as presenting women as the opportunity for gay sistership and identification, then it may also be understood as presenting men as the opportunity for gay desire.

It would seem then, that Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* is an ideal vehicle with which to look at how dominant, that is heterosexual, groups and marginal, homosexual groups, have handled competing notions about the nature of gay identity and its relationship to identifications with women. Not only has the play elicited critical responses of an extraordinary tenacity and passion, but was written before the emergence of Gay Liberation: the considerable attention it has generated spans key historical shifts in the nature of gay identity. This gives us the opportunity to draw out the kinds of knowledge implicated in the contests enacted over the meanings of the play.

PART ONE

STREETCAR : PERVERSION OR GREAT AMERICAN (QUEER)

ART ?

The ways in which mainstream America theatre criticism, and indeed the US cultural establishment generally, has handled Tennessee Williams show us that he has been a source of considerable anxiety. On the one hand his works were showered with acclaim and awards: when *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway in 1947 it won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and in 1952 Elia Kazan's film version won the New York Film Critics' Circle Award; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was first performed in 1955 and eventually ran for six hundred and ninety-four performances, winning the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics' Circle and Donaldson Awards. In the West the emergence of Cold-War ideology in the early 1950s insisted on the moral, spiritual and cultural superiority of the American way of life over communism. Williams's success, both at home and abroad, which we may in part attribute to a degree of controversy about the sauciness of his depiction of heterosexual relations, made it necessary for him to be embraced as emblematic of that American superiority. Yet by the 1960s, critics such as Howard Taubman and Stanley Kauffman began to question the way in which understandings of American culture were being handled by Williams; they also challenged the work of Edward

Albee and William Inge, homosexual dramatists who were also hugely popular and successful. In 1963, a couple of months after the Broadway debut of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Taubman wrote a piece for the *New York Times* in which he claimed to want to help the people of America recover their 'lost innocence'. He entreated them to:

Look out for the baneful female who is a libel on womanhood.

Look out for the hideous wife who makes a horror of the marriage relationship.

Be suspicious of the compulsive slut ... who represents a total disenchantment with the possibility of a fulfilled relationship between man and woman.¹⁶

By the 1970s, Stanley Kauffman was more explicit:

we have all had much more than enough of the materials so often presented by the three writers in question [Williams, Albee, Inge]: the viciousness towards women, the lurid violence that seems a sublimation of social hatreds, the transvestite sexual exhibitionism that has the same sneering exploitation of its audience that every club stripper has behind her smile.¹⁷

I think Kauffman's comments about female sex workers make it fairly clear that the 'three writers in question' aren't perhaps the only ones harbouring a sublimated viciousness towards women. In a deft move of patriarchal recuperation (his presumptive 'we'), homosexuals are positioned as pathologically bitter in the same

moment at which women are reinstated into the protective and parochial fold - as long as they don't compromise the duplicity upon which male authority reproduces itself (hence the alleged 'sneering exploitation' of the sex worker). But Kauffman is rattled by these writers: his recuperation of patriarchal effects into gay male misogyny is but a thin veil for his discomfort - the fluidity and integrity of his authority is straining at this point, and requires a violent reinstatement ('viciousness', 'lurid violence', 'hatreds', 'sneering') which betrays his anxiety.

Molly Haskell's work in *From Reverence to Rape* showed how homosexual representations of women may facilitate patriarchal purposes in their negotiation of repression and in their desire to express erotic excess. Very quickly her feminist analysis of Williams's female characterisations was re-appropriated however, by criticism with a dominant project. An example of such an appropriation is offered by Stephen S. Stanton in his collection of critical essays published in 1977.¹⁸ Haskell's thesis proposed a feminist analysis of filmic representation: it was precisely this kind of work that gave strength and encouragement to similarly critical discourses enacted by lesbians and gay men, and yet only three years after *From Reverence*, Haskell's repudiation of Williams's women as lustful cyphers of homosexual histrionics and her reticence about acknowledging them as representations of a de-naturalised heterosexuality makes a recuperative assimilation of her work for homophobic purposes disconcertingly smooth. Whereas the tone of Haskell's analysis is invigoratingly pejorative, Stanton's

introduction strikes an oily balance between outright bigotry and hegemonic liberalism. In a volume hysterically concerned with rescuing Williams's canonical stature from the twin nemeses of diminishing 'artistic' quality and homosexual vice, it is clear from the opening paragraph which poses the gravest challenge for Stanton's project. The increasing openness with which Williams represented himself in interviews through the early seventies, culminating in the highly explicit *Memoirs* of 1975, is attributed by Stanton not to the political and social shifts engendered by several years of Gay Liberation agitation but to the playwright's personal 'confession', prompted not by political consciousness or an alignment with liberatory activity, but by 'courage' that was permitted by a 'new tolerance' in the media.¹⁹ Such terms deftly disempower Williams's agency as a flourishing 'gay' man whilst they veil Stanton's recuperative intentions in liberal condescension, secured by the smug insistence upon his distance from earlier critics, who with considerably more ingenuousness dismissed Williams's work as what has been described as a 'Fetid swamp'.²⁰ Stanton magnanimously acknowledges Williams's 'shortcomings' which, if they are to become great drama must 'be better distanced and universalized'. He considers Stanley Edgar Hyman's notion of the Albertine strategy to be 'perceptive' because it enables this universalisation:

[Tennessee Williams's] plays are frequently transvestite since they substitute women for men in the sexual relationships; and the best of them succeed in transforming homosexual into

heterosexual relationships ... in drawing on his private experience,
he has universalized it.²¹

This circuit of incorporative recuperation is secured with reference to an instance of Williams's own attempt to incorporate: 'A true faggot does not like my women. I do not have a faggot, a homosexual, a gay audience. I write for an audience.' Here, Williams's strategic retreat, itself a function of the homophobic terms under which the playwright had to negotiate the public reception of his work (if not his own homophobia), isolates the 'gay' audience from the universal fold to which Stanton welcomes Williams - as long as he is really writing about universal heterosexuals and vilifying faggots.

The difficulty which Taubman and Kauffman were attempting to bludgeon, and which Stanton was attempting unctuously to connive away resides in Williams's homosexuality being so proximate to understandings of him as a great American playwright. Cold War ideology rested on policing the virility of the imperialist nation state, that is, on upholding the naturalised integrity of the heterosexual patriarchal subject. The rise of psychoanalysis as popular discourse through the 1950s in America all too clearly manifested homosexuality as tangible and unsettling to the internal confidence of that subjectivity. As Alan Sinfield has shown, Freud's reference to the notion of bisexual latency 'meant that *anyone* might be subject to deep-set homosexual inclinations. This was convenient for witchhunters'.²² The idea of latency provided ample opportunity for the

exploitation of anxiety in potential subjects, for it implied that the unspeakable homosexual urge may possibly reside deep in the subconscious of even the most manly American: certainly the more anxious that subject the more he would attract an aura of paranoia and guilt. Yet, as Sinfield suggests, 'latency was too good; once you started looking, no one was exempt'²³ and this could explain the gradual turn from an opportunistic celebration of Williams as a great American artist to a systematic demonisation of him that Taubman and Kauffman exemplify. It became necessary to turn the anxiety from the threat within to the threat without; hence Kauffman's instructive guidelines: 'look out for the baneful female' for she is a sign of homosexuality, of un-Americanism. For US cold-war ideology this 'baneful female', the woman with sexuality, personality, presence is not only unacceptable as the bearer, enabler, of American manliness, she is in fact not even a woman, but a product of a warped homosexual imaginary. For it is also clear that whilst the preoccupation of Kauffman and Taubman with the women characters in the plays of Williams and his colleagues is an index of their Freudian understanding of the homosexuality of these playwrights, it also represents an unease about the ideological relationship between naturalised heterosexual gender roles and homosexuality. Freudian notions of inversion, appropriated from the work of the earliest radical homosexual writers and assimilated within Freud's system of sexual aberrations, provided a way for hostile critics to make *Streetcar* about homosexuality - allowed them to render it perverse - which rescued them from the difficulty offered by Williams's problematising representation of heterosexuality.

The abhorrence that is present in *Streetcar* for Taubman and his chums is not actually a *product* of Williams's homosexuality, but is rather *revealed* by its de-naturalising effect upon systems of gender. The playwright's sexuality enables an uncomfortably incisive critique of heterosexuality. This idea will be developed throughout this chapter and consolidated in a reading of the play which closes it.

Inversion: *Maurice* and Unrequited Desire

Stanley Kauffman, Molly Haskell, and Stephen Stanton, would seem to want to situate Williams's own identifications as being uncomplicatedly through Blanche as a desirer of Stanley.²⁴ It is important to be highly sceptical of such accounts, not only because they pathologise homosexuality, or render it as an eternal state of victimisation, but because they uphold homosexuality as an abnormal reflection of heterosexuality whose function it is to normalise gender roles. Williams's *Memoirs* make it clear that he liked to dominate men, not the other way round, and whilst this doesn't provide conclusive evidence of the nature of his identificatory or fantasy practices, it certainly enables us to problematise accounts of homosexual desire that position gay men as necessarily locked into a masochistic erotic relationship with an ultra-masculine stud.²⁵ The undercurrents in such accounts suggest a cultural, rather than particularly homosexual, fascination with the authority and legitimacy of the butch male as the appropriate, proper male as sexual subject, in relation to which feminine subjects (be they homosexual male or heterosexual female) must simmer in passive admiration. In the logic of their

paranoia these critics subscribe to a prevailing psychoanalytic construction of homosexuality as an inversion of physical and psychic sex identity: Williams's female characters express his morbid (and un-American) homosexuality which is a pathological inversion of normal masculinity and femininity. However, the pathological and heterosexist notion of inversion made popular through psychoanalytic discourse in the 1950s was itself an appropriation of models of inversion or of a third sex which emerged in the nineteenth century and were separately proposed by the likes of Krafft-Ebing, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Havelock Ellis, who were attempting to make sense of their desires.²⁶

Inversion was initially proposed by early homosexual writers as a way of naturalising what had been perceived first as sinful, and then later, perverse behaviour. Ironically the later appropriation of inversion, or third-sex, theories by Freud provided a whole new clinical, and later institutional, context for the legitimation of the idea of homosexuality as perversion. The concept of inversion is predicated on a 'natural', biological division of the species along gender lines, and the idea subsequently circulated culturally as an expression of the need to suggest the inevitability of campy stereotypes for gay men and butch stereotypes for lesbians, and then explain that stereotype as scientific (medical) fact.

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German lawyer, began to write about what he called the third sex in an attempt to intervene in the juridical regulation of 'unnatural

fornication' in the 1860s. Ulrichs' notion of the third sex, or Uranism, was based on a dichotomy of body and soul in which a mis-match has taken place in the first three months of foetal development; the same period in which the medical profession was asserting that physical hermaphroditism became manifested: indeed, inversion was called a 'hermaphroditism of the mind'. The foetus is then left with the body of one sex, and the soul of the other; however, Ulrichs had little conception of how this mis-match would constitute the characteristics of a third sex: the only area in which the concept really appeared to interest him was that of the reversal of normal sexual preference.²⁷

A crucial aspect of Ulrichs' contention was that sexual relations between Uranians and what we would now call heterosexual youths ('Dionians') should be decriminalised because he believed that most Uranians desired sexual relations with heterosexuals:

'Is a Uranian sexually attracted to a Uranian? A little or not at all.'

They were as little attracted to each other as they were to women, for whom they felt abhorrence in sexual matters. The Uranian's object of desire was a person who was male in body and soul, that is, a Dionian. Ulrichs recast the dichotomy of female and male desire into a theory of the Uranian lover and his Dionian beloved.²⁸

Ulrichs' conceptualisation of homosexuality as a third sex became the prevailing structure of knowledge on the subject for much of the next century. As George Chauncey has noted, the end of the nineteenth century was a crucial period in the emergence of understandings of homosexuality as the characterisation of certain identifiable individuals rather than as a form of sinful behaviour in which anyone might engage.²⁹ Repudiated or moderated, Ulrichs' notion predominantly organised the discourse on homosexuality until the rise of social problem discourses in the 1950s and 60s.³⁰ Indeed, one of my contentions is that Ulrichs' propositions, and the idea of inversion, continue to be deeply implicated in ideological work in relation to sexuality, and specifically so in the consideration of Tennessee Williams's relationship to women as a sex, and femininity as a sign of gender.

We can perhaps see the force of Ulrichs' work in E. M. Forster's posthumously published homosexual (Uranian?) novel *Maurice* which translates many of Ulrichs' preoccupations into an English class context; and which, although not published until 1971, remains an important indicator of the prevailing knowledges of the time it was written - a mere thirty years after Krafft-Ebing's initial scientific consideration of Ulrichs' work, and fourteen years after Ulrichs' own later writings.³¹ We could perhaps suggest that *Maurice* was the first important novel in English literature to assemble a 'modern' male homosexual identity; *The Well of Loneliness* occupying a similar place in relation to lesbianism. It is, of course, lamentable that Forster's

novel wasn't published earlier (especially after the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* under the Obscene Publications Act in 1960), its latency is a depressing but compelling missed opportunity: the possibilities for mobilisation and cultural shift might have been diverse and substantial. Nevertheless, even though the novel didn't have the opportunity to circulate as *The Well* did, it remains an important indication of the thinking prevalent at the moment of its conception, and since 1970 it has circulated widely and visibly. It remains an important instance of an attempt to assemble a matrix of homosexual identities at a notably early point. I want to suggest the strength of the influence that Ulrichs' understanding of abnormal sexual object choice, as a confusion of sex and gender, had at the turn of the century, in order to then demonstrate how subsequent negotiations of this model were remorselessly caught up in its concerns.

