

Compañero Tenn: The Hispanic Presence in the Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Tennessee Williams was enamored of most things Hispanic as his travels, tastes, and scripts would attest. A central document in Williams's Hispanic voyages was his essay "A Summer of Discovery," published in 1961 just before the premiere of *The Night of the Iguana* but retrospectively detailing his experiences on a 1940 trip to Mexico. Williams rode with a young "Mexican bridegroom" and "a young blonde lady of ambiguous profession whom he was now preparing to take home to meet his parents in Mexico City" ("Summer" 138). Recalling this memorable "share-the-expense" trip, Williams observed: "We had a fantastic ride south. There were three other male Mexicans in the party and they took turns at the wheel. Sometimes a road map was produced but they couldn't follow it. We kept making involuntary detours . . . that took us hundred of miles out of the way" (*Memoirs* 57). The south of the border experience allowed Williams to enter the liminal world where his sexual and political anxieties, triggered by conventionalism, could be expressed and eased. It was a time of sexual gratification without sentimental companionship for Williams (Leverich 378). Nonetheless, it was a highly productive apprenticeship as well. Out of that seminal summer in Mexico came the experiences that led to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Camino Real*, and *Iguana*. "It was a desperate period in my life . . . but it's during such times that a writer draws out . . . the most necessary impulse of drive toward his work, which is the transmutation of experiences into some significant . . . creation. . . ." ("Summer" 140). The transmuted Hispanic world empowered him to do "something wild, something exciting, something you are not used to" ("Something Wild") and thus advance his aesthetics/politics of desire. When Alma tells John in *Summer and Smoke* "Those Latins all dream in the sun—and indulge their senses" (197), we hear Williams invoke a world beyond Anglo repression. As Williams discovered on his trip, Mexico was "an elemental country where you can quickly forget the false dignities and conceits imposed by success, a country where vagrants innocent as children curl up to sleep on the pavements and human voices, especially when their language is not familiar to the ear, are soft as birds'. My public self, that artifice of mirrors, did not exist here and so my natural being was resumed" ("Catastrophe" 138).

Unlike his mother, who was terrified of Mexicans (*Memoirs* 57), Williams ventured often into the Spanish-speaking world, especially to Mexico and Cuba. Like the Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon, Williams could claim "I know Mexico well," though his knowledge of Spanish was very slight—just a few phrases really (Hale). He took many trips to Mexico, first in 1938 and then throughout later decades. He

thoroughly enjoyed the Mexican premiere of *Streetcar* in 1949, claiming that it was “better represented here in Mexico than in New York” (*Ultima Hora* [5 May 1949] qtd. in Kolin “Mexican Premiere”). In the 1950s, the New York papers were full of Williams’s visits to Cuba, a land and its leader—Castro—that held a special place in his heart. According to Spoto, “For years Williams praised Castro’s gentlemanliness and charm” (233) and was so infatuated with Fidelissimo that he flirted with the idea of writing a screenplay about him and fantasized about being kidnapped by revolutionaries Castro and Ché Guevara. On April 7, 1959, Williams visited Castro at the Palacio, and even though Cuban-American relations were at a dangerous ebb, Havana’s *Revolucion* (8 April) honored Williams as “a friend of our sensual tropical sun, our character, and our revolution” (qtd. in Kolin, “Tennessee Williams” 6). Not surprisingly, the playwright and his work ran into trouble with censorship in Francoist Spain where *Streetcar* did not premiere until 1961. Generalissimos were always his foes, whether fictionally in *Camino* or in actuality with Sen. Joseph McCarthy or John Foster Dulles (Kolin, “Tennessee Williams” 6).

Williams’s Spanish-speaking characters and settings permitted him a shunt to express the revolutionary, to celebrate his wild exciting ideas. The Hispanic world in Williams’s plays became a site for him to express his resistance to the status quo and where he could more fully and freely explore and express his desires. It is a world where “Conquistadors . . . bore the flag of the Inquisition along with the Cross of Christ” (*Iguana* 305). Through an Hispanic presence Williams revolutionized as well as sexualized America. Hispanics were his quintessential outsiders whose sexuality and violence are signifiers of Otherness. Through their elemental humanity, Hispanics in Williams’s plays—from *Not About Nightingales* (1938) to *Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975)—embody the poetry and primitivism he sought in his life and work. They became vital players in the theatre of Williams’s self—the author as a performing audience. But an Hispanic presence also helped Williams to problematize the darker, more oppressive resistance to his ideas about power, sexuality, and art. An Hispanicized America allowed him to represent mind space, or ideas, through actual geographical space. The Hispanic diaspora in the Williams canon thus embraced celebration and indeterminacy.

