

Gay Men and Female Identification: Pathology or Cultural Dissent?

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Lesbian and gay scholars have good reason for their investments in Cultural Studies, a relatively new paradigm that we have had a significant hand in propagating. A small personal anecdote may illuminate the needs that have led to such investment. In my final year as an undergraduate on an English Literature degree at a reasonably well respected red brick university I took a course on Philosophy in Literature. At this time I was enjoying my new political life as an out gay man. I had entered higher education so that I could be gay by escaping the small and deeply provincial town in which I grew up. In 1988, just after Clause 28, gay politics on campus was thriving, and I threw myself into it with an enthusiasm that slaked the frustrations of small town narrow-mindedness. By my final year I had also begun to be fired up by my course, whilst still whirling and shrieking round campus, caught up in fights for lesbian and gay officers on the Union Executive, campaigns for AIDS and HIV welfare policy, and suchlike. The point is, I was not politically timid about my sexuality: indeed, you could say that I was striving to become a human pink triangle. One of the set books on this Philosophy and Literature course was *Death in Venice*, and I remember the Professor in charge of the teaching starting his lecture by instructing us that Mann's novel had nothing whatsoever to do with homosexuality, but was instead concerned with more substantial issues of an ethical and artistic nature. What is striking about my recollection is that even though I instinctively knew this Professor was wrong and deeply prejudiced, anxious even, I did not challenge him. Moreover, I did not think to challenge him because his was the intellectual authority: I had no access to dissident rhetorical strategies with which to engage him on an appropriate footing. Naturally I bitched and carped about him with an outlandish relish in the bar after seminars, but taking on this brown acrylic clad harbinger of open-mindedness was beyond the scope of my newly hatched and brashly affected gay pride.

Cultural Studies and Psychoanalysis

Respectable canonical literary criticism, enshrined in institutions of higher education, preserves and naturalises a very specific view of the world. That is, it takes an upper middle-class, white, heterosexual and male anxiety about the manliness of sitting around and gossiping about books, and fashions it into a

discrete and manly search for truth. Reading becomes not so much the indulgence of fantasies and desires, but the search for the one true meaning: a meaning which authenticates the particular arrangement of contingent identities I have just specified. Readings which have the audacity to diverge from this one true meaning are wrong. That is of course, if such readings ever find articulacy, given that the framework of literary criticism lacks the tools for such transgression, and given the institutional power of this ideology (once you know that certain kinds of arguments get your essays failed, your theses unpublished, you learn to ventriloquise the appropriate discourse). Similar kinds of ideological activity have defined all the traditional arts disciplines, as well as subject paradigms within Psychology, Geography, Anthropology and Sociology, although each has its own particular history and set of circumstances through which such authorities become instated.

These intellectual orthodoxies have been variously eroded, moderated, mediated and emboldened by the growing popularity of the critical apparatus provided by Cultural Studies. The history of British Cultural Studies is liberally covered elsewhere, through its development in the work of Richard Hoggart and later the Marxists, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, and later still through the interventions of the members of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), notably Stuart Hall.¹ These developments leave us with a rough date for the emergence of Cultural Studies around the earlier years of the 1970s.² Once this kind of work became disseminated, scholars in other fields, who had not necessarily been encouraged to think culturally within the frameworks of

¹Colin Sparks, 'Stuart Hall, Clearly this is a substantial, polemical generalisation: there are branches of psychoanalytic criticism which pursue a displacement of the Oedipal narrative as opposed to its recuperative enhancement, for example the work of French feminist Luce Irigaray, whose work suggests the contingency of the Freudian orthodoxy. Cultural Studies and Marxism' in David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996; Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992; Simon During, 'Introduction' in During (ed.) *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993; Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms' in Collins et al (eds.) *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader*, London: Sage, 1986; Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury & Jackie Stacey, 'Feminism and Cultural Studies', in Scannell, Schlesinger & Sparks (eds.), *Culture and Power: A Media, Culture and Society Reader*, London: Sage, 1992; Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994

²Colin Sparks, 'Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and Marxism' in David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996, p.72

their subject paradigm, but whose own political affiliations had been suppressed by the terms of these paradigms, began to incorporate the materialist discourse Cultural Studies offered into their own work. Subsequently we could suggest that it has become fairly unthinkable to teach media studies and film studies (both disciplines which developed out of Cultural Studies initiatives), and Geography, Sociology and Anthropology without substantial coverage of a range of English, American and European cultural theory. It should be unthinkable to teach Lit Crit without an engagement with the discourses of Cultural Studies, but many lovers of brown acrylic and their like still persist in their reactionary ways...