Maurice was famously inspired by a visit to the socialist writer and self-proclaimed Uranian Edward Carpenter (who was heavily influenced by Ulrichs), and his comrade and lover, George Merrill, who touched Forster's bum, sending a sensation 'straight through the small of my back and into my ideas'.³² Written at a time during which the very possibility of homosexual desire as a discursive notion was still in its infancy, *Maurice* necessarily exhibits the incoherences that are held within the models of homosexuality Forster was mobilising, and which are displaced across other models disputed and incorporated into those which he favoured. John Fletcher offers a reading of the complex intersections the novel exhibits around

divergent Platonic models of manly love which are themselves inconclusive.³³ Fletcher asserts that Forster's imperative happy ending is a vision of sexual sameness, a 'virile doubling', possible only because of two crucial textual absences:

Maurice is notable for the absence of a theory of inversion, of intermediacy or of cross-gendering such as marks the writings of many of Forster's homosexual contemporaries, e.g. Proust, Radclyffe Hall and especially Edward Carpenter. Also noticeable is its sexual inexplicitness, the absence of the theme of sodomy so crucial to Forster's other suppressed homosexual fictions which turn on the act of sodomy as the symbolic act of male inversion through which a range of other differences - barbarian/Christian, missionary/native, officer/half caste, milkman/baronet - are played out.³⁴

I would suggest, however, that this is not strictly the case. Forster's text is haunted by inversionist structures, and consequently by an ideological imperative Ulrichs' exemplified in his manifestos of Uranism, and which he reproduced so eloquently (albeit with the most transgressive of motives) which gestures towards a gendering of difference across desire.

Present amongst the counter-currents of Greek ideals in the romance between Maurice and Clive is the spectre of class difference, which carries with it a connotation of gender, paradoxically in a reverse formation to that which Uranism

enacts. Homosexuality, most noticeably of the effete, dandy variety, was associated with the leisure classes: they had the material means to enact an aesthetic - an identity, and they had the money with which to procure working class men.³⁵ Consequently a cultural association of effeminacy, which we could suggest was locked into place by the Wilde trials, was enacted around upper-class identity.³⁶ In tracking the construction of the desires at play in Forster's plot and character system we find a substantial incoherence which pivots around the class-, intellectual-, and thus, gendered identity of the protagonists. Clive is upper class and a literary intellectual during his relationship with Maurice at Cambridge, although he is noticeably, necessarily, not a dandy. He is a figure in whom the text invests considerable anxiety: he mustn't be a dandy in order to suggest a mutual manliness in his relationship with Maurice, but he must be enough of a literary intellectual to be familiar with the Platonic dialogues. Further there is Risley, in whose literary intellectual circle Clive is implicated, and who is a powerful background figure in the Cambridge part of the novel. Risley represents a classically effete leisure class dandy; a figure situated perversely in relation to the heroic manliness of our protagonists. It is in the measure of Clive and Maurice's difference from Risley at Cambridge that we gain an orientation as to the sexual character of the principals: Risley is the known quantity, the foppish, sissy dandy ('They sat down, and Risley turned with a titter to Maurice and said, 'I simply can't think of a reply to that'; in each of his sentences he accented one word violently.³⁷) in relation to whom Maurice appears as a rough, rigger playing man, and for

whom we are led to believe Risley has a sexual desire: '[Maurice] had not spoken before, and his voice, which was low but very gruff, made Risley shiver' (p.33), and furthermore an attraction which is conceived through a collapse back into Uranism - Risley of the aesthetic sensibility (feminine soul?) and male body desiring the gruff Maurice, who at this point is nominally Dionian, partially by virtue of the fact that he is the object of the leisure-class effete homosexual's desire, and therefore he must be 'masculine'.

Leaving university, Clive also leaves the leisure class and becomes, quite literally, landed gentry, a responsible lord and estate owner. Maurice is distinctly middle class at Cambridge and beyond, thus during his affair with Clive the arrangements suggest a seduction of the Dionian Maurice by the effete, inverted Clive, whose strategy of seduction is itself literary ('I knew you read the Symposium in the vac' p.56). As I have suggested, however, this inversionist structure must be unstable, given the diverse deployments of Platonic ideals Forster enacts, Clive's ultimate refusal of physical love ('"I? It's appalling you should attribute such thoughts to me," pursued Clive. Had he corrupted an inferior's intellect?'³⁸), and our knowledge as readers of Maurice's troubled feelings. Nevertheless, amongst the diverse notions implicated in Forster's schema, inversion, and its attendant gender structure, are to be found, latently and crucially festering. Upon Maurice's consensual progress into the relationship with Clive his status as Dionian 'other' must dissipate - the mutuality of their desire produces sameness, and their love cannot be sustained.

Although, with Greek heroism and unlikely forwardness, it is Scudder who initiates the sex with Maurice, their relationship, before the transcendent retreat to the Greenwood, is characterised by the fear and exploitation that is a function of their class identities.

Again, alongside the Greek ideals, the organisation of the homosexual relationship is shot through with gendered notions of Uranism-Dionism. Forster doggedly attempts to neutralise this tendency, but his vision of manly sameness is destabilised by a rupture along the lines of class difference in which the desire is constituted. There is a suggestion in John Fletcher's analysis that Forster's imperative was the writing of a narrative in which his own paradoxical absence from the happy ending could be conceptually, or at least fantasmatically, reinstated. As Carpenter's ideal of Greek and manly comradeship is shot through with implicitly (although suppressed) gendered class difference, and posits a desire which is compromised by similarity, and enflamed by difference ('my ideal of love is a powerful, strongly built man ... preferably of the working class ... Anything effeminate in a man ... repels me very decisively'³⁹), so we could say the same of the desire that he inspired in Forster,

I want to love a strong, young man of the lower classes and be
loved by him and even hurt by him. That is my ticket...⁴⁰

and which is represented in Maurice:

'This too has gone wrong' began flitting through his brain...He was back in the smoking-room at home with Clive, who said, 'I don't love you any more; I'm sorry,' and he felt that his life would revolve in cycles of a year, always to the same eclipse. [...] They must live outside class. (p.208)

What the text does not, cannot, acknowledge, is the position which the writer holds in the structures of Uranian desire that are being consciously disavowed in all this manly Greek love, which can adequately be used to handle Platonic friendship (the kind to which Clive is referring in his last meeting with Maurice when he says 'But surely - the sole excuse for any relationship between men is that it remain purely platonic.' p.213) but cannot do the job when the text requires something a little more carnal. In order to participate successfully in the consummation of virile sameness, Forster (and arguably Carpenter as well⁴¹) must disavow his own upper middle class literary effete intellectualism, in the process suppressing the Uranian inversion that constantly informs and structures the desire he represents in *Maurice*, and mitigates against the happy ending. The retreat into the Greenwood cannot sustain the weight of the desire for transcendence that the conflicting currents of identity in which Forster is bound up in the novel require.

Crucially for the plausibility of his manly and symmetrical lovers, Forster is unable successfully to supplant Ulrichs' Uranian model with a Greek one - partially because of the instability of the notion of manly Greek egalitarianism, and partially because

of the anxiety Forster had about the identity he perceived himself to inhabit in the Uranian model, which for him, we may now suggest, necessitated its suppression.

We might suggest that Forster's anxiety is one precipitated by the acknowledgement of a disjunction, particularly troubling in homosexual arrangements, between identification and desire. Because he identifies himself as not being what he values and exalts as a sexual being, the desired, the 'strong young man of the lower classes', the implicitly masculine Dionian figure, he exhibits a need to re-locate his identification away from the Uranian model in which his desire is constituted, and closer to that which is the desired, desirable: the masculine Dionian. The urgency with which *Maurice* seeks to secure its symmetrical 'virile doubling', is an index of the degree to which Forster found himself enmeshed in a structure which gendered his desire, and which his class and value system rendered him unable to be empowered by. Classified by his own desires and tastes as a feminine man, a Uranian, Forster was locked into a continually unrequited search for a plausible Dionian identification. It is for its exemplification of this quite particular difficulty in the negotiation of homosexual desires to be and to have that *Maurice* is useful.

Over half a century later, this inversionist model is still being used to enmesh homosexual writers, with, it seems, little more opportunity allowed for the possibilities of subverting or contesting a system still entrenched in Uranian

principles. Whilst Williams states in the *Memoirs* that he wasn't attracted to camp men,⁴² there is no reason to believe that he had a masochistic orientation towards Stanley (or Brando for that matter) as a 'real' (heterosexual) man. Such latently inversionist accounts elide the power relations within and across homosexual desires and identities, merely positing gay desire as a unitary position, reflexive of a self-loathing desire for the unattainable 'real' man (Dionian): unattainable as both an ego ideal or sexual partner. Inversionism cannot conceptualise a man's 'active' masculine desire for a 'passive' feminine male partner; nor, for that matter, a sissy's desire for another sissy. Homosexual men must be locked into a struggle simultaneously to find both acceptable points of identification in the available systems which offer only the abjection of effeminacy, and to find the possibility of imagining a requitable object of desire when the cultural imperative offers only the endless unrequitability of 'real' heterosexual (Dionian) men. We can see the mirror of this formulation in Radclyffe Hall's melodramatic *The Well of Loneliness*, which was first published in 1928. Amongst its many strategies, it offers the immutability of inversion as God-given, and inverts are represented as inevitably suffering - but with the worthiness, even holiness, of martyrs: Hall's protagonist is named after the first Christian martyr, is born on the eve of the Redeemer who saved by suffering and the novel is suffused with religious motifs and language.⁴³ The novel posits lesbianism as inversion, and has little trouble conceptualising the desires of its butch protagonist, Stephen Gordon, but collapses under the strain of attempting to position the desire of her femme partners, Angela or Mary, who behave all

wrong: Stephen desires them because she is a woman with the consciousness of a man, and thus they have to be femme-acting; yet if they behave in a 'feminine' way, how can their desire for Stephen be explained by the inversion of a male consciousness in a woman's body? They can either be femme-acting or desire a woman, but within an inversionist account, they can't be both.

This is of course one of the contradictions through which the heterosexual hegemony proceeds, which allows for multiple accounts of the identities which is its project to contain - inversion theories portray gay men as all limp-wristed Uranian femmes in pursuit of a Dionian real man (lesbians as masculine butches inevitably unrequited in their desire of feminine women), whilst disease models portray gay men and lesbians as infectious, predatory figures, sin models absolve the desire but damn the sexual practice and so on. These models are activated by culturally-situated needs to police the boundaries of gender. Whilst each specific discourse may prove to be disabling within its own frame, the diversity of accounts that must proliferate, in order to attempt to contain all threatening possibilities, produces faultlines in the cultural landscape.⁴⁴ It is at the point of rupture, when these discourses or stories collide, that ideological work is most anxiously and viciously undertaken to secure the hegemony and (re)contain the contradictions: these moments are opportunities for mobilisation and dissidence. Dominant authority does not necessarily collapse under the weight of these contradictions, but they are potential breaking points, at which new formations are possible, as

the terms of cultural reproduction are contested and negotiated. Thus it is not sufficient merely to comment upon the difficulties that ensue when we attempt to make sense of our practices and validate our identifications or desires; we need to be sensitive to the complexity of the power structures in which we are positioned and in which we are jostling. If the rise of psychoanalysis as popular discourse in America gave the narrative of inversion an authoritative invigoration in the 1950s and 60s, then the growing cultural confidence and political activism of homosexual subcultures enabled a dissident assault upon such hetero-patriarchal knowledge.

Coming Out: Stonewall and Gay Politics

As we have seen, Gay politics emerged in the liberatory aftermath of the Stonewall riots of June 1969 in Greenwich Village in New York. The riots acted as a catalyst for the burgeoning political awareness and anger amongst homosexuals which was engendered by a climate of heightened social unrest that characterised 1960s radical politics in America. The political character of the Gay Liberation Front, which emerged within a month of the Stonewall riots, could be said to be largely influenced by the strategies and rhetoric of the black power, feminist, student and anti-Vietnam war movements that shaped the face of a dissident politics in the States during the 1960s. A similar movement emerged in Britain, influenced by the ardour of American post-Stonewall militism, but distinct in its negotiation of the crucial 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which instated containing and liberally tolerant notions of public and private, and opened but a small window of legal acceptability for certain male homosexual practices in private.