Possibly Williams’s earliest Hispanic character appears in *Not About Nightingales*, a play written in 1938 but not (re)discovered until 1996 by Vanessa Redgrave who produced it for the first time in London in 1997. Based on an actual tragedy at the Holmesberg, Pennsylvania prison, *Nightingales* may be the most radical, revolutionary play in the canon. It chronicles the events leading up to and following a hunger strike by convicts retaliating against the inhuman treatment they received from Boss Whalen, the warden who brutally roasted four of them to death in a nearly airtight boiler-room saturated with 150 degree steam. To reflect a cross-section of the convicts, Williams included a variety of ethnic characters, including Shapiro who speaks Yiddish, Krause, black Ollie, Queenie (“his first homosexual

character" [Hale, "Introduction" xx]), and Mex, who has few lines but all of them in Spanish.

When he is forced to endure "two weeks in the hole," Mex "*swears in Spanish*" and then "*protests in Spanish*" (75-76). Later, when the lethal punishment of Klondike (the boiler-room cell) is imminent, Mex "*prays in a hoarse strangled voice*" (122). At first it is a Marian litany—"Santa maria—Madre de Dios—etc." (122) and then, amid "yammering" and the noise of a con who "*raps commandingly*" on the bars, Mex prays "*Jesu—muerto por nuestros pecados*" ("Jesus, who died for our sins"), an appropriate prayer for a sinful convict in the tradition of St. Dismus. But after a chorus of convicts intone "We'll beat Klondike!" Mex begins "chanting"—"*Muerto—por nuestros pecados—rojo—de sangre e—el sol*" ("Dead—for our sins—blood red is the sun"). Mex's chant contains the last words of this climatic scene dissolving into a "BLACKOUT" (123).

Unquestionably a minor character, Mex is nonetheless an innovative part of Williams's highly expressionistic play. Mex's Spanish prayers/chants intensify the unfolding tragedy and serve as a contrapuntal threnody to the angry but ultimately powerless protests of the cons. Certainly, Mex's sincerity contrasts with the purchased piety of the Rev. Hooker, a venal clergyman whom the warden brings in to warn and rebuke the convicts. But most importantly, Mex's words are steeped in the religious symbolism that Williams would develop more fully in later plays. Mex's words and disjuncted syntax suggest lines torn away from a liturgy, or possibly from Lorca whom he was reading at the time (Hale). It is probable, too, that Mex's words are an auto-da-fê (act of faith) before the Inquisitional tortures planned by the warden. Blood (*sangre*) and sun (*sol*) fit well into the warden's perverse punishment for heretical prisoners. Finally, Mex distantly prefigures the two Mexican characters in *Streetcar*—Pablo, the "greaseball," and the blind flower-selling woman, a symbol of Blanche's encroaching death. Early in his career, then, Williams reified the symbolically portentous through Hispanic rituals.

Williams's use of Mexican characters is perhaps the least complex, most conventional in *Summer and Smoke*, where Papa Gonzales and his tempestuous daughter Rosa, from Piedras Negras, incorporate many ethnic stereotypes Williams exploited to introduce disruptions and to threaten instability in Glorious Hill, Mississippi. A "bull of a man" (216), Papa Gonzales runs Moon Lake Casino "where anything goes" (195), including gambling, brawls, and cockfights. Celebrating the liminal world, Papa declares, "the sky is the limit" (214), living outside the law. Just before Papa shoots old Dr. Buchanan, a patriarchal figure of sobriety and order, "*Mexican music comes up strongly, with a definitely ominous quality*" (215), foreshadowing the eerie entrance of the blind Mexican woman in *Streetcar*. Like Papa, Rosa lives beyond the periphery of respectability. She is a fiery Latin temptress who never makes love without scratching or biting. Dressed in a Flamenco costume, Rosa dances suggestively, clicking castinatas before John's anatomy chart as if to seduce epistemic science into a sexual farrago (211). The Gonzales twosome encode the lawless sexuality that was a part of Williams's selfhood.

Perhaps like Williams himself, John is engaged in a psychomachia between his responsible, strict Anglo side and the Hispanicized rebelliousness he both courts and fears. Confessing to Alma that "I've been thinking of South America lately. . .cantinas are lots more fun than saloons and senioritas are caviar among females" (195), he painfully tastes one of those senioritas through Rosa's dangerous passion. "Did anyone ever slide downhill as fast as I have this summer" (212), he laments. Through symbolic stage business Williams scripts Rosa's precarious place in John's life. Provocatively personifying Latin entrapment for John, Rosa's costume typifies those "dresses for the equator" that alarmed the staid Louise about her daughter Gloria in *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?* (85). Attempting to contain or even suppress the instability Rosa represents in his life, John orders "Wait outside, Rosa. In the hall. Be quiet" (178). He closes the door on her and demands "calla de la boca" (183)—"close your mouth" or shut up—a command that both marginalizes and outrageously alludes to her sexual power. She is the forbidden lust that clamors for admittance into John's world—his doctors's office in repressive Glorious Hill. Indebted to a host of Hispanic sirens, Rosa is the *puta* vying for John's soul.