Presenting Cultural Studies in such unified terms is a little fallacious: currently there are diverse kinds of intellectual practice engaged under its rubric. Developments in Cultural Studies have reflected those in the socialist politics of which it is a product, and have given rise to recognisable and distinct Black and Post-Colonial Studies, and Lesbian and Gay Studies, which have emerged as responses to the economic determinism of Cultural Studies and the heterosexism and ethno-centrism of many of its practitioners. One particularly powerful strain within Cultural Studies develops Levi-Strauss's work on linguistic practices with Lacanian notions of the decentred subject and Freudian notions of the subconscious, and has posed a significant challenge to the stress placed upon the subjective experience of structural power in Cultural criticism, and its analysis of historical materialism.³ This kind of psychoanalytic theory has become incredibly popular, I would suggest, as part of a late post-modern enthusiasm for an evacuation of identity politics, which has represented a backlash against the kinds of articulation Cultural Studies enables for those of us usually silenced by mandarin academicism. Many denser-than-though theorists shrug off the messy intricacies of identities and materially lived power relations, dissipating them with an insistence upon our instability and incoherence as refracted effects of signification. Heterosexuality isn't just some postmodern ironic effect, a performance to be parodied or deconstructed, it's an institution with complex material, ideological and representational structures. Insisting on the continuing importance of the category of identity is *not* some naive attempt to return to the apparently bad old days of structuralism, humanism or Hegel. I know how complex and mediated my identity is, and because of that complexity, I'd rather it wasn't swept away by the broom of assimilationism, thank you very much. I would like to spend a little more time attempting to understand the material and discursive terrain upon which the components of my social reality

³see Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', *ibid*, p. 46

intersect with those of other aligned, hostile or competitive formations of identity before I have to give myself over to an orgy of hegemonic recuperation masquerading as post-modern fragmentation.

Clearly many concepts and terminologies of cultural criticism are dependent on Freudian or Lacanian insights - it would be highly disingenuous to suggest otherwise. Clearly also, the realm of the subconscious has been a richly mined resource for women's studies, and lesbian and gay studies; particularly in terms of opening up a space for conceptualising desire and fantasy. Yet the self-perpetuating and seductive referentiality of the psychoanalytic narrative has lured many otherwise astute commentators into a position where they are no longer taking part in a process of questioning the material world in which they live, or even the deep-seated desires and damages that secure the plausibility of that world, but where they are pursuing some rarefied search for a missing fraction by which the Oedipal narrative can be resolved. The inevitability of that narrative, with its endless refractions of contradiction, irresolution, transference and symbolism seems to draw many into an entrancing master-narrative determined by articles of faith, principally that of the ludicrously arbitrary Oedipus myth. In *Male Impersonators*, gay critic Mark Simpson uses Freud to attempt to illuminate the instability of masculinity exhibited in the air-brushed and monochromatic virility of Calvin Klein adverts and such like. Simpson's argument and subject matter is appealing: he suggests that in its infatuation with connotated signs of masculinity the narcissism fostered by the new man of the early 1990s represents a Freudian repression/expression of homosexuality. But in the process of tying himself in knots of Freudian complexity and transference, Simpson misses the point entirely. Of course masculinity is unstable, of course the embodiment of virility is elusive: but such efforts are the catalytic linchpin of patriarchal authority. In constantly doubting and in striving to attain a reflection of symbolic masculine power, men *maintain* rather than dissipate the authority of masculinity and male interests. Similarly, in Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen's *Female Fetishism* a desire to gain the heavy duty intellectual credibility of psychoanalysis fashions an argument in which a political context is lost. Rather than question the principles of psychoanalysis through which the fetishistic practices of assorted divas, perverts and mistresses are overlooked in theory and in clinical analysis, Gamman and Makinen claim their right to understand such flagrancy as pathological behaviour: as a yet uncovered feminine variation in the Freudian super-narrative. In effect these queer and feminist interventions serve as recuperative enhancements to the

psychoanalytic faith, re-shaping and regurgitating its narrative to accommodate and assimilate contemporary and radical interventions.