One of the characterising principles of Gay Liberation was the development of a politics of coming out, which sought to contest the reorganisation of dominant regulation that had occurred in Britain with the premise of liberal toleration of homosexual behaviour in private. Similarly, in America, an uneasy combination of post-1950s hysteria about manliness, homosexuality and Communism, alongside the veneration of citizenship in the ideology of the Constitution brought about a state in which homosexuality could be tolerated, but only in private. Coming out of

the closet was a crucial Gay Liberation strategy, and involved reversing the terms of the public silence on sexual orientation and of coming together in unity. The effect of mounting a politics around 'coming out', as Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, however, is to reverse the process through which the containment is effected, rendering 'closetedness' itself as a 'performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence'.⁴⁵

The boundaries of the normal, of heterosexuality, are policed by the continuing connotation of homosexuality as an abjection; but this connotation is an open secret, which naturalises the 'normal' by continually conjuring, but not speaking, homosexuality. Instating the notion of the closet as a site of contestation, out of which one can emerge, and through the invocation of which normality is secured, was one of the ways in which the particular politics of Gay liberation came into intelligibility. Crucial to the movement was the assertion of an identity politics, similar to that of the women's movement, whereby what had been perceived as personal, possibly pathologised behaviour, became a political, positively affirmed identity; slogans used by the movement included 'Gay is good' and 'Gay is proud'. This mobilisation also entailed the celebration of cultural forms that were considered to be intrinsically gay and rejecting of 'straight' norms and values. These forms eventually included drag, cruising, promiscuity, anonymous and public sex, camp, aestheticism and theatricality, sadomasochism, pornography, body building and body worship and a whole range of other practices problematically

melded into an identifiable 'gay sensibility'.⁴⁶ However, there was a tendency for the new liberationists to dismiss earlier political interventions, such as the Homophile Movement when, as John D'Emilio has pointed out, it seems apparent their work was a precursor to that of Gay Liberation, and in part enabled its existence.⁴⁷ Thus, although we could say that there were distinct and fundamental discontinuities between the pre- and post-Stonewall eras, we need to emphasise the particular character and tenor of the Gay Liberation rhetoric and activity, rather than ascribe the earlier Homophile period to conservatism and the later Liberationism to radicalism. It is also important not to subtend a neat model of history which attributes the degree of political progression in direct proportion to the passing of time and the emergence of new and distinct movements. Although post-Stonewall activity within the Gay Liberation movement did represent a break with the terms of the earlier Homophile movement, Gay Liberation did not become the only rhetoric in circulation, even after Stonewall: homosexual women and men continued to mobilise around political material that enabled them to manoeuvre and gain some leverage or respite in the precise conditions in which they were embedded. We could now suggest that these could be intelligible as an intersection of geographical and spatial concerns (urban, rural, metropolitan, national) with issues of class, age, ethnicity, education, affluence, marital and parental status, all of which, amongst others, function as the determining conditions for access to dissident, intellectual and sub-cultural materials. An analogue of this trajectory of negotiating political and cultural models can be

found in an analysis of the contests over the emergence of Queer politics in the 1990s which sought to critique what was represented as liberal and comfortable Gay politics; yet Queer activism precisely mobilised the same kinds of political rhetoric and direct action used by Liberationists twenty years earlier. The key to Queer was that it attempted to sell radicalism and dissent to a newer generation who had to own their own involvements.⁴⁸

An important part of the negotiations that entail cultural change and progress is the claiming of texts as indicative of particular moments or movements. This claiming means involves a negotiation between existing reading positions and the newer position elaborated by the text that necessarily produces absences or loose ends: those parts of the text that are suppressed or glossed over, the characteristics which strain against the older position from the newer. Gay liberation partly came into intelligibility through the claiming of writers and other cultural producers as gay. Not only did this legitimise the liberation project, but the action of claiming itself was axiomatic, in that it brought the chosen subject out of the closet, and brought them into a process of positive affirmation and collectivity. This activity has been incalculably important in the development of gay identity as a positivity, as a way of conceptualising a positive space in which to produce and imagine a life in which same-sex desire is possible. In one of the collections of writings from the National Lesbian and Gay Survey, 'Andrew' writes of the moment at which he came out.⁴⁹ Taking part in a community play, a fellow cast member overhears him talking

about the film *Torch Song Trilogy* and asks him if he's gay. It seems to be the collective acknowledgement of *Torch Song Trilogy* as a 'gay' film and as something valued within that collectivity that enables 'Andrew' to identify himself. The knowledges through which *Torch Song* is here secured as a gay text are context specific, and rely on the apparently positive image the film suggests of a New York drag queen's homosexual lifestyle, and the relative rarity of such imagery. Yet this action is also historically specific: the particular importance of *Torch Song* is embedded in the cultural domain in which 'gay' circulates at the moment of which 'Andrew' is speaking, and we may presume is secured by an elaboration of its positive elements (dramatisation of a coming-out narrative in which the gay man is autonomous and dignified, depiction of harmonious and humorous domestic arrangements, the opportunity for shared anger and politicisation in Alan's murder, and so on) and a suppression or glossing over of its less positive elements (the awkward and pejorative representation of anonymous or promiscuous sex, the primacy of normative, possibly heterosexualised domestic values, the fact that the women have to lose out for the gays to triumph, so that Arnold may be the best woman). Similarly when 'Simon' comes out to his father by extending his gayness back through history, he must suppress Oscar Wilde's marriage and children, Auden's resistance and Tchaikovsky's suicide to elaborate the notions of collectivity and positivity that define that gayness:

I said, 'What do Proust and Auden, Oscar Wilde, Somerset
Maugham, Alexander the Great and Tchaikovsky, Michelangelo,

Cole Porter, Noel Coward, Housman, John Gielgud and Marc Almond have in common?' He stared at me. 'Add me to the list,' I said.⁵⁰

Identifying the moments of suppression or of glossing that enable the elaboration of a cultural position is an important way of being able to track cultural projects historically. But any cultural criticism must remain aware of not only the theoretical stakes involved, but the emotional ones as well. To vilify 'Andrew' in his alignment with *Torch Song* would be to perpetrate a vast and heinous injustice: *Torch Song Trilogy* is a titanic edifice of fabulousness. However, the circumstances that precipitate our identifications need to be identified in order that we can assess the scope our cultural negotiations have for dissidence or social change.

A Streetcar Named Desire : A Gay Play?

For those critics who have aligned themselves with the Gay Liberation project and who have engaged with Tennessee Williams, that engagement has been structured by the pathologising accounts instated by Taubman and company in the 1960s. In keeping with the defining notions of gay politics, writers such as John Clum have attempted to displace the inversionist readings of *Streetcar*, *Sweet Bird of Youth* and others, with a reading that judges Williams's work by gay criteria; that is, as negotiations of the closet. Alas this project is grounded on a precarious terrain: whatever the enthusiasm with which gay critics may wish to claim Williams, or

recognise his works as emblematic expressions of the knowledges and practices of gay culture, they remain products of a pre-liberation time.

Thus we can see that for gay theatrical critic John Clum, the principal concern in the work of Tennessee Williams is the extent of his closetedness: this is a marker of the degree to which he is useful to the agendas of Gay Liberation in speaking openly about homosexuality. Clum writes that the playwright 'was much more successful at dramatizing the closet than at presenting a coherent, affirming view of gayness.'⁵¹ For Clum, the closet is an intrinsically problematic realm that it is the project of Gay Liberation to dissipate; yet his model of the closet itself perhaps bears an unfortunate resemblance to a psychoanalytically constituted concept of latency operative in American nationalistic paranoia: '*A Streetcar Named Desire*, though *without a living homosexual character or overt gay theme*, depicts in a codified fashion a paradigmatic homosexual experience.'⁵² Even apparently radical critical manoeuvres do not necessarily escape the entrapment of dominant and heterosexist ideologies. So, *Streetcar* may not realise any homosexual representation or characterisation, but holds an inherent, and latent, form of homosexuality. For Clum, as for other gay critics, the homosexual-ness of characters like Blanche DuBois is an effect of the operations of the closet and not of a psychoanalytically ascribed pathology of inversion.'⁵³ The knowing, fallaciously feminine disposition of Blanche then becomes a cloaking of the playwright's homosexual expression, hidden 'within the actions of a heterosexual female

character' and this is a function of historical conditions (rather than psychic ones) which censored the open representation of coherent homosexuality (p.150).

In both the earlier article published in 1989 and also in his book, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama*, first published in 1992, Clum elucidates Williams's dramatisation of the closet in lengthy discussions of how the theatricality of Blanche constructs a series of gay codes that identify her as 'the quintessential gay character in American closet drama'.⁵⁴ This theatricality is played off against an eroticisation of the male characters, such as Stanley Kowalski, which makes them the objects of the gaze, and Clum notes that 'straight men could fantasize about the sexual attractiveness and power these male characters had.' This is true, although it is a feature of male sexuality that is not limited to homosexual representations. As Eve Sedgwick famously posits in *Between Men* and Craig Owens discusses in 'Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism', the maleness of men, which is to be consumed by men through the male gaze, is a central component of the reproduction of masculinity.⁵⁵ The constant presence of the threat of homosexuality functions to police the precarious identificatory relationships that men are encouraged to form with idealised forms of masculinity. Thus the suggestion that the eroticisation of Stanley alone signals *Streetcar* as a gay, but closeted, text is a little premature. Clum's suggestion of *Streetcar's* representation of a 'paradigmatic homosexual experience' seems an equivalent concept to that of 'gay sensibility', in that it calls on the recognition of certain subcultural practices as

defining a homogenous gay identity. Of the characteristics I noted earlier that in part seem to constitute this sensibility, Williams's work, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* in particular, exemplify cruising and promiscuity (in Blanche's behaviour with wagon loads of soldiers in Laurel), camp, theatricality and aestheticism (Blanche again, as well as the theatrical and dramatic nature of *Streetcar* as a cultural form in itself), and eroticism of the male body and body building (Stanley, with his shirt off, torn, wet or in the process of being taken off). For Clum this archetypal gay construction is Williams's defence from the homophobia to which the playwright feared he would succumb:

[Blanche] knows about paper moons and cardboard skies and paper lanterns, but she also knows that performance is both her allure and her protection. And William's [sic] protection of his homosexual subtext is achieved by hiding it within the actions of a heterosexual female character. (p.150)

Clum is a little more indulgent of Williams in his later book than he is the article, but his criticism is a little barren in that he does not anticipate particular audiences for Williams's work. He says:

The works of William Inge and Tennessee Williams are closet dramas in their evasions, silences, and invisibilities [sic] and in heterosexist language with which they surround their homosexual characters. They are also plays about the closet itself and about the terrors of being uncloseted. (p.173)

Part of the problem here is an insufficiently cultural approach to both the terms and conditions that were organising Williams' own ability to conceptualise his sexuality, and to the reading skills and subcultural strategies that typified gay liberation activity. Proceeding from the understanding that Williams was not writing explicit gay drama, Clum deduces that he must be writing closet gay drama because this is a notion consistent with Clum's own politics. In reading Williams this way, he has to be selective in his account of, for example *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in order to produce the coherence of his 'closet drama' approach. Clum does not discuss the role of Stella or Mitch in the closet economy of the play: if Blanche operates as a gay man, and Stanley is an object for the gay male gaze, how can this account handle the positions of Mitch, who is a heterosexual man and who desires Blanche, and Stella who is a heterosexual woman married to Stanley? As I shall be discussing shortly, Mitch's masculinity is not unmediated itself - through a certain passivity and connotations of Freudian homosexuality - and Stella is represented as a desiring, sexual woman. These factors at the very least trouble Clum's reading: within his own logic the audience for Blanche's theatricality needs to be masculine, in order not to rupture the ironic authority of her performance, and if it is the men in whom Williams is apparently constructing the drama's eroticism, then how come Stella, as a non-theatrical woman is shown to be actively sexual - what happens to the matrix of gender and sexual representation that Clum describes in this instance?

Further, in vilifying Williams for not making less closeted dramas, Clum is anticipating Williams as a mainstream playwright and a subcultural one simultaneously. Here the radical critique of Williams's heterosexism is collapsing back into liberal notions of sameness and equivalence. Clum's frustration with Williams is that he doesn't treat his gay characters, who admittedly don't fare well (they are dead, subtextual or self-oppressed) in the same way as his straight characters. Clum's assumption is that all Williams had to do was open the doors of his creative closet and liberation would flow through his pen and on to the American stage. This is the limitation of gay liberation perspectives, which insufficiently conceptualise the extent of the threat of homosexuality, and the degree to which it is already being conjured by dominant ideological discourses. Clum does acknowledge the brutal forces that make it difficult to be open, but he does not conceive that these forces are not just merely producing silence precipitated by the closet. In as far as the difficulty in openness is constituted by the active production of sexual categories, rather than the mere suppression of disclosure, Clum is unforthcoming. His model only adequately accounts for enforced silence as the mechanism through which homosexuality is circumscribed.

The particular terms in which Clum mobilises the closet as an analytical tool have a tendency to be ahistorical and essentialising: given that the notion of the closet and the ideology of disclosure and secrecy that it discursively proposes came into being with gay liberation of the early 1970s, and has been brought into question

by recent queer initiatives, it seems curious to extend that tool back into a consideration of texts written before 1970, in order to bring Williams to account in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, first performed in 1955, Clum says:

Cat ... contains Williams' most interesting attempt at measuring his characters' troubled relationships against the potential of an abiding love between two men, an attempt that is mitigated by Williams' inability, or disinclination, to forge a positive language for the homosexual love the play tries to affirm. (p.156)

Here the Williams that Clum conjurs is a figure wilfully trenchant in his closetry (note the 'disinclination'). Clum does note the bind the playwright is caught in: on the one hand the troubled relationships are his 'most interesting attempt', yet they are 'mitigated' by his own personal whim or failing in not forging positive language. The rhetoric of positivity is one of gay liberationism. Clum's failure is in the way in which he situates the playwright outside the structures of knowledge that are manifested in the play - if the play is apparently negative about homosexual love, then this must be determined by Williams himself. A little earlier in his consideration of *Cat*, Clum notes that the motif of arrested development characterises Brick's homosexual feelings. This is a Freudian notion in which same-sex desire is emblematic of an insufficiently matured development out of infantile polymorphous perversity. Yet despite having identified this as knowledge structuring the depiction of homosexual desire in the play, Clum situates Williams

outside the cultural forces which made such knowledge the abiding terms for conceptualising homosexuality in 1950s America, and blames him for not conjuring a more 'positive' representation.