But even though John would suppress her, Rosa insurgently contrasts with Alma: Rosa's hot-blooded seduction foils Alma's frozen passion. In the symbolism of the Hispanicized Other, Alma—"Spanish for soul" (202)—rejects the purely elemental primitivism of the body encoded through Rosa, perhaps the wild Rose of Williams's personal hagiography. Alma eschews anything Hispanic. Speaking of John's proposed South American sexual junket, she asserts: "It takes a strong character to survive in the tropics. Otherwise it's a quagmire" (196). Yet, ironically, Alma lapses into just such a "quagmire" when at the end of the play she turns the park, with the stone angel, into her own cantina of seduction.

John's young fiancée, Nellie Ewell, becomes the new respectable Rosa, the licit conflation of body and soul. Williams contrasts and parallels Nellie and Rosa to recuperate Hispanic passion into the Anglo world. Like Rosa, Nellie inherits a socially questionable past. Her mother—the "merry widow of Glorious Hill"—runs the town bordello, meeting trains and entertaining traveling salesmen. Mrs. Ewell's house is the feminized equivalent of Papa Gonzales's Moon Lake Casino. Yet Nellie transcends her mother's past. Characteristic of Williams's symbolic narratives, Nellie graduates from Sophie *Newcombe* (italics mine, actually spelled "Newcomb") College in New Orleans, returning to Glorious Hill as a suitable mate for John, unlike the predatory Rosa who never escapes her heritage. But if Williams reconfigures Rosa's sexuality into respectability in Nellie, he also incorporates Alma's spirituality into John's bride. Alma learns of John's engagement during the Christmas season, when Nellie shouts "Glad tidings" (248), an exclamation replete with religious overtones of the Nativity. Nellie Ewell becomes the new Rosa bearing the imprint of both the sacred and sexualized ideal for Williams.

In *Streetcar* (1947), Williams significantly deepened the symbolic and structural function of Hispanic characters, building upon and expanding earlier stereo-

typical portraits. Hispanic ethnicity, as well as African American, French, Chinese, Slavic, and Creole, pervades *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Among the first words Blanche hears in the French Quarter are Eunice's "*Por nada*, as the Mexicans say" (248)—in response to Blanche's "Thanks" for "letting me in" to Stanley and Stella's apartment. Eunice's "You're welcome" literally translates "for nothing," a phrase ominously symbolizing Blanche's entry in a world where her dreams are reduced to "nothing." The two Hispanic characters in *Streetcar*—Pablo Gonzales and the blind Mexican woman—participate in and embody the "nothingness" enveloping Blanche as well as Stanley. Paradoxically, the Hispanic world in *Streetcar* becomes a site for the displacement of rather than glorification of passion. The name *Gonzales* no doubt incorporated both melancholy and pain for Williams because of his fiery-tempered ex-lover in the early 1940s Pablo Roderiquez Gonzales. Williams used the name again in his short story "The Mysteries of Joy Rio," where the old watchmaker Emil Kroger falls in love with the Mexican Pablo Gonzales. Doubtless, too, Williams knew other Hispanics with that same common surname, including a number of Nicaraguan and Honduran émigrés in New Orleans. The image of a blind Mexican woman could have come to Williams from a real-life source as well as from numerous mythological antecedents of the blind doomsayer/prophet, e.g. Blind Fates, Tiresias.