However, it should be clear that my criticisms are substantial, polemical generalisations: there are branches of psychoanalytic criticism which pursue a displacement of the Oedipal narrative as opposed to its recuperative enhancement. Obviously there is the work of French feminist Luce Irigaray, whose work powerfully suggests the contingency of the Freudian orthodoxy.⁴ But there's also the extraordinary work of Mario Mieli which nonchalantly integrates the work of Freud and Marx into a wilfully partisan celebration of subcultural queerness.⁵ More structurally prestigious however, is the work of Kaja Silverman, which maintains the centrality of Oedipus, but considerably enlarges the wayward and dissident potential in theories of the subconscious.⁶ Then there is a considerable body of work which utilises psychoanalytic concepts but succeeds in maintaining the specificity of its own project; a particularly exciting example of this resistance of psychoanalysis as a package deal is Chris Straayer's audacious 'The She-man: Postmodern bi-sexed performance in film and video'.⁷

Ideally, a critical apparatus should be a questioning tool with which to reveal layers of meaning. Conventional psychoanalytic criticism seems to produce meaning from within an exploration of the tool itself, yet often with a striking lack of reflexivity about the limitations or effectiveness of that tool. Psychoanalysis often functions as a master narrative, in relation to which all acolytes must pay deference, or become understood as theoretically naive (and here I am perhaps anticipating my own critics). Academic criticism should not be justifying its privileged status in the world with endless dissections of the fluff in its belly button. I don't want to engage with theory as an intellectual exercise in itself, I want to use theory as a means through which I can understand the cultural processes that form me, and with which I must engage. Writing about issues of sexuality, class, disability, gender or ethnicity should be a political process, and I always want to be able to insist on the contingency of frameworks within which power is reproduced. It is therefore essential not only to resist the embroiling intricacies of psychoanalysis as a means

⁴notably in Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985; and *Speculum of the Other Woman*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985

⁵Mario Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, London: Gay Men's Press, 1980

⁶Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, New York & London: Routledge, 1992

⁷printed in *Screen*, vol 31, no 3, Autumn 1990

of enlightenment, a tool, but it is essential that the very edifice of psychoanalysis itself as a body of intellectual and social authority is questioned, resisted and situated.

Tennessee Williams and Gay Subculture

In 1994 the National Theatre in London staged the most prestigious revival of a Tennessee Williams play in some time. The sumptuous production of *Sweet Bird of Youth* was the occasion for the resuscitation in the British broadsheet press of a discourse about the particular importance of Williams's female characterisation. *The Independent*, which ran a full page feature headlined, "Tennessee Williams and His Women", suggested that:

William'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 either that *The Independent* was uncertain how conclusive that disproving has been, or that they felt that such was the currency of the proposition that its readers might need to be reminded that they no longer invested in such a notion. Regardless, in her *From Reverence to Rape* Molly Haskell offers an incisive account of the 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 is a particularly clear example 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.¹⁰ This transaction has come to exemplify a preponderant strain through which homosexuality is understood, and I will come to a discussion of the political effects of this knowledge shortly. Tennessee Williams is important not only for being a particularly visible and contentious homosexual man who seemed to enjoy his homosexuality (and the pills and the booze), but because his visibility is partly intelligible through an identification with women. Film

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

¹⁰David 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.

spectatorship and star adoration are particularly highly determined practices in gay male culture. One of the things that has made Williams so compelling and accessible are the potent cinematic adaptations of his work; in these films, and in a series of famous stage performances, actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor, Vivien Leigh, Ann-Margaret, Geraldine Page, Tallulah Bankhead, Bette Davis, Anna Magnani, Ava Gardner and Lauren Bacall, have structured an iconography of femininity that for dominant critics and gay culture alike has become distinctively associated with homosexuality. At the National in 1994 Alexandra del Lago was played by Clare Higgins, whose performance so accurately pastiched the voice and mannerism of Lauren Bacall that it verged on becoming an impersonation, and showed how far the intelligibility of Williams's women characters rests on a stylised iconography of female stardom.