A more imaginative attempt to locate Williams in relation to gay male culture comes in Neil Bartlett's production *Night After Night*. Vince, the barman addresses the audience:

I fancied a change and I did go and see a more dramatic piece. I don't know if any of you saw it, it was that *Streetcar* with Miss Leigh. *Streetcar Named Desire*, what a fabulous title. Oh, and she was fabulous in it, I thought, although I know some people thought otherwise...⁵⁶

In the preface to his work Bartlett lists *A Streetcar Named Desire* amongst the sources used to form a popular image of the gay man at the time in which the production is set, 1958. Bartlett seems to be situating Vince through *Streetcar* in two ways: firstly as a tragedy queen preoccupied with the idea of suicide as the represented fate of homosexuals ('...the kindness of strangers is all very well, thankyou, but Miss Leigh's husband in *Streetcar Named Desire*, what happened to him? ... Well, he killed himself didn't he?') whom Vince can't even name as homosexual; and secondly as identifying Vivien Leigh's portrayal of Blanche DuBois as 'fabulous' and 'marvellous' (twice). It is telling that Leigh-as-Blanche is more memorable to Vince than Stanley, that apparently archetypal object of queer desire (note Jarman's

lechery towards Stanley, noted earlier...). As a point of identification it is clear that Blanche is preferable to her dead husband ('I didn't find that very uplifting, actually'), but not quite so apparent why Blanche would be preferable to Stanley. In this characterisation of Vince as an archetypally mincing bar queen it seems to be more important in securing the historical and cultural authenticity that he identifies with Leigh-as-Blanche, that he desires to be like her, than he sexually desire Stanley, and not just as a safer subject position from which to desire than the husband (Vince does not articulate any sexual desire from the position of 'Miss Leigh'), but as a textual position that is 'marvellous' and 'fabulous'. In other words, given the range of possible responses that a gay man might be expected to produce in relation to *Streetcar*, Bartlett elects to represent one in which his character chooses not to identify with the only 'homosexual' in the play, and does not represent a desire of Stanley, but who does find a meaningful and affirmative identification in Leigh-as-Blanche. Of the four subject positions available to Bartlett in order to signify Vince's homosexuality (Allan, Stanley, Mitch and Blanche), he chooses the identification with a woman. Blanche is not merely a position of identification because she desires men, but because she is a woman, a 'fabulous' and 'marvellous' subject position rather than an object who is identifiable only as a function of the presence of somebody else in the room ('By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty...⁵⁷'). In so far as the identity of Blanche's husband is 'visible', that visibility is only conceivable as a connotation, as is Vince's own homosexuality. Vince does not come out as homosexual, cannot, and he is not

named as such: 'people like me do meet at parties ... but they have come to terms with the, you know, situation.' In Bartlett's judgement, what can be made explicit by this homosexual man in 1958 is his identification with the starring actress, but more than that, this is the identification that will make Vince meaningful to a largely subcultural audience in the late 1990s.

From Gender to Libido (and back again?)

As we saw earlier, one significant problem homosexual writers like Forster exhibit in their attempts to negotiate around inversionism is that they enact a suppression of any connotation of effeminacy or female identification. In Forster's case this necessitates his own absence from the transcendent ascent into the Greenwood. This suppression represents a preponderant strain of post-liberation gay cultural activity. It was partly in an attempt to shift the security of the effeminate construction consolidated by Freudianism that the macho clone image became a predominant one in many urban contexts in which gay liberation flourished. This strategy is less popular currently, but it was successful in installing a different notion of homosexual men, one in which they could be masculine. However, clone culture was less successful in shifting that part of the inversionist construction which imagines homosexual men locked into an endless desire of the dionian ideal, the 'real' man. Indeed, in some ways clone culture re-secured this structure, and made it even more difficult to envisage the effeminate homosexual as an object of desire - largely because it mobilised contest around disputing the idea

that homosexual men couldn't be masculine, rather than around a challenge to the idea that masculinity should be the central quality to aspire towards or desire. Gregg Blachford argues that the masculinisation of American and British gay subcultures in the late 1970s did not preclude the idolisation of masculinity before this time, but that 'for the first time homosexuals themselves moved away from the previous stereotype of 'swish and sweaters' towards a new masculine style which has become the dominant mode of expression in the subculture'.⁵⁸ In other words, in the seventies gay men learned how to identify as masculine as well as to desire the masculine.

Yet whilst this clone culture may have become a predominant manifestation of urban gay life for a while, it would clearly be a mistake to suggest that it was the only operative mode of homosexual expression, even as it continues to maintain. But as Blachford suggests we may be able to characterise this movement as instating a libidinous notion of gay identity that no longer acknowledged the implicit relation between homosexuality and gender dissent or dysphoria. This relation was established by the early exponents of the third sex model: homosexuality was not merely an existing sex with an alternative sexual object choice, but constituted a different gender all together. As we have seen, subsequently this conception of homosexuality as an alternative gender became understood as an inversion of sex and gender which produced the proposition of male homosexuality as a pathological manifestation of femininity. Gay politics and

cultural activity has been strenuously engaged with this complicated and often repellent set of knowledges, and our subcultural negotiations are not consistent. Whilst the rise of macho clone expressions has replaced the apparent fixation of the invert upon the unattainable heterosexual dionian ideal with a more acceptable, reputable homosexual object of desire, gay culture continues to proliferate a remnancy of the gender structure inversionism implicated us within. Gay culture no longer depends for its erotic satisfaction upon the willingness or corruptibility of 'trade', but has proliferated diverse expressions of the gendering of that relation: the cult of Jeff Stryker and other impenetrable porn icons, active and passive fantasies advertised on phonedines, the gendering of personal ads in the gay press around maturity/youth, active/passive, top/bottom, master/servant, occidental/oriental, black/white, trade/queen, hirsute/smooth, dominant/submissive, daddy/son, employer/houseboy.

This reproduction of the primacy of masculinity, both as an image with which to identify (to be), and as a body to desire (to have), is a process we might describe as embodying the notion that hegemonies of oppression operate through rearticulation. In this instance, the oppressive and dominant structure of masculinity is rearticulated by a marginal group as something pleasurable, empowering, desirable. In the moments of rearticulation the structure becomes stronger as the power of its ideological centrality is reinforced, not by those who necessarily profit from it, but in this instance by those who inhabit an identity continually invoked in order to police the homosocial continuum. In *Bodies that*

Matter, Judith Butler suggests that this rearticulation is a performative act, a participation in the process by which dominant ideology is secured hegemonically, by conjuring the possibility of dissent and contest.⁵⁹ This is a development beyond her performative thesis in *Gender Trouble*, which was widely interpreted as suggesting that gender is a performance, and that performances which parody dominant gender constructions fragment their power.⁶⁰

One of the reasons why *Gender Trouble* proved to be so popular, especially with gay male writers and activists, was that it was interpreted as promising an intrinsic subversiveness to subcultural practices that lesbian feminism had traditionally been critical of, such as gender-bending and drag, transsexualism, sadomasochism and sexual role play. Sheila Jeffreys comments on what she considers to be the dilemma facing the stars of 'lesbianandgay' theory:

How, for instance, is the phenomenon of drag to be made not just acceptable but even seen as revolutionary in lesbianandgay theory when it has stuck in the craw of feminist theory ever since lesbians dissented from gay liberation? It is to be accomplished by a return to gender, and invention of a harmless version of gender as an idea which lesbians and gay men can endlessly play with and be revolutionary at the same time.⁶¹

Jeffreys decries what she sees in *Gender Trouble* and lesbianandgay theory generally as the elaboration of gender as merely a series of drag effects in which power

becomes little more than a discursive metaphor. She argues that feminist lesbians have fostered these theories as a way of building authority and success in an academic environment where gay male sexuality has accrued a revolutionary chic that Jeffrey suggests amounts to a reinvestment in liberal and individualistic ideals.⁶² The trajectory of lesbian and gay or queer politics in Britain would certainly bear out Jeffrey's arguments about the erosion of gender as a vital and urgent category of concern.⁶³ However, Jeffrey's dismissal as politically compromising practices such as lesbian butch and femme role-playing, sadomasochism and drag produces an analysis dangerously simplistic in its failure either to imagine the seductiveness and pleasure of such practices and their expedience in given cultural conditions, or the complex ideological contests through which such practices become the site of subcultural formation, resistance and dissidence. As Butler suggests in *Gender Trouble*:

gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematise 'the natural' in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex.⁶⁴

There is clearly a problem with some of the ways in which ideas derived from *Gender Trouble* circulated culturally, which gave rise to an assumption that in our gender performances we might shrug off troublesome power relations as easily as one might strap on a dildo, apply a bit of lippy or slip on a frock.⁶⁵ Lesbian feminist writers have questioned Butler's investment in gay male cultural activity, suggesting that in making gay performances equivalent to queer ones, she erases

the distinction between gay and lesbian, and subsumes lesbian women into gay men.⁶⁶

In *Belle Reprieve*, a queer adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Split Britches and Bloodlips, the roles of Blanche, played by the drag performer Bette Bourne, and Stanley, played by lesbian performance artist Peggy Shaw, exhibit both the kind of queer performativity that Butler suggests is a dissident intervention into the process of hegemonic rearticulation, and the terms under which this dissidence is both troubling to the natural effect of heterosexuality, and necessarily caught up in the force of dominant rearticulation. When Stanley and Blanche emerge from boxes on stage at the beginning of the play and confront each other, Blanche must assure Stanley of 'her' credentials: before they can 'get on with the scenes of brutal humiliation and sexual passion' - Stanley must find her 'motive' in the trunk from which she emerged. As 'he' searches the trunk he asks, 'what are little girls made of?' whilst Blanche frames the terms under which we are to view identity in the play:

BLANCHE: I assure you that is who I am. My namesake is a role played by that incandescent star, Vivien Leigh, and although the resemblance is not immediately striking I have been told we have the same shoulders.

STANLEY: (Looking at passport photo) Then who's this here?

BLANCHE: The information in that document is a convention which allows me to pass in the world without let or hindrance. If you'll just notice the message inside the front cover, the Queen of England herself not only requests this but requires it.⁶⁷

Bette as Blanche here self-consciously asserts her right not only to re-interpret the iconic performance of the role by Vivien Leigh, but to perform Blanche's gender as any other performer would: this is the convention, the stage, that enables him to 'pass' as a woman character. *Belle Reprieve* exhibits the subcultural knowledge of which it is a product, reflecting as it does the significance *Streetcar* and Williams have in gay culture. A few lines later Stanley retorts,

Look, have you any idea how many people we have come in here saying they're Blanche DuBois, clutching tiny handbags and fainting in the foyer? I'm afraid I'll have to subject this case to the closest possible scrutiny before I allow any of you to pass any further. (p.9)

Here in the licensed space of the alternative stage, Peggy as Stanley performs with the authority of male power, identifying the gay practice that inscribes the iconography of Blanche's dainty Southern Belle femininity. Those gay male performers who come 'in here', into the subcultural space, who clutch tiny handbags and faint, are deploying femininity. Later, Stella, the woman-as-feminine performer in *Belle Reprieve*, rearticulates the natural values of that femininity, and

how she learned their characteristics from her (queer?) sister, waiting for her to come home from Woolworth's, observing her mannerisms and affectations, admiring her entrance down the staircase to receive her 'gentlemen callers'. The irony in this performance space is that (Lois as) Stella's admission comes but a few lines after we've heard her role model in the bath:

BLANCHE: One day I'll probably just dissolve in the bath. They'll
come looking for me, but there'll be nothing left. 'Drag Queen
Dissolves in Bathtub,' that'll be the headline. (p.13)

In an alternative, avant-garde political theatrical convention, to an audience subculturally conversant with the Brechtian levels of irony employed in these exchanges, and aware that they are being invited to participate in disrupting the rearticulation of 'natural', conventional gender structures, *Belle Reprise* re-inscribes Williams's play with a sense of artifice which validates queer subcultural gender play, and troubles the categories of normality in which all our knowledges are necessarily located. Yet it is interesting to note that the play coheres much more successfully around its presentation of Bette as Blanche and Peggy as Stanley than it does around that of Lois Weaver as Stella and Paul Shaw as Mitch. The underlying identities that validate these performances are congruent with dominant models of homosexuality: Peggy playing a butch dyke being Stanley, a man renowned as an icon of machismo, and Bette playing a drag queen being Blanche, the archetype of the fey Southern Belle, are both instances, performances, of the inversionist conceptualisation of homosexuality. Peggy performs Stanley so

that she can desire the feminine Stella, and Bette performs Blanche so that she can be subjugated by Stanley. Lois' femme lesbian interpretation of Stella desiring Peggy as Stanley, and Paul's fey straight interpretation of Mitch desiring Blanche are much less satisfying: Lois can signify as lesbian or as feminine, but the potential to convincingly unite both terms, one conjuring the natural, one standing for perversity, is limited.

However, the constitution of the theatrical space is not consistent: the play shifts genres from avant-garde fairy-tale through political didacticism, realism and back again. One crucial point of shifting is when Blanche is about to be attacked and raped by Stanley. Bette has been flouncing around, rebelling against the group's avant-garde pretensions: 'she' aspires towards an authenticity that will validate her gender performance as Blanche, she wants to be in a 'real' play, one that her mother can come and see her in:

STELLA: You think you can play it?

BLANCHE: I have the shoulders. (p.34)

Yet as they progress into realism and return to Williams's *Streetcar* where Blanche's fate is sealed by the narrative and by her gender identity, Bette again steps out of the convention, rupturing the narrative, the rearticulation of patriarchal values, by reinvoking the specific performative context in which 'she' is embedded. 'She' foregrounds the avant-garde and the subcultural domain in which they are performing, and fragments the convention of the suspension of disbelief, inviting

'her' subcultural audience to see her as a gay man performing femininity, but not wanting to be treated like a woman, not wanting to be raped and humiliated:

STANLEY: Drop the stiletto!

BLANCHE: You think I'm crazy or something?

STANLEY: If you want to be in this play you've got to drop the stiletto.

BLANCHE: If you want to be in this play you've got to make me!

STANLEY: If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and she goes crazy in the end.

BLANCHE: I don't want to get raped and go crazy, I just wanted to wear a nice frock, and look at the shit they've given me! (p.35)

In rendering his 'womanliness' as unnatural, the gay Bette enables us to catch a glimpse of the gender order being reinstated, but it is a glimpse that momentarily shatters the invisibility of the structure, catching its moment of rearticulation, a moment when the hegemony is being re-secured. In restoring his masculinity Bette takes control of his destiny once again, his performance of apparently authentic feminine representation, of subjugation, is over. Similarly, if Peggy as Stanley truly wishes to perform as a man, to be masculine, then she necessarily adopts a position of dominance in relation to identities positioned as feminine in the space. Here the performances constitute power relations: to perform is to cloak oneself with the trappings of a culturally produced identity, it is to situate oneself in relation to other performers, other identities. To perform gender is to perform, to

reproduce, power relations: as Hilary Harris notes: 'Sexuality may be about fucking, but getting fucked is still about gender, even if 'only' metaphorically.'⁶⁸

PART TWO

STREETCAR : A PLAY WITH GENDER?