Most significantly, these two Hispanics help imprint Stanley's and Blanche's tragedies on the audience's consciousness. In the sexualized bravado of Pablo Gonzalez, Williams created an analogously Hispanic Stanley, a reflection of Kowalski's wild, uncontrollable passion and sexuality. Juxtaposed with Pablo, Stanley is ethnicized as a Polish "greaseball," a slur he hurls at Pablo (403) but, interestingly enough, one that applies to him as well. Stanley gets the car "greased" (311) and is literally covered with grease—"he wears an undershirt and grease-stained seersucker pants" (332). Pablo's clothes, like Stanley's on the poker night reflect the "*lurid nocturnal brilliance*" (286) of Van Gogh's *Night Café*. Like Pablo, too, Stanley is loud, inebriate, and violent. Both men are "*vivid slices of watermelon*" (286) swilling whiskey and Jax beer, eager for rounds of "*grappling and cursing*" (303) that define them as compadres, brothers under the sign of Dionysus (Thompson 38). Moreover, both are figures of overriding male anatomization, machismo. Stanley parades around shirtless, waves his red silk pajamas in the air, and sprays beer in Scene 10 in a phallic interlude celebrating his potency. Appropriately, Kowalski's Hispanic Doppelgänger Pablo calls out "one-eyed jacks are wild," expressing a gamester's bold priapic joke; and assaulting the "sugar tit" Mitch, Pablo taunts: "Sure he's got ants now. Seven five-dollar bills in his pants pocket folded tight as spitballs" (296). Using the word "spitballs," Pablo jokes at Mitch's sexual expense minimizing his testicular prowess.

Speaking the same sexualized lingo, Stanley prefers to play "Spit in the Ocean" (296), a popular card game that co-opts Pablo's contempt for their less-manly fellow card player. In seeing Pablo, then, we see Stanley Kowalski—the marginalized ethnic who glories in his phallic resistance to Blanche and her gossamer world.

The Mexican flower seller unquestionably is a reflection of the ghostly Blanche—a transfixing visual trope for Blanche herself. “*A Vendor comes around the corner. She is a blind Mexican woman in a dark shawl, carrying bunches of those gaudy tin flowers that lower class Mexicans display at funerals and other festive occasions . . .*” (387). Although she has only one line, “Flores para los muertos, flores—flores” (with a slight variation of “coronas” for “flores”), the Mexican woman speaks the incantation of the play, the ejaculation of the lost. As with Pablo, Williams analogizes the two women to intensify the terror of the tragedy. Just as Pablo is a partner to Stanley, the old woman is one to Blanche, creating a foursome in the game of destiny that *Streetcar* plays out. Structurally, the blind Mexican woman is another in a series of vendors bringing desire and/or death to Blanche, starting with the merchant Kiefaber, the “Red hots” hawker, the young man collecting for the *Evening Star*, and even the Western Union operator to whom Blanche cries for help. A precursor to the Doctor, the last vendor of the play, the Mexican woman assists Blanche to “transfer to a [streetcar] called Cemeteries” (246). Representatively, too, the old Mexican woman functions in a significantly Hispanic role further defining Blanche’s tragedy. She is an ironic *doña* or *chaperone*, an old woman accompanying young girls on their courting rituals. Confronting the blind Mexican woman helps to push Blanche even further into the world of her courtship past, her salad days with Shep Huntleigh. The Mexican vendor thus becomes the baleful midwife to that memory, the harbinger of pain becoming ecstasy.

Parallels between Blanche and the Mexican woman further signal that the old woman represents the doom awaiting Blanche at the madhouse. Unquestionably, the Mexican woman is a supplicant for the dead, and there is no doubt from the start of the play—and throughout it—that Blanche has been linked with death, e.g., “All those deaths. The long parade to the graveyard” (261). But Williams establishes other cultural and poetic links between Blanche and the old woman from the start. Like Blanche, she is an intruder—the Other—in the Kowalski world and is ultimately ousted. As Blanche had done in Scene 1, the old Mexican woman knocks at Stanley and Stella’s door. Seeing her, Blanche “*darts back into the apartment slamming the door*” (388), exactly what the Kowalskis do to their visiting relative from Mississippi in Scene 11. Like the sightless Mexican woman, too, “*Blanche allows the doctor to lead her as if she were blind*” to the madhouse/charnel house (418). Moreover, according to Bert Cardullo, the flowers the blind woman carries are “symbolic of all the deaths at Belle Reve that helped to drive the DuBois family into bankruptcy” (“Blind Mexican”). The flowers also have much immediate significance in Blanche’s tortured present, visually cuing audiences to the numerous flowers associated with Blanche. “*Blanche’s dress, a flowered print, is laid out on Stella’s bed*” at the beginning of Scene 2, a lifeless print of Blanche’s own body tragically searching for the requited love fulfilled on the marriage bed. Another old dress with flowers is arranged in her trunk—the proleptic coffin in Scene 11.