The way in which mainstream America theatre criticism, and indeed the US cultural establishment generally, has handled Tennessee Williams shows 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; in 1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 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 American way of life over communism. Williams's popularity, both at home and abroad, made it necessary for him to be embraced as emblematic of that American superiority. Yet on the other hand, 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, hugely popular and successful dramatists who were also homosexual. 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.¹¹

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.¹²

The difficulty Taubman and Kauffman are negotiating resides in Williams's homosexuality being so proximate to understandings of him as a great American playwright. Cold War ideology rested on the virility of the imperialist nation state, that is, on 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".¹³ 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",¹⁴ 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.

¹¹Howard Taubman, 'Modern Primer: Helpful Hints To Tell Appearances from Truth', *New York Times*, April 28, 1963, section 2, p.1

¹²Stanley 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

¹³Alan Sinfield, 'Un-American Activities', in Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994, p.42

¹⁴Sinfield, *ibid*, p.42

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 separately proposed by Krafft-Ebing, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Havelock Ellis at the turn of the century, who were attempting to make sense of their desires.¹⁵ Indeed in his first of the famous *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* of 1905, 'The Sexual Aberrations', Freud himself acknowledges the debt to Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Hirschfeld, and others, adding a footnote in 1910 to indicate that the non-psychoanalytically constituted notion of inversion had become certified in psychoanalytic clinical practice.¹⁶ Thus Freud bought into a narrative of homosexuality, produced by homosexuals, to enable the constitution of a specific conceptual space in history within which to image same-sex desire as rational, and fitted it into what became a trans-historical and essentialising discourse that institutionally enshrined the pathologising of homosexual women and men. Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and E.M. Forster's *Maurice* remain as literary testimonies to the attempts made by homosexual writers to assemble a matrix of plausible homosexual identities through models of inversion in a period which pre-dates the mass cultural circulation of psychoanalytic concepts, although Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* had been published and would have been available to both writers through their intellectual milieu.¹⁷ Kenneth Lewes, in his authoritative study *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*, suggests that

¹⁵see 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.

¹⁶Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and other works*, The Pelican Freud Library, Volume 7. London: Penguin, 1977, p.45

¹⁷*The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago: 1982) was first published in 1928. *Maurice* (London: Penguin 1972) was first published in 1970, after Forster's death and in accordance with his instructions; it had been finished in July 1914 and was circulated amongst the author's friends. Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* was first published in 1905 and is printed in volume seven of the Pelican Freud Library, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and other works*, London: Penguin, 1977.

Freud himself never quite decided whether gay men exhibited pathological perversion, or inversion. It is interesting to note that for Lewes, the non-pathological status of invert is the most favourable, or liberal of Freud's vicissitudes on the status of gay men.¹⁸ Certainly Freud seems to use the term inversion to stand in for homosexuality, and in doing so throughout his huge and often contradictory body of work stabilises an *a priori* understanding of homosexuality in this way. Later Freudians, as Lewes points out and cultural history and experience confirm, collapsed The Father's distinction between perversion and inversion, daubing homosexuality as clinically exhibiting both.¹⁹