A Streetcar Named Desire dramatises the arrival of a middle-aged Southern Belle, Blanche DuBois, in licentious New Orleans, and her intrusion into the libidinous domesticity of her younger sister Stella, and her husband, Stanley Kowalski, a working-class second generation Polish immigrant. The DuBois plantation, Belle Reve, and the aristocratic status it represents, has been lost to the indulgent 'epic fornications' of Blanche and Stella's male relatives, and Blanche arrives unmarried and homeless. Despite her aristocratic bearing, which infuriates Stanley, it is apparent that Blanche is traumatised. However, she strikes up a romantic relationship with one of Kowalski's friends, Harold Mitchell, who lives with his mother, which promises to abate both her material precariousness and her emotional vulnerability. Mitch appears enchanted by Blanche's bearing and grace, his affection growing in proportion to the frustration and violence of Stella's husband, who is being deprived of his raucous sex life and domestic nuclearity by Blanche's continuing presence: this becomes more evident when we learn that Stella is about to have a baby. Stanley discovers that Blanche was sacked from her position as a teacher of English for seducing a seventeen year old pupil, and that her reputation for sexual excess at the Hotel Flamingo got her hounded out of her home town of Laurel. At the dramatic climax of the play on the night of Blanche's

birthday Stanley becomes violent and confronts Blanche with his knowledge of her history; he gives her a bus ticket back to Laurel. Whilst they wait for Mitch's arrival, it transpires that Stanley has told his friend about Blanche's past and he no longer wants her. When Stella challenges Stanley about his behaviour he hits her again and she goes into labour. Whilst her sister and brother-in-law are at the hospital, Blanche gets drunk and parades around in a swirl of satin and romantic fantasies. Stanley returns and the two fight; as Blanche continues to resist him, Stanley rapes her. The play ends after Stella has returned home with her new baby, refusing to believe Blanche's accusation of her husband. Blanche retreats into delusions of former romantic gentility and is taken off to a mental institution.

Part of the task of an agile and dissident reader, one who wishes to formulate an interpretation which is culturally challenging, is to pose questions suggested by the ideological and narrative arrangements of a text that conventional wisdom and dominant productions and criticism have not posed or answered. One key incoherence around which the dominant formations at work in *A Streetcar Named Desire* destabilise, arises out of the question that if Stanley just wants Blanche out of the house so that he and Stella can keep those 'pretty lights going', which is how he justifies his actions to Stella, then why does he sabotage her chances of marrying Mitch (which would certainly get her out of the house), and why does he rape her? Why does he need to subject her to such behaviour? What destabilising 'queerness' does she represent that must be dominated physically and medically

removed (she is taken away at the end by a doctor) from the apparently threatening proximity to his identity and his homosocial matrix?

Within those accounts of *Streetcar* which position Stanley as the object of Williams's own masochistic homosexual desire it is axiomatic that the Kowalski conjured is indefatigably brutish and powerful, an unassailable potency. Ronald Hayman speaks of the way Williams apparently endowed his male characters 'with the same qualities that had excited him in men he had known', Mark Lilly feels that the playwright made it plain how far his male characters were his own homoerotic icons, whilst Christopher Bigsby is positively salivating as he suggests that Stanley 'dominates existence and as such in a way commands Williams's respect, even if he represents a brutalism which frightens'.⁶⁹ It is my intention here to develop a reading of *Streetcar* which attempts to address Stanley's need to annihilate Blanche, and which also invests in the constructive notion of gay men's identification with her. As part of this project it is important to look much more closely at the apparently robust masculinity with which Tennessee Williams imbued Stanley Kowalski.

Stanley Kowalski: Polack, Stud, Husband

In his biography of Williams, Donald Spoto recounts an erotic fascination the future playwright had for a man he worked with at International Shoe in 1934. He was dark and burly, and for that period became Tom's (Williams only became known as Tennessee after the publication of his first story in 1939) closest companion. He was called Stanley Kowalski:

It is perhaps hard to know how much of his character and personality are represented by the character with that name in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but the attraction to him by Blanche DuBois is certainly something that the playwright himself first knew.⁷⁰

Such precise biographical knowledge lends a greater credibility to suggestions about Williams' erotic fascination with the character of Stanley in the play, although this is a proposition about which we must remain suspicious; what it suggests however, is that Stanley seems to be invested with a particularly significant sexual character. Throughout the unfolding drama Stanley is constructed as being aggressively, animalistically sexual; this is not merely a reflection of the cross-currents of desire and gender that the play sets up: those cross-currents are themselves articulated through a construction of ethnic and racial difference. The notions of racial difference in *Streetcar* intersect with pre-existing and re-circulating knowledges about the history of slavery and racism in the American South and the powerful myths that enable these oppressions to become plausible.

The heady, licentious and lyrical atmosphere that the play establishes in the opening stage direction calls upon an exoticism invested in New Orleans, which in this dramatic context, 'is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town.'⁷¹ The racial identity that is being particularly called upon here, it seems, is a 'soulful' Afro-American one; we may note the 'redolences of bananas and coffee' in the warm air, with their exotic connotations of the Caribbean, matched by the 'infatuated fluency of brown fingers' (p.115) who add their own redolences of blues piano to the already heady atmosphere. The steamy, sensual *mise en scene* in which the play creates a space of passion and violence is to a large extent a function of ethnic exoticism, secured through an elaboration of the racial difference of New Orleans' apparent blackness. So, what the text identifies as a cultural image, an ethnic stereotype, is specified through the elaboration of racial difference - an apparent biological difference in physiology. As Sander Gilman points out, 'the association of the black with concupiscence reaches back into the Middle Ages.'⁷² We might suggest, then, that the quality of licentiousness that *Streetcar* invests in New Orleans is secured through this evocation of a racial stereotype.

Lionel Kelly has pointed out that

[Stanley] is presented as an ethnic intruder in a site in which two prevalent other ethnicities, the southern white and the southern black, prevail. Both of these he seeks to subordinate, the one

through an appeal to a legality that surmounts ethnic specificity,
the other through a braggart appropriation of their modes of
social being.⁷³

There is clearly a danger in making Stanley's Polishness equivalent to the blackness with which the idea of New Orleans' licentiousness is secured, and in the process rendering invisible the particular ethnic location he occupies. However, there is a slippage in *Streetcar* around Stanley, that is symptomatic of the contradictory racial and ethnic messages the play produces and the complex historical context of the play's setting. New Orleans is understood to have a particular ethnic identity as a place, secured through its mix of black and white, a place where normal boundaries are obscured, where the principal cultural conflict is not between black and white. As a Southern city New Orleans was on the losing side in the Civil War, and so conjurs an air of loss, and of the conflict between old aristocratic, colonialist values and those of the ascendant new America. It is in this milieu that Stanley makes his claim as a citizen of 'the greatest country on earth': claims his right to participate in the American dream, predicated on the promise of inclusion and immigrancy. However, *Streetcar* positions Stanley unevenly: it manifests a space coded as black and points towards Stanley's occupation of it, and yet simultaneously and contradictorily positions him as a Polish immigrant. Even before Kowalski appears on stage an effect of his difference from Anglo-Saxon whiteness is produced; Stella makes a point of telling her sister that Stanley is Polish, and Blanche suggests that this is like being Irish, 'Only not so – highbrow?' and they laugh together (p.124).

Here Stanley's ethnic difference and inferiority is secured at the same moment as Blanche and Stella's superiority and sameness: they laugh 'in the same way'. This exchange helps to secure the sisters' social superiority: they represent the old (and lost) money of the aristocratic Southern white family. Later we can see that this difference is secured through a conflation of primal sexual passion and bestiality. When it becomes apparent that Belle Reve is lost, Blanche's defensiveness leads her to suggest that Stella was in bed with her 'Polack' whilst Blanche struggled alone (p.127). And later still Blanche's view of Stanley seems directly shaped by Victorian racial taxonomy:

BLANCHE: There's something downright - bestial - about him!...There's even something - sub-human - something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something - ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in - anthropological studies!... Don't - don't hang back with the brutes! (p.163)

It is difficult not to conflate the racial work the play is undertaking here with the kinds of knowledge about black sexuality produced in Victorian racial taxonomies - Blanche even refers to anthropological studies.. Sander Gilman notes how such work 'commented on the lascivious, ape-like sexual appetite of the black'.⁷⁴ This view of Blanche's, that Stanley is an animalistic sexual beast, a primal figure, seems

to be endorsed by the text in the famous stage description which heralds his entrance into the play:

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes everything that is his ... bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. (p.128)

Not only is Stanley an animal sexual figure metaphorically, even iconically, but by the end of the play he is also a rapist. In her now classic book *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis explores the force of the myth of the black male rapist, which imbues black men with a predatory sexual drive, particularly in relation to white women. She argues that the content of this myth is in direct opposition to the reality endured under slavery where 'the right claimed by slave owners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over Black people as a whole.'⁷⁵ Following the end of slavery, the myth of the black male rapist was used to control and terrorise the black populations of the South. Lynchings, justified with reference to the apparent insatiability and animality of black sexuality, were used to parochially protect white women, and strike fear into black ex-slaves. Given the particular kinds of imagery *Streetcar* is calling up, and its setting in the South, it's difficult not to read the play as buying into this kind of mythicisation. *Sweet Bird of Youth*, written twelve years after *Streetcar*, similarly points to a space circumscribed by white myths of racial difference but situates the young, beautiful and white Chance Wayne there instead of the anticipated black male sexual aggressor. Chance has returned to the small

Southern town where years earlier he venereally infected his childhood sweetheart, Heavenly, daughter of Boss Finley, the town's patriarch. At the end of the play, Chance will be castrated for defiling her, in the name of Boss Finley's appeal to keep the South segregated: his daughter Heavenly is no longer convincing as a 'shining example [...] of white Southern youth - in danger' from 'them that want to adulterate the pure white blood of the South.'⁷⁶

Yet in *Streetcar*, this conflation of Stanley with blackness is not consistent throughout the play. Whilst it continues to position him as an outsider, the speech in which Stanley makes a claim for his identity as an American citizen, reaffirms both his Polish ethnicity and his belief in the American dream:

STANLEY: I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack. (p.197)

This celebration of the aspirational potential America offers is related to Stanley's working class identity: here his ethnicity is functioning in a way that signifies Eastern-European second generation immigrancy rather than associations of blackness and post-slavery racist rhetoric. However, this elaboration does reproduce both his primal sexuality, and his class difference from Stella and Blanche: he reminds his wife how common she thought he was when they first met, as she showed him pictures of Belle Reve, 'the place with the columns'. Stanley

taunts Stella with her own desire for his common sensuality: he pulled her down off the columns, and she loved it, 'having them coloured lights going!' And he's explicit about what has ruptured this libidinous domestic harmony: it's the intrusion of Blanche, with her airs, likening Stanley to an 'ape' (p.198).

So, at points the play relies on a construction of Stanley's sexuality through ethnicity somewhat distant from white supremacist notions of blackness and bestiality, in as far as that (Polish) ethnicity denotes working class immigrancy and the ascendant industrialisation of the new America. It is this distance from 'blackness' and the idea of him being working class that facilitates the possibility of an eroticisation of Stanley by Stella (or Blanche), which would otherwise have been unthinkable, given the fears of miscegenation we would expect old family aristocratic Southerners like Stella and Blanche to have: it is worth noting that they are a fallen, white trash version of the identity occupied by Boss Finley in *Sweet Bird of Youth*; he would no doubt see their poverty as what happens when you don't police your daughters rigorously enough. Yet part of the play's appeal is the way in which it represents Stella's active desire and the possibility of her pleasure in Stanley's sexuality, indeed this was one of the elements that was perceived to be most shocking when it first opened.

The racial and ethnic implications of Stanley's character in *Streetcar* are deeply embedded in the play's context and in its principal dramatic tensions. The iconic

stature of Stanley's masculinity, and its contestant position in relation to Blanche's Southern Belle femininity, her status as white goddess, are to a large degree manifested through, and secured by a rhetoric of racial difference, reproduced through myths originated to secure the plausibility of white supremacy. However, this racial difference is not positioned in the text as a unified discourse, and there is a contradictory relationship between the notions of blackness and animalistic sexuality, and Stanley's (Polish) ethnicity, which jostle in the text. This ethnicity has a different cultural trajectory to that of the discourse of racial difference: it is positioned in such a way as to be aspirational to the values of the American nation ('born and raised in the greatest country on earth') and although it still occupies a subordinate position, this is a function of class, as well as ethnicity. The effect of this complexity of ideological imperatives is to render Stanley's masculinity as simultaneously dangerous and exotically sexual, but objectifiable: by Blanche as part of their contest over authority, by Stella as his social superior and wife, and by a potential audience (or Williams himself) as an object of sexual beauty. This last position of spectatorship, enabled by Stanley's ideological manifestation, is particularly important when put into the context of a performance of *Streetcar*. This play is notorious for its displays of male physicality: Stanley appears constantly to be undressing, dressing down and coming on stage in wet clothes. As Jarman notes, Marlon Brando as Kowalski secured a performative context for that character that is largely intelligible as a visual sign of sex;⁷⁷ indeed this was one of the features of Williams's work that was considered to be particularly shocking, and at

least for Howard Taubman, such a scopophilic presentation of the male was an indication of the homosexuality of the playwright.⁷⁸ Both the power of the spectacle and the complex cultural knowledges he inscribes coalesce to offset Stanley's authority as an apparently unassailably masculine and authoritative figure. This modulates the possible meanings we may make from Blanche's presence in Stanley's life, and makes the notion of Blanche as a threat to his position and authority, one which requires substantial repression by him, more plausible. This is central to my interpretation of the play.