But these two Hispanic characters function more significantly than just as analogues. Pablo and the blind Mexican woman evolve as nemeses ushering in a world dreaded by Blanche and Stanley alike. These Hispanics are the self and the fear of self for both Blanche and Stanley, and possibly for Williams, too. Pablo's curse "*Maldita sea tu suerte*" in Scene 11 (403) is paralleled and fulfilled in the blind woman's haunting threnody. Both Blanche and Stanley have been afflicted with "rutting luck" (a terrifying pun signifying bad luck in general and bad luck sexually). In these Spanish words, Stanley (as well as Blanche) is threatened by the death of desire. Despite her hallucinatory assignations, Blanche is not off to a cruise but to a dismal life of confinement, similar to that which awaited Williams's sister Rose. Stanley, too, will find flowers for the dead draped over his rutting, for there are plentiful omens of future marital strife because of his actions toward Blanche. The Kowalski baby (Blanche's nephew born on her birthday [Cardullo, "Birth and Death"]) and Stella will doubtless bring remorse to that marriage bed. Through these two Hispanic characters, then, Williams deconstructs the binary world of death and desire reflecting a marriage of Eros and Thanatos. Pablo and the old woman incorporate much of the instability the script tries impossibly to contain.

The Hispanic world is even more intense and invasive in *Camino Real* (1953), the most politicized Hispanic space in the canon. Ostensibly, the play is set in a Latin American country resembling "*such widely scattered ports . . . [as] Havana, Vera Cruz, New Orleans*" (431). Yet Williams simultaneously mesmerizes and indicts audiences by asking them to see and *not see* America in Caminoland. It is his neatest *trompe d'oeil*, the art of concealing by revealing. He weaves familiar American political icons—as well as those from his personal history—through a fictional/factual Hispanic landscape, blurring distinctions between nationalist borders, both Anglo and Latin. As La Madrecita, a permanent resident of the Camino, apostrophizes Kilroy whom she holds in Pieta fashion: "This was thy son, America, and now mine" (578). *Camino* intrepidly interrogates whose son Kilroy is, and when he asks at the start of Block 16 "which way is out," Williams's answer is that it is the same either way—fictional Latin American dictatorship or real American republic. Upholding all dictators, Gutman proclaims "the love of the people belongs safely to you their Generalissimo." What makes *Camino* a perpetually dangerous play is that Williams analogizes an odious Latin American dictatorship, to which the U.S. has felt superior since the days of the Spanish-American War, with the land of the free and the home of the brave. Williams both distances and localizes America through the Hispanicized sites of *Camino*. The play thus magnifies and minimalizes America through such settings, a provocative imprint of the revolutionary Tennessee. The freedoms that Williams romantically valorized in *Camino* were those he would celebrate in the Castro coup at the end of the decade.

Camino was Williams's emancipatory manifesto hurled against any right-wing dictator/oligarchy, whether in central America or in the U.S. He could not have set the play in America in 1953—because of such oppression—but he staged

it there, linking American with this unidentified Hispanic setting. It is impossible to escape from the Camino, just as it was impossible to evade McCarthy-like witch hunts in America. *Camino* is a play about the refractions of repression. Tierra Caliente looks a lot like Washington, D.C. In the ghoulish, sexualized landscape of *Camino*, Williams attacks the fascist oppression of Joseph McCarthy's American (Balakian), although a subsequent revival in 1970 with Al Pacino and Jessica Tandy proved that McCarthyism was not confined to one decade. Caminoland is a walled city, a Pentagon of armed guards—"gorillas"—and supposedly licit civil servants—the piping street cleaners—who are the visible secret police exterminating dissenters, especially wanderers and artists. The street cleaners symbolize the cannibalism Williams later recoiled from in *Suddenly Last Summer*. An artist in a repressive American or on the Camino is anyone who values love, freedom, and speaks the forbidden word "Brother." An artist's papers, as Marguerite finds out, are especially suspect in McCarthy America or Caminoland and may be *lettres de cachet*, amounting to the artist's death warrant. Kilroy is both freedom fighter and dispossessed artist, "desocupado," just like Williams during the summer of 1940 when the idea of *Camino* flowered in his imagination.

In *Camino* Williams furthered his political goals by inverting traditional, comfortable Hispanic rituals and customs. He disabused an audience of the 1950s—and beyond—that the land south of the border offered carefree days, restful siestas, welcoming señoritas, and sunny passion. One ritual that Williams perverts in *Camino* is the fiesta, a communal celebration associated with a variety of rites—religious, political, sexual (e.g. Fiesta Nocturna). Instead, such a feast is transformed by the Generalissimo and Gutman into a propagandized sideshow deflecting attention (and anger) away from the harsh reprisals against the exercise of human rights. As Gutman says to the Generalissimo after the Survivor is exterminated, "I think we'd better have some public diversion right away. Put the Gypsy on. Have her announce the Fiesta" (Block 2). But Fiesta Camino-fashion leads not to animated celebration or eye-pleasing pageantry, but to degradation and denial of love and brotherhood. "The first event is the coronation of the King of Cuckolds" (Block 11). It is as if Williams