As a specific, political intervention into an evolving historical narrative, Gay criticism has been concerned with repelling the inversionist propositions about Williams and situating him in the context of post-Stonewall thinking, as a way of remodelling homosexuality as something other than heterosexuality gone treacherously wrong. What we now understand to be Gay politics emerged in the liberatory aftermath of the Stonewall riots of June 1969 in Greenwich Village in New York. The riots, led largely by Latino and Black drag queens, acted as a catalyst for burgeoning political awareness and anger amongst homosexuals that had gained a new context in the heightened social unrest that characterised 1960s radical politics in America, with the anti-Vietnam war movement, Black Power and Feminism. In America and in Britain, the politics of the Gay Liberation Front fashioned a radical refusal of state toleration of homosexuality in private that had enabled considerable surveillance, control and intimidation, in both specific and federal terms. In Britain we had just had the 1967 Sexual offences Act, which instated containing and liberally tolerant notions of public and private, and had opened but a small window of legal acceptability for certain male homosexual practices in private. In America an uneasy combination of post-1950s national hysteria about manliness, homosexuality and Communism (which, as we have seen, was deployed through psychoanalytic notions) and the principle of the veneration of individual liberty and citizenship in the ideology of the constitution brought considerable pressure to bear upon homosexual life as a source of anxiety for state authorities. Under these political conditions, and following the example of the Black Power movement, gay liberation emphasised public declaration, coming out

¹⁸Kenneth Lewes, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*, London & New York: Quartet, 1989, p.29

¹⁹Lewes, *ibid*, p.89

of the closet - a refusal of dominant narratives of your identity, as a way of confounding the covert control of private toleration.

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."²⁰ 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 not dissimilar to that 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."²¹ 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 with 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.²² The knowing, falaciously 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.²³

Gay criticism, like Clum's, maintains a precarious balance between repudiating the pathological and heterosexist aspects of inversion, which work to culturally authenticate gender roles produced by capitalist patriarchies, whilst maintaining an

²⁰John 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

²¹Clum, *Acting Gay*, *ibid*, p.150, my emphasis

²²for example, Mark Lilly, *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century*, London: Macmillan, 1993, p.105-115, discusses how Williams's homosexuality is metaphorically refracted through, amongst others, Laura's lameness in *The Glass Menagerie*.

²³Clum, *Acting Gay*, *ibid*, p.150

investment in the queerness of Blanche, Alexandra del Lago and company. Underneath a political rhetoric which attempts to moderate the more rabid effects of certain powerful ideological uses of psychoanalysis and put distance between homosexuality and Blanche and her colleagues, we can however see that gay subculture remains suffused with cross-gender identifications. Metropolitan, urban gay male centres in America, Britain and Australia have lapped up the *Absolutely Fabulous* goings-on of Patsy and Edina and offered a whole new vocabulary for the trichological excesses of drag-queens, whilst the divine megalomania of Streisand, Maclaine, Dietrich, Madonna, Midler, Basse, Davis, and the rest continues to hold diverse kinds of queens the world over in papal thrall. Despite a call to historical circumstance, Clum seems to infer that homosexuality becomes textually coded through women because they express our gay sensibility: that is how he attempts to elude the inversionist trap. Yet gay subcultural activity itself may suggest a more fundamental preoccupation with women, and with gender itself, which speaks more proximately to the conditions which underwrite inversion theories.

It is not politically desirable to turn explanations of gay subcultural activity on the axis of psychoanalysis, where female identification becomes the collective manifestation of pathological neuroses, infantilism or some such pejorative perversion. Not only do these explanations exhibit heterosexism to an extraordinarily arrogant degree, they give us little substance with which to fashion any political dissent, and thus they may represent a limit case in entrapment. Even more fundamentally, such psychoanalytic explanations individualise and de-historicise practices which are only meaningful to gay men in collective and historical terms.