Miss DuBois: Queer Defiance?

If the prevailing account of Stanley we inherit from those of Williams's critics who buy into Freudianism highlights his unassailability, then their accounts of Blanche foreground her neurotic, vaporous powerlessness. One key problem identified by several critics of the Haymarket production of *Streetcar* was that Jessica Lange was too strong for the role. Charles Spencer wrote:

Lange proudly proclaims in her programme note that she has 'built her distinguished career portraying strong and independent women', which sounds like the worst kind of preparation for Blanche, who is weak to the point of disintegration and famously dependent on 'the kindness of strangers'.⁷⁹

Michael Billington agreed:

But, although Lange works hard at the role, I still find it hard to believe in her as the delicate creature of Williams's imagination.⁸⁰

Both critics exhibit considerable investment in the fragility of Blanche, an interpretation of her which they make Williams responsible for inscribing (rather than, say, their homosocial expectations of women), and which they resent Jessica Lange with her presumptuous programme notes and strong independence, for disrupting. Hence, it is her performance that is inauthentic, rather than their reading.

Christopher Bigsby has offered an account of Stanley's attempted destruction of Blanche, which attempts to explain why he wouldn't rather just settle for her marriage and removal from his household. Bigsby has suggested that Stanley's sabotage of Blanche's relationship with Mitch repays her attempts to ruin his marriage, 'for she has indeed set herself to undermine a relationship whose honest and open physicality repels her.'⁸¹ He could be referring to Stanley's violence towards his wife, which is both honestly and openly physical, but his intention is to naturalise the heterosexuality of the Kowalskis by reflecting it against Blanche's apparently duplicitous prudery. This neurotic Blanche, too genteel for sex, too delicate for reality, too hysterical to survive, is authenticated by the most famous and widely disseminated production of *Streetcar*. Vivien Leigh's portrayal in Elia Kazan's film of 1951 is all tremulous voice, downcast glances and widely frightened eyes: her affectations do not seem earthbound. Often it appears that those who

have commented on Williams's play, are in fact referencing Leigh's performance in Kazan's film. Similarly, Jessica Lange's performance in the CBS television film of 1995 is so preciously, insistently neurotic that it seems perfectly sensible to violate her and cart her off to a lunatic asylum just to shut her up. Both readings of Blanche have her flee towards fanciful excesses of madness in order to be able to reconcile those elements of the play which doggedly oppose the plausible rendering of her as simply victimised.

For all its ubiquity and prestige, and potent iconography, Kazan's film remains, necessarily, a partial reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which fails to make sense of Blanche's character or of the enmity between her and Stanley. Vivien Leigh's frail, almost translucently white Blanche hardly seems capable of drawing breath, let alone seducing wagon loads of soldiers, disposing of an aristocratic estate or of threatening Stanley to the point where the ferocity of their enmity can no longer be restrained. The English actress Sheila Gish, who played Blanche, has said that she always thought that they made Blanche 'tiresome' in Kazan's film, even though she is 'the greatest single part ever written for an actress' because 'they took all of [her spirit] away.' She goes on:

So come the second half of the film, you really like Stanley a lot.

You sit there thinking, 'Go on, get her out of there.'⁸²

Both the 1951 and 1995 filmed versions retain Stanley's line from scene eight where he is justifying Blanche's exposure and expulsion to Stella. He says, 'Don't forget all

that I took off her': yet as he is played by Brando and by Alec Baldwin, Stanley takes little more than a squirt of jasmine perfume and some carping off her. What is it that she has she done to him? Afterall, how bad can it be when she's supposed to be so delicate and weak? Lange's performance crystallises those frustrating elements of Blanche's characterisation, as I have suggested, in such a way as to make the necessity of her expulsion from Stanley's domestic territory clear. But can such annoyance bear the dramatic and conceptual responsibility for the vicious and destructive response it garners, even accounting for an assumption about the ethical naturalisation of man's authority in his own home?

At the end of scene five, Blanche is alone in the apartment, waiting for Mitch: it's Saturday night, Stella and Stanley have gone out with Eunice and Steve from upstairs. A young man appears: he is collecting for the *Evening Star*. Blanche greets him: 'Well, well! What can I do for you?'

The young man is shy and self-conscious. Blanche doesn't give him any money, but gently and purposefully she flirts with him, turning up the heat as she holds him in her presence. As the boy is leaving, Blanche calls him back, and asks him for a light, using the opportunity to close the gap between them. She asks him the time as she draws upon him:

BLANCHE: So late? Don't you just love these long rainy afternoons
in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour - but a little bit

of Eternity dropped in your hands - and who knows what to do
with it? (p.173)

It seems quite clear what Blanche would like to do with rainy afternoons in New Orleans. She's not content with flirtation, however, and tells him that she wants to kiss him softly and sweetly, and she does, without waiting for him to accept. But the reality of her situation is all too clear, and the Blanche of Laurel becomes visible to us as she dismisses the boy, lamenting that it would be nice to keep him, 'but I've got to be good and keep my hands off children.' (p.174).

Whatever she may be, this Blanche seems to be neither a prude nor delicate to the point of weakness or passivity. As the young man from the *Evening Star* leaves, Mitch arrives for their date: as effortlessly as she drew the boy to the edge of seduction, so Blanche now effects appropriate decorum towards the man she wants, needs, for a husband.

BLANCHE: Looks who's coming! My Rosenkavalier! Bow to me first!

Now present them. [He does so. She curtsies low.] Ahhh! Merciiii!

(p.174)

This contrast between Blanche's encounter with the young man and Mitch's subsequent entrance, is a deliberate and considerable shift between sexual and courtship modes that in its abruptness and apparent self-consciousness enables a denaturalisation of the role Blanche projects for men, which is her negotiation of (their) power. Blanche is able to express herself freely with the young man because

she is situated more strongly than he is: she has greater social power than the youth, whom she clearly intimidates, by virtue of her sex, class, maturity and sophistication. But in relation to Mitch, from whom she wishes to elicit a proposal of marriage, her propriety and the condition of her acquiescence to that institution oblige her to be more circumspect. She must not threaten Mitch, nor give him cause to take her sexual favours for granted, they are to come later, when sanctified by his ownership of her in the marriage contract: all her coquetry may illicit sexual desire, whilst axiomatically maintaining its constraint. Later, when they have returned from their date, Blanche asserts the roles for both of them, she reminds them who they are supposed to be; unlike Stanley who conducts his relationships with women on his terms, Mitch invites Blanche to adjudicate his behaviour - the discourse of courtship into which they have entered is one in which she remains confident, as a function of her class experience. When Mitch attempts to grope her, she effortlessly keeps him at bay, reminding him that just because Stanley and Stella aren't home, he shouldn't forget to behave like a gentleman. He defers to her, but doesn't understand the irony in her presentation of such sexual formality (p.179).

Just in case we haven't understood the irony of her self-presentation, Williams adds a stage direction for Blanche to roll her eyes, in the knowledge that Mitch cannot see her face (p.179). Her performance of feminine propriety admits her artifice to the audience. When Blanche suggests that Stanley and Stella's absence is not an

excuse for Mitch to behave ungentlemanly, it is her assertion of what his gentlemanly behaviour should be like that he manifests - he, clearly, is supposed to have no idea how he should behave ('Huh?') and she controls the terms of their interaction. However, as Blanche makes clear, this is dependent on Stanley and Stella not being home - were they to be, what has been established in this play as normal heterosexual behaviour would be in evidence - a subordination of women through violence sublimated as animalistic and magnetic sexuality (this is represented by Stanley and Stella, and secured as normality by the similar behaviour of Steve and Eunice upstairs).

If Blanche is weak, flimsy or delicate it is because as an unmarried woman she has no material access to power, only to the privilege of her ethnic and class experience. Arriving in New Orleans at the house of her sister on the streetcar named desire, Blanche is in a desperate situation: she has lost her job, her husband, her home and the class status it represented. As she tells Stanley, 'Everything that I own is in that trunk', and the trunk is full of faded glamour, romantic memories (love letters) and superfluous papers that are the only remaining tangible artefact of the 'place with the columns'. Whatever its cause, we should feel the seriousness of Stanley's enmity towards Blanche, and the threat that he represents to her: she has nowhere else to go. If Blanche's relationship with Mitch is tinged with nervousness, this is not the pathological manifestation of her neuroses, but an index of her precariousness: she needs a husband.

Blanche's vanity always appears related to the presence of a man, as in the scene when she and Stella return from having supper at Galatoires whilst the men play poker. Stella realises that the game is still going on, and Blanche's realisation that the men are still in the house causes her immediate anxiety: she asks Stella how she looks, and bids her sister wait until she's powdered her nose before opening the door (p.144). Again, this vanity is a function of her anxiety, and not of pure 'calculation'⁸³, nor of 'denial'⁸⁴, or indeed of 'helplessness'.⁸⁵ Williams makes it very clear that he intends us to understand Blanche's self-awareness. Stella asks her sister why she is so sensitive about her age, and Blanche replies explicitly that it's because of her vulnerability, her need to be wanted:

STELLA: Blanche, do you want *him*?

BLANCHE: I want to *rest*! I want to breathe quietly again! Yes - I
want Mitch...very badly! Just think! If it happens! I can leave here
and not be anyone's problem... (p.171)

It is significant that when Blanche asks Stella if she's been listening to her fears about her precarious position, Stella replies 'I don't listen to you when you are being morbid!' - Stella cannot accept knowledge about this gender structure, and disavows her position within it by pathologising Blanche's fears as 'morbid' - a personal paranoia, rather than a structural inequality.

The brutal reality of Blanche's situation makes it easy to see why Kauffman and Taubman find *Streetcar's* depiction of relations between men and women so troublesome. The structure of heterosexuality rests upon maintaining the ideological integrity of gender performance: the unquestioning acceptance of knowledge about the essential complementarity of gender roles, which naturalises the power differential between them. Blanche is such a powerful representation because her performances of her gender are so openly depicted as functions of her material insecurity. Blanche's class experience, and her whiteness, gives the commodity that is her femininity added value, which it is clear she must utilise: the precariousness of her position, and the emotional toll this is taking on her, make it necessary.

Blanche first meets Mitch in scene three when she and Stella have returned from Gallatoires. Stanley's Saturday night poker game is still in progress, a paradigm of homosocial intimacy. When the sisters return, Mitch is in the bathroom, and emerges into the bedroom after the women have been exiled there: Stanley whacks his wife's thigh, to the edification of his confidants, to ensure her subordination to the homosocial ritual fronted by the poker game. Mitch returns to the game, but is distracted when Blanche puts on the radio. The other men don't mind the women enjoying the music, but this is Stanley's house, and he reacts to the competition for his buddies' attention angrily. He jumps up and turns off the radio. The stage description here bears notice:

[He stops short at the sight of BLANCHE in the chair. *She returns his look without flinching.*]⁸⁶

Again, this does not seem to be the behaviour of a woman passively strung up on the torments of a neurotic disposition. When Blanche continues to prove a distraction for Mitch, Stanley reacts with what can only be described as jealous anger: it's clear that he resents the competition for his friend's attention. Not only is Stella increasingly displaying attitudes towards her husband which are a function of Blanche's supremacist and class bound view of him, but now Blanche's 'enchantment' is displacing Stanley's homosocial intimacy with Mitch. As Blanche waltzes to the music 'with romantic gestures' and Mitch delightedly 'moves in awkward imitation' Stanley's demands for attention become more insistent; finally he interrupts the alternative bonding ritual enacted by the sisters and Mitch: he throws the radio out of the window, performing his violent masculinity in an assertion of his power. Stanley is threatened by the power Blanche has accumulated through her seduction of Mitch and of Stella, with her southern upper-class femme behaviour. He must either accept a position of aspirational subordination (as Mitch has) in relation to Blanche's privileged space or rebel against it: his class and ethnic identity (we have seen how his ethnic difference has been coded at different points as working-class ignorant East European, and as black Afro-Caribbean) gives him no other option: as a man he cannot acquiesce to her. He must exert his own working class authority - his physicality, violence and

brutish sexuality are structurally threatened by virtue of their ethnic coding in relation to Blanche's cultured whiteness.

Blanche tells Stella that 'The only way to live with such a man is to go to bed with him', but Blanche's presence on the other side of the curtains is preventing the married couple from having sex (or at least the kind of unrestrained, noisy sex they usually have), and her challenge to Stanley's 'animalism' threatens Stella's security. To take Blanche's view is to end up as insecure as Blanche. Enchanted by the romantic and genteel space Blanche conjurs to displace the poker game, Stella reacts disgustedly to Stanley's violence. Stella attempts to assert herself within her marriage and home, and is physically overcome: Stanley hits her. He is restrained by his buddies, lest the violence of his heterosexual passion over reach patriarchal normality and invite judicial intervention. He is grateful for this, 'They speak quietly and lovingly to him and he leans his face on one of their shoulders' (p.152) and their homosocial bond is secured: they have entered into ritual competition with each other in the poker game, and are now mutually supportive of their status as men, men who control and desire women. Once his violent physicality is restored to an equilibrium it can then find its conventional outlet in his libido and he calls Stella to him. As the passion of violence and confrontation passes, to be replaced by more conventional, safer passions, the material reality of Stella's position reasserts itself. As she explains to Blanche the next day 'there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark - that sort of make everything

else seem – unimportant’ (p.162), and they need to. Her desire for Stanley needs to overcome her knowledge of his power over her, and the displays he makes of this to her, and to his homosocial affiliates: if it doesn’t, there’s nothing to separate her from the vulnerability and paranoia of her sister. Sublimating her subordination in eroticism and her physical desire allows her to maintain some material security by virtue of her relationship with Stanley, a sublimation made all the more necessary by her pregnancy and its attendant pressures. Clearly there is the juxtaposition here of the imminent arrival of the final member of the normative family against the idea of Blanche’s unnatural and disruptive imposition on that family.

Later we see more evidence of how Blanche’s presence and defiance compromise Stella. In the discussion of astrological signs Blanche is attempting to assert some influence over the evening with feminine passive-aggression that punishes Stanley’s uncouth maleness (p. 168), but he retaliates not just with the threat of knowledge he has about Blanche’s past, but he refuses to kiss Stella in front of her; by withholding his affections and his sexuality from Stella he is exercising his primary method of control, for that sexuality and passion always has the connotation or threat of the violence of which it is a sublimation, and of the pleasure and fear that is Stella’s experience of it.

When Stella protests about Stanley’s treatment of her sister, judging him for his uncouth table manners, he reacts violently, hurling his plate to the floor and

grabbing his wife. He rails against how they've both been judging him to be a vulgar and greasy Polack, and again the use of his name, Mr. Kowalski is invoked as a sign of his ethnic difference. Stella begins to cry 'weakly' (p. 194), but as ever, his violence comes with eroticism:

STANLEY: Stell, it's gonna be all right after she goes and after you've had the baby. It's gonna be all right again between you and me the way that it was. You remember that way that it was? Them nights we had together? God, honey, it's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way that we used to and get the coloured lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us! (p.195)

And we have little doubt that he is right - it will be better for Stella when Blanche has gone - the ambiguity of her position won't be so evident, and they can return to an eroticisation of the subordination she endures, and which makes the powerlessness not only tolerable, but exciting. There seems to be a strong indication here of the idea that the power relations within gender arrangements are inscribed with sexuality - that sex is the coercive mechanism by which domination can proceed within a consensual arrangement, almost an imperative of desire: Stella must endure because she must desire Stanley, and she must have him.

Despite the fact that she proved to be the catalyst for his suicide, Blanche's marriage to the homosexual Allan, as well as her structural opposition to Stanley's

homosocial authority, offers her as a preferred location for gay identification, as we have seen. Indeed, her attitude to Allan's death is so remorseful that she almost comes to stand in for the tragic notion of homosexuality his death represents. She tells Mitch of her dead husband with a great poignancy which seems to seal their intentions: 'Could it be - you and me, Blanche?' (p.184). Despite the heterosexual mannerisms of their relationship, we may choose to read Blanche's beau as homosexual. Mitch's character is not coherent throughout the play, and indeed he performs different structural functions in relation to the others at different points. In this he is like Stella: they are both required by the drama to lubricate the complex power dynamic established between Stanley and Blanche. Mitch is a man, but one who is not threatened by Blanche's display of her class experience; he associates with Stanley (is in fact, his side kick) and operates within a homosocial matrix with him and yet is at least partially identified in codes that signal a Freudian model of homosexuality. He lives with, and maintains a touching affection for his dying mother: the mummy's boy was a substantial signifier of homosexuality for popular post-war American Freudian ideology. Unlike Stanley, Mitch is conscious of the need actively to present and perform an image that asserts his gender identity. He is self-conscious around Blanche, unsure of his role; and he is ashamed of the way he perspires (p.178) and aware that he may look clumsy. He goes on to attempt to play out the animal, physical and sexual role that the play establishes (around Stanley) as the necessary way in which (heterosexual) men occupy space, in positions of domination. But he talks about his physique to

Blanche, rather than simply manifest it; he describes his body rather than having it eroticised in the stage descriptions, and tells of how he acquired his physique by going to the gym. Mitch represents safety to Blanche by virtue of his social position as a man and by the fact that he does not threaten her with this position, indeed, he acknowledges and enjoys her manifestations of the privileges of her class experience. The basis of their romantic bonding is their shared experience of insecurity and loneliness, rather than sexual passion. Mitch needs Blanche to gain the heterosexual credentials he requires to function within the homosocial network which Stanley emanates as she needs him to protect her from her exclusion from, and subjugation to, such networks of power.

Although Blanche talks to Mitch about Stanley hating her, and her finding him common, power relations and their proximity in physical terms make it impossible for the tension between them to be even conceptually contained by the idea of a purely personal enmity; they are both enmeshed in cultural tensions around race and national identity, class and gender:

BLANCHE: ... Of course there is such a thing as the hostility of -

perhaps in some perverse kind of way he - No! To think of it

makes me...[She makes a gesture of revulsion...] (p.181)

What she is speaking of is the 'hostility of' desire. Stanley desires Blanche, because in this play sexuality, predicated in terms of power, violence and sublimation, provides the medium through which gender power is asserted and contested.

Blanche on p.161 and Stanley on p.196 are both concerned with what goes on behind the curtains - Blanche can't bear to sleep with Stanley in such close proximity, Stanley wants to be able to make as much noise as he wants in sex without Blanche overhearing - this shows that both are supposed to be sexually aware of the other, and self-conscious about the physical and conceptual barriers (symbolised by the flimsiness of the curtain) that separate their desires from reality. The subtextual desire which organises their interaction is anxiously policed by them both.

Stanley's commonness and class identity, his lack of breeding, and refusal to acknowledge the feminine southern gentility that Blanche produces, not to say anything of his brutal physicality, make him an obstacle to the security and haven she sought in coming to her sister's following her inauspicious departure from Laurel. Blanche invokes the inequality and rupture around class and ethnicity that the marriage of Stanley and Stella represents, and she embodies the possibility of a consolidation of Stella's class authority - that Stanley becomes more the brutal Polack for Stella through Blanche's gaze. Blanche's education, class position and her relationship to Stella, along with her performance of femininity, make her a threat to Stanley, especially as the mechanisms by which he subordinates women are not available to him - he can't fuck her into acquiescent adoration, because he's married to Stella. Stanley desires Blanche because he wishes to dominate her. If Blanche does desire Stanley she cannot admit to her desires because that would

mean an abdication of her autonomy, her authority; we know that Blanche is libidinous, but her desires are for men who have some degree of powerlessness or vulnerability in relation to her (the homosexual Allan, lower class soldiers, young boys from her school, the newspaper boy, Mitch), so we cannot presume that Stanley's threatening presence is erotically appealing to her.

Stanley is able to destroy Blanche by virtue of his homosocial power, which she has threatened on two fronts. Her presence in his home and her intimacy with her sister, his wife, undermines the cultural credibility of his variously encoded aspirant working-class identity by refracting it through her aristocratic and colonial snobbery and gentility. Her relationship with Mitch is specifically constructed as a distraction from the rigours of homosocial celebration, a romantic, cultured alternative to crude phallicism. Stanley's discovery of Blanche's past provides the justification of his violent mistreatment of her. If Blanche initially provided Mitch with the promise of heterosexual credibility, the disclosure of her past betrays his homosocial affiliations. If Blanche's chastely enacted decorum constituted respectability and passivity, the revelation of her promiscuity connotes her as dangerously knowing, deceitful and masculine: too threatening to give men homosocial credibility. If a woman has had many men, she may be a cheap object of exchange, but she's also been exchanging men herself. There is a strong contrast between Mitch's naivety during his dates with Blanche, and his later anger at the recognition of her apparent duplicity. Homosocially empowered, or impelled, by

Stanley and his knowledge, Mitch attempts to force himself upon Blanche, in what appears to be a spineless anticipation of Stanley's later rape, but typically his performance of brutishness is no match for Blanche's privileged poise, and he flees into the night, unsatisfied. Once she is no longer in control of the truth about her sexual identity, Blanche's facade and status as a prospective wife are lost, and she suffers the plight of sexually active women in a social system that gives men status for sexual excess, and sends women into asylums for similar behaviour.⁸⁷ To maintain the dominance of men in the play, Stanley must withdraw the privileges through which Blanche negotiates male power. As he tells Stella: he could not let his best friend 'get caught'. It is preferable that Mitch remain a mummy's boy than marry a woman with sufficient cultural privilege to hoodwink a member of Stanley's homosocial network. Stella's material security and social authority is dependent on her deference, her submission to Stanley's male power (she accepts and forgives his hitting of her, and comes down from Eunice's - *she comes to him*), a selling out of her class and ethnic identity. Blanche refuses to submit, refuses to use her status and culture to collude with Stanley's masculine pride, his arrogant expectation of an acknowledgement of his superiority. As a function of her material insecurity, Blanche should perform her femininity in such a way as to show her recognition of Stanley's power and her need for his benevolent patronage. As a single woman, she should constantly produce deferral to the conceptually superior marital arrangements of her sister; instead she incites Stella to leave her husband. As a woman, Blanche should display her recognition of

Stanley's authority as a man; instead she presents his masculinity as a bestial reflection of her own 'pure white blood of the South.'⁸⁸ As a guest in his house, Blanche should reproduce the grudging deference shown by Stanley's wife to his homosocial relationships; instead Blanche creates autonomous spaces of her own 'enchantment' that are not only *not* feminine negotiations of Stanley's power, but which actually seduce his homosocial partner into forming 'adulterous' bonds with her.

Blanche has gone out of her way not to enact behaviour which recognises Stanley's authority, despite manifesting a debilitating nervousness which betrays her relative powerlessness in relation to that authority; therefore, just getting her out of his house may enable Stanley to realise Blanche's fears of material deprivation, but will not neutralise her assaults upon his masculinity. Indeed, marrying Mitch will confirm the success of her determinedly privileged performances of femininity by awarding her with the material security she needs, and permanently inscribe her into Stanley's homosocial network as the wife of his best buddy. Stanley has not forgotten 'all that I took off her' (p.198); when she meets his gaze, squirts jasmine perfume in his face, incites his wife to leave him, when she uses her breeding to humiliate him and seduce his buddy into an engagement, Blanche is committing acts of homosocial defiance. It is not adequate just to put a woman capable of such dissidence on the street, from where she may gain the romantic approval of a man less homosocially rigorous than Stanley and

marry him, attaining the cultural standing available to women who acquiesce to that institution.

In the 1995 CBS television version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* Stanley's rape of Blanche has little dramatic force. Jessica Lange's Blanche has fluttered way beyond the realms of rationality by the time Stanley returns from the hospital: Stanley's assault has little impact because this Blanche does not exhibit any remnant of a gender performance that acknowledges an awareness about material conditions and power. Baldwin's Stanley is exuberant with virility about his impending fatherhood: she's available, unaware, easily overcome. This Blanche has been so intrusive, so ineffectual, that one almost welcomes her dramatic demise. This film is a reactionary appropriation of *Streetcar*. Williams's text makes it clear that Blanche is drunk and emotionally distraught at this point, not mad. This evening has seen her exposure, rejection by her would-be husband and saviour, attempted rape by that saviour, and the consumption of considerable amounts of Stanley's whisky. Her fantasies of safety, grandeur and Shep Huntleigh are the escapism of a frightened and drunk woman. The poise and assurance that are functions of her experience, which we see displayed in her manipulation of Mitch, her seduction of the young man, and in her earlier resistance of Stanley, Blanche manifests as real struggle against her attacker. Although the outcome is inevitable as an expression of Stanley's gender superiority, the rape of Blanche, Southern White Goddess, in its evocation of supremacist myth, also secures Stanley's conceptual inferiority by

inferring his 'blackness'. If Blanche does exhibit madness in this play, that madness comes in the final scene, and then this seems the justified response of a woman whose reality is being invalidated, rather than some neurotic self-indulgence or pathological illness. Stella and Eunice collude in a denial of Blanche's accusation of Stanley:

STELLA: I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.

EUNICE: Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going. (p.217)

They must sacrifice her to maintain the plausibility of their own relationships with men, on whom they depend for material security and social privilege. To believe Blanche is to accept her exclusion from male homosocial power for themselves; for Blanche, this has led to her dispatch to a mental asylum. As Blanche leaves, Stella gives in to 'luxurious sobs' (p.226), Stanley puts his hand into his wife's blouse, and the poker players deal another hand. Howard Taubman would no doubt see this as a happy resolution of wholesome heterosexuality following the expulsion of the 'baneful female'. Thankfully, Gore Vidal offers an anecdote that allows us to pervert such hegemonic nonsense. In *Palimpsest*, Vidal recounts a meeting between Williams, his 'Glorious Bird', and the actress Claire Bloom, who was about to play Blanche:

The Bird looked at her suspiciously; then he said, 'Do you have any questions about the play?'

'Yes.' Claire pulled herself together. 'What happens *after* the final curtain?'

The Bird sat back in his chair, narrowed his eyes. 'No actress has ever asked me that question.' He shut his eyes; thought. 'She will enjoy her time in the bin. She will seduce one or two of the more comely young doctors. Then she will be let free to open an attractive boutique in the French Quarter...'

'She wins?'

'Oh, yes,' said the Bird. 'Blanche wins.'⁸⁹

Vidal goes on to describe Bloom's performance, strengthened by her conversation with the Glorious Bird, as being 'splendid' and which culminated in Blanche leaving for the asylum 'as for a coronation.'

Inversionism has proved a useful strategy for hegemonically containing Williams's work. Even though the *content* of inversionist narratives, through which the playwright's pathologisation is effected, are themselves a function of gender, the *effect* of that pathologisation is his exclusion from the normative sex-gender system. This exclusion enables critics like Taubman and Kauffman, as we have seen, to render the troubling accounts of heterosexuality offered in works like *A Streetcar Named Desire* safe: they are not a comment on heterosexuality, but a perverse vengeance upon it. Thus, Blanche is understood as a twisted refraction of a freakishly abnormal sensibility, and not a dangerously revealing, ideologically

exposed portrait of heterosexual femininity. Inversionist knowledge is but one strand in a tapestry of competing ideological narratives through which we gain an understanding of our identities. Inversion remains operative in contemporary accounts of gay culture and identity because we are part of a wider system which handles differential gender power. If Blanche really is queer, it is not because she doesn't signify as a woman: the challenge she poses to Stanley, and his responses are only intelligible coming from a textual position of 'womanhood'. Blanche's queerness is a function of her troublesome presence, which not only destabilises normative masculine power, but produces this destabilisation out of a critique of heterosexuality itself, and women's place within it, as subjects of male homosociality. Taubman and Kauffman's hegemonic narrative of Williams's inversion not only perverts the commentary *Streetcar* enacts in Blanche, but it conceals the operation of their homosocial masculinity. This homosociality keeps homosexuality right at the centre of the sex-gender system as a means of reproducing the natural balance of male power. Blanche DuBois is a heterosocial heroine, unleashed by Williams as queer dissent upon homosocial subjectivity. I shall be mapping out the terms of heterosociality in subsequent chapters.