If it were appropriate to compile a canon of Cultural Studies, then Dick Hebdige's work on youth subcultures and Angela McRobbie's feminist enhancement of subcultural theory would surely be included.²⁴ The maps of subcultural dynamics that these writers have laid down are particularly useful in understanding gay culture. Subcultures are necessarily resistant and marginal in attitude, but they retain a symbiotic relationship to wider cultures and the dominant powers that

²⁴Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London: Routledge 1988; Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991. In 1975 the Birmingham CCCS published *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain*, edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson which contained the essay, 'Subcultures, cultures and class' by John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts. This work was the first to introduce the idea of subculture as a critical concept.

produce them. Subcultures fashion new meanings from objects and representations that circulate in mainstream cultures, but these appropriations are often quickly recuperated through processes of commodification and ideological reworking. Thus, although the notion of subculture allows us to constitute alternative spaces for social and political articulation, such activity always takes place under conditions of contest. Defining the mannerisms and materials produced by gay men through the terms of subculture allows us to constitute them in terms that side-step critical approaches that endlessly see marginal behaviours as functions of powerlessness that only ever manifest our subordination. Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall both work with three kinds of decoding systems that may help us to narrativise the fluctuations that mark subcultural activity: dominant, negotiated and radical. The dominant claims normative status, negotiated readings adapt to dominant systems or make room for them without directly aligning with or repudiating them, and radical readings take up direct opposition to dominant ones. We know how difficult it is to sustain radicalism, for dominant authorities continue to claim normative status, but if we are to escape entrapment, or the endless mediation and compromise of a negotiated decoding position where we accept a dominant view of ourselves and work round it, then we need to be able to envisage dissent.

Hegemony and Homosocial Masculinity

Raymond Williams's version of Gramscian hegemony, which he presents in 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', enables us to understand the scope and power of dominant authorities, but also their contingency, formed through a continuous process of adjustment, reinterpretation, incorporation, and dilution, conducted in response to alternative, oppositional, residual and emergent cultural formations.²⁵ Alan Sinfield has suggested that "the dominant may tolerate, repress, or incorporate these other formations, but that will be a continuous, urgent and often strenuous project."²⁶ There is no single location which dominance inhabits, power is not monolithic, but disparately spread through a complex of material and ideological institutions; what we understand as dominant authority expresses a coalition of interests shared by these institutions, or locations of power, but these coalitions are shifting, compromised and conflicted. Heterosexual capitalist patriarchy is a macro-political example of such a coalition, which manifests complex requirements concerned with maintaining gender power for men, control over property and succession, and the integrity of capital. The needs of this system are diverse, and create anomalous circumstances. Eve Sedgwick has described one ideological system which works to police and organise one such set of anomalies, which she calls homosocial bonds.²⁷

Sedgwick argues that the most celebrated and important relationships in our society are between men, and that many of our most valorised cultural representations celebrate shared interests and intimacy amongst men, and an exchange of women between these men, as tokens of masculinity. We can see the plausibility of her thesis in the buddy movies Hollywood produces: a fairly recent and extraordinarily potent example is Tarantino's film, *Pulp Fiction*, where women exist merely as the opportunities for masculine exhibitionism and bonding between men, and homosexuality exists in visible and threatening proximity to such masculinity. Sedgwick suggests that male homosocial bonds maintain a functional relationship with homosexuality which is actively connotated as a policing mechanism, "the result has been a structural residue of terrorist potential,

²⁵Raymond Williams, 'Base and superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in *Culture*, Glasgow: Fontana, 1981, p.40-42

²⁶Sinfield, *ibid*, p.25

²⁷Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985

of *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia."²⁸ The content of homosocial narratives, like that represented in *Pulp Fiction*, show us that this leverage rests on a misogynistic horror of the feminine and an understanding of homosexuality as men's potential to perversely manifest that femininity. Even if aspirational patriarchal subjects appropriately vilify women as representations of femininity, and signal their distance from abjection with constant invocations of homophobia, they remain caught in what Sedgwick characterises as a "double bind":

For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being "interested in men."²⁹

This strenuous ideological framing and the anxiety it produces across the board of all male behaviour expresses a perfect example of the kinds of hegemonic reformation which Raymond Williams has proposed, which work to absorb and re-shape diverse cultural narratives and representations. The constitution of homosocial masculinity, a cultural and historical formation, rests on the authority of many psychoanalytic propositions: we can see how functional both the ideas of homosexual latency and of inversion are in regimenting appropriate male behaviour and identity. Resisting the authenticity of psychoanalytic notions as clinical fact, and placing them in a cultural and historical context enables us to understand the ideologies through which they gain credibility as markers of apparently personal pathology. At moments of particular stress and tension, such as shifts in the organisation of labour and gender roles in post-war America, psychoanalysis has provided useful narratives with which to re-stabilise male authority. Raymond Williams's notion of hegemony allows us to see how institutions like that of patriarchal masculinity retain their dominance by powerfully repressing the instabilities necessarily inherent in such complex manifestations of power. This acknowledgement of contingency in powerful formations enables us to see much more potential in our transgressive activities: "Social orders and cultural orders must be seen as being actively made: actively and continuously, or they may quite quickly break down."³⁰ Yet we must also be cautious about this optimism Williams fosters. Clearly dominant power does not necessarily break down under the weight of such incoherence and ideological production: indeed, it seems to thrive on it. If hegemony is the process through which powerful constituencies attempt to instate their concerns as those of the

²⁸Sedgwick, *ibid*, p.89, emphasis in original.

²⁹Sedgwick, *ibid*, p.89

³⁰Raymond Williams, *Culture*, Glasgow: Fontana, 1981, p.201

majority, then that process will necessarily be a difficult one: manipulating what have been described as faultline possibilities that are thrown up by the abrasions between different sets of ideological and institutional needs so as to restore apparent equilibrium.³¹ Yet this constant attention required to re-organise areas of instability back into efficacy keeps capital and patriarchy agile and constantly on the move. The possibilities for radicalism and dissent are great, but the demands such dissident activity may place on the resources of the marginal are enormous.

Homosocial narratives of masculinity produce a sexualised abjection of homosexuality for functional purposes within the formation of gender roles: far from being personally disgusted "phobic" responses (as in homophobia) most prejudice against homosexual people is institutionalised and ideologically validated. Yet the particularly striking notions of women offered by Tennessee Williams, and the popularity and importance of female identification that Clum evades in his post-Stonewall notion of the playwright, would suggest that gay men have formed subcultures which attempt to resist the homosocial mechanism through its production of gender. Diverse kinds of gay men clearly have a number of ways of decoding the culturally powerful narrative homosociality offers. To follow Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, we could suggest that one way would entail an alignment by some gay men with the practice of exchanging women and suppressing the realm of the feminine: a position which ventriloquises dominant decoding. John Clum would identify this strategy as closetedness, and thankfully the consolidation of gay political articulation has made this an often unnecessary option; although residual traces of the kind of misogyny such exchange produces do remain in lots of gay culture. However, the naturalisation of gay male abjection often means that many gay men take up negotiated positions of self-oppression and humility: accepting the psychoanalytic pathologisation of queer practices. Dominant sponsorship of narratives like that of inversion show us how unstable the organisation of gender roles remains, and the fearsome punishment of those who blur the distinctions between them. Gay male female identification is a dissident activity that attempts to intersect with these dominant faultlines, by fracturing the integrity of the homosocial negation of the feminine, and by

³¹The term faultline is used by Alan Sinfield to describe those occasions facilitated by incoherences, contradictions and tensions between often competing sets of powerful ideological formations which best enable our dissident exploitations. Faultline stories are those that have required the most assiduous and anxious re-working in order to cohere within dominant ideological formations. See Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

attempting to overcome the structural obstacle masculinity represents in potential alignments between marginalised homosexuality and women oppressed through homosocial exchange. However, one of the most important features of gay male identification with women is the sense of historical continuity it offers, a shared vernacular that Tennessee Williams has been crucial in establishing. Whilst we may not relish the hostile attentions of dominant critics of Williams's work, we have exploited the faultlines such accounts represent, and bought into a practice that has become emblematic of gay male refusals of homosocial subjectivity. In the process we have also fashioned subcultural dissent against those dominant accounts of Tennessee Williams which would have him as a great national playwright, representative of American imperial superiority. The continuity of critical unease about Tennessee Williams and his women, from the 1960s to the more recent revivals, illustrates the unresolved faultline nature of his representations. Williams has remained important for stabilising gay practices and in this we have managed to keep him as both a subcultural and a homosexual playwright.