¹John Peter, 'Desire's Cruel Devices', *The Sunday Times*, 5 January 1997.

²Alistair Macaulay, 'Neurotic Undercurrents in New Orleans', *Financial Times*, 2 January 1997.

³Charles Spencer, 'This Stately Streetcar Fails to Move', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 1997.

⁴Kate Clanchy, 'Arts Review', *The Scotsman*, 7 January 1997.

⁵Alistair Macaulay, 'Neurotic Undercurrents in New Orleans'.

⁶Philip C. Kolin (ed.), *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993); Ronald Hayman, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else is an Audience* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁷Lyle Leverich, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995).

⁸David Benedict, 'Tennessee Williams and His Women', *The Independent*, June 15 1994, section 2, p.23.

⁹Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd Edition, (University of Chicago Press, 1987) p.248.

¹⁰Alistair Macaulay, 'Neurotic Undercurrents in New Orleans'.

¹¹John Gross, 'A Princess Goes Potty', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 5 January 1997.

¹²Michael Coveney 'A study in blush pink', *The Observer Review*, June 19, 1994, p.10.

¹³David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p.116.

¹⁴In Karla Jay and Allen Young (eds) *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* (New York: Pyramid, 1974), p.70.

¹⁵Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, edited by Michael Christie (London: Vintage, 1993), p.55.

¹⁶Howard Taubman, 'Modern Primer: Helpful Hints To Tell Appearances from Truth', *New York Times*, April 28, 1963, section 2, p.1.

¹⁷Stanley Kauffman, *Persons of the Drama: Theater Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) quoted in Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) p.126.

¹⁸Stephen S. Stanton (ed.) *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1977).

¹⁹Stephen S. Stanton 'Introduction' in Stephen S. Stanton (ed.) *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.1.

²⁰In his essay 'Selected Memories of the Glorious Bird and the Golden Age', Gore Vidal details the extensive and vitriolic hostility to Williams in the period 1945 to 1961, which predated Stanton's liberal toleration.

²¹Stanton, 'Introduction', p.4.

²²Alan Sinfield, 'Un-American Activities', in Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading* (London: Routledge, 1994) p.42.

²³ibid.

²⁴Haskell suggests that 'it is from the male in them that the women acquire their hyperactive libidos ... the scenes ... between Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh in *A*

Streetcar Named Desire are powerfully sexual, in the flexing, posturing fascination of homosexual pornography for a repressed or 'closet' seductee.' *From Reverence*, p.248.

²⁵Tennessee Williams *Memoirs* (London: W.H. Allen, 1976): 'so incontinent was my desire for the boy that I would wake him repeatedly during the night for more love-making. You see, I had no sense in those days - and nights - of how passion can wear out even a passive partner... Kip said to me, 'Last night you made me know what is meant by beautiful pain.' (p.55); Williams tells how the go-go boys in a bar in New Orleans all have clap in the ass and so you shouldn't penetrate them (p.75); tells how he 'screwed' a gay marine seven times in one night; how he refused a sailor who wanted to fuck him (p.79); how he doesn't like to be topped (p.97); how a hustler he met was inexperienced and would not 'turn over', but who later said, 'Mr. Williams, if you'd like to, you can bugger me tonight.' (p.154).

²⁶See Gert Hekma, 'A Female Soul in a Male Body': Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth Century Sexology', in Gilbert Herdt (ed.), *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 1994); George Chauncey, 'From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualisation of Female Deviance', *Salmagundi*, 58-59, Fall 1982-Winter 1983; and Tim Edwards, *Erotics and Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity and Feminism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) p.19.

²⁷Hekma, "A Female Soul in a Male body", p.220.

²⁸ibid, p.221.

²⁹Chauncey, 'From Sexual Inversion To Homosexuality', pp.114-46.

³⁰'The sexologists and boy-love advocates made the masculine/feminine binary structure even more necessary and central while, at the same time, doing little to clarify its confusions', Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*, p.118.

³¹Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis mit besonderer Berucksichtigung der contraren Sexualempfindung: Eine klinisch-forensische Studie* was published in 1886; Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' 'Vier Briefe' *Jahrbuch fur sexuekke Zwischenstufen* was published in 1899: see Gert Hekma, "A Female Soul in a Male body", p.542.

³²E. M. Forster 'Terminal Note' to *Maurice* (London: Penguin 1972) p.217.

³³John Fletcher 'Forster's *Maurice* and the scapegoating of Clive' in Joseph Bristow (ed.) *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992) in which he outlines the confusions and tensions in the Platonic texts themselves about the ethical and social meanings of sexual and non-sexual relations between men.

³⁴Fletcher, 'Forster's *Maurice* and the scapegoating of Clive', p.90.

³⁵See Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989): 'Homosexuality was a further reason for commitment to the life-style of the leisure class, where its practice was most possible. There was more toleration than elsewhere, one might evade difficulties through the deployment of money or influence, and one was well-placed to gratify and impress lower-class young men - whole groups of whom, guardsmen for instance, learned how to play

the scene.' (p.65) This association of homosexuality with the leisure classes has subsequently been challenged by Murray Healy in *Gay Skins* (London: Cassell, 1996).

³⁶See Sinfield *The Wilde Century*: 'At that point [after the trials of 1895], the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived, variously, an instantiating was transformed into a brilliantly precise image' (p.3).

³⁷Forster, *Maurice*, p.33. Further references to *Maurice* will be given in the text.

³⁸Forster, *Maurice*, p.214; this also has the effect of securing the power relation embedded in their respective class identities - Clive's concern here is meant to be at least partly parochial.

³⁹Edward Carpenter, 'Self-Analysis for Havelock Ellis', reprinted in David Fernbach and Noel Greig (eds) *Selected Writings: Volume One: Sex* (London: Gay Men's Press 1984) p.290.

⁴⁰Francis King, *E.M. Forster* (London: Thames & Hudson 1978) p.80.

⁴¹See Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet 1977), p.68-70 for an account of Edward Carpenter's bourgeois background and the romanticised politics he developed of the working classes.

⁴²'[homos] have cast off, I noticed, most of the swish and camp that made them ... unattractive to me' Williams, *Memoirs*, p.50.

⁴³See Alison Hennegan, 'Introduction' to Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago 1982) amongst others for detail about this; we could suggest it as an instance of Foucault's reverse discourse.

⁴⁴See Alan Sinfield *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 'faultline stories are ... the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute ... The task for a political criticism, then, is to observe how stories negotiate the faultlines that distress the prevailing conditions of plausibility. [...] No story can contain all the possibilities it brings into play; coherence is always selection.' pp.47-51.

⁴⁵Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Epistemology of the Closet* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p.3.

⁴⁶See Michael Bronski *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) and Jack Babuscio 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility' in *Gays and Film* ed. Richard Dyer (London: B.F.I. 1977) for an elaboration of the gay sensibility, and Joseph Bristow 'Being Gay: Politics, Identity, Pleasure' in *New Formations* no.9, Winter 1989, for a critique of these notions. Not all of the cultural expressions I note here were initially acceptable: some, such as pornography and sadomasochism, were highly controversial within alliances of gay men and/or lesbians. The contestations over the issues divided many groups within the sexually dissident margins, and led to the sexual politics/politics of sexuality split that is the context for my discussions in the next chapter. However, by the time of a pre-queer period, all these forms

have become understood as expressions of gay culture and identity: often their problematisation has centralised their importance.

⁴⁷John D'Emilio *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: the Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983) p.240.

⁴⁸This notion of the parity between Queer politics and Liberatory politics is disputed by Greg Bredbeck in 'The New Queer Narrative', *Textual Practice*, Vol.9, no.3, 1995, pp.477-502, who argues for the distinctiveness of the two movements.

⁴⁹National Lesbian and Gay Survey, *Proust, Cole Porter, Michelangelo, Marc Almond and me: Writings by gay men on their lives and lifestyles from the archives of the National Lesbian and Gay Survey* (London: Routledge, 1993) p.7.

⁵⁰ibid, p.110.

⁵¹John M. Clum, "Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams', in R.R. Butters, J.M. Clum & M. Moon (eds), *Displacing Homophobia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989); and Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.149.

⁵²Clum, *Acting Gay*, p.150, my emphasis.

⁵³For example, Mark Lilly, *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century*, London: Macmillan, 1993, pp.105-115, discusses how Williams's homosexuality is metaphorically refracted through, amongst others, Laura's lameness in *The Glass Menagerie*.

⁵⁴Clum, *Acting Gay*, p.150. Further references to *Acting Gay* will be given in the text.

⁵⁵Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Craig Owens 'Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism' in Alice Jardine & Paul Smith (eds), *Men in Feminism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989).

⁵⁶Neil Bartlett *Night After Night* (London: Methuen 1993) p.14.

⁵⁷Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire* (London: Penguin 1959) p.183. There is an interesting discrepancy between the text of the Penguin edition and that of the New Directions text *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (1971) which includes the line 'the boy I had married and the older man who had been his friend for years' which is omitted in the former.

⁵⁸Gregg Blachford 'Male Dominance and the gay world' in Kenneth Plummer (ed.) *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Hutchinson, 1981) p.187.

⁵⁹Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993).

⁶⁰Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990).

⁶¹Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1994) p.97.

⁶²ibid, p.118.

⁶³See Maddison 'All Queered Out' *Red Pepper* no.9, February 1995.

⁶⁴Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p.x.

⁶⁵ In his review of a British Conference in 1994, *Troublesome Visibilities*, which was advertised as 'Reviewing Queer Theory and Gender Performance', and in which he was a participant, the influential British gay journalist Paul Burston bemoaned the absence of straight men and suggested that a transsexual spoke as though they were on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; he also pointed out that to lament the absence of a black male speaker 'was strangely out of synch with notions of non-fixed subjectivities'. (*Troublesome Visibilities*, London 30th April 1994; Burston's report appeared in *Time Out* May 11-18, 1994, p.90).

⁶⁶See Hilary Harris, 'Toward a Lesbian Theory of Performance: Refunctioning Gender' in Lynda Hart & Peggy Phelan (eds), *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) p.273.

⁶⁷Bette Bourne, Peggy Shaw, Paul Shaw, & Lois Weaver, *Belle Reprise*. In *Gay and Lesbian Plays Today*, ed. Terry Helbing (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), p.8. Further references to *Belle Reprise* will be given in the text.

⁶⁸Harris, 'Toward a Lesbian Theory of Performance: Refunctioning Gender', p.261.

⁶⁹Ronald Hayman, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else in an Audience* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993) p.xiii; Mark Lilly, *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century*, p.114; C.W.E. Bigsby *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Volume Two: Williams, Miller, Albee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p.60.

⁷⁰Donald Spoto *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (London: The Bodley Head, 1985), p.44.

⁷¹*A Streetcar Named Desire* (London: Penguin 1962), p.115. Further references to this edition of *Streetcar* will be given in the text.

⁷²Sander Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature' in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds) *'Race', Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992) p.174.

⁷³Lionel Kelly, 'The White Goddess, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Desire' in Philip C. Kolin (ed.) *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993) p.121.

⁷⁴Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies', p.176.

⁷⁵Angela Davis *Women, Race and Class* (London: The Women's Press, 1982) p.174.

⁷⁶Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (London: Penguin, 1962) pp.66-67.

⁷⁷Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, p.55.

⁷⁸One of Taubman's list of signs of unwanted homosexuality in American theatre was 'the male character who is young, handsome, remote and lofty in a neutral way...be on guard for the male character whose proclivities are like a stallions', *Modern Primer: Helpful Hints To Tell Appearances from Truth*.

⁷⁹Charles Spencer, 'This Stately Streetcar Fails to Move', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 January 1997.

⁸⁰Michael Billington, 'Persistence of a Bleak Vision', *The Guardian*, 31 December 1996.

⁸¹ Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Volume Two*, p.60.

⁸² Sheila Gish, 'Tennessee Williams and his Women', *The Independent*, 15 June 1994.

⁸³ John Peter, 'Desire's Cruel Devices'.

⁸⁴ Alistair Macaulay, 'Neurotic Undercurrents in New Orleans'.

⁸⁵ Michael Billington, 'Persistence of Bleak Vision'.

⁸⁶ *Streetcar*, p. 148, my emphasis.

⁸⁷ For an audience with knowledge of Williams's biography, there is an additional point of connection here: his sister Rose suffered a similar fate for behaviour that was related to her alleged lack of sexual modesty; see Williams's *Memoirs*.

Donald Spoto sheds a different light on this, and suggests that Rose was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of their father, and that her mental health problems were a consequence of bearing the responsibility of silence, having been disbelieved once by their mother, Miss Edwina. (Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers*, p.59, 61) It has been suggested that the scenario which unfolds in *Suddenly Last Summer* was inspired by Williams's guilt over Rose's eventual lobotomy. In the play Catherine will be lobotomised for bearing witness to her cousin Sebastian's procuring of young boys for sex: it is interesting to reflect that in writing a narrative purportedly attempting to cathart the predicament of his sister - one that preoccupied him until his death - he seems to guiltily substitute a sexual identity symmetrical to his own for the abusive behaviour of his father.

⁸⁸ The description is Boss Finley's, from *Sweet Bird of Youth*, p.67.

⁸⁹Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1995) pp.155-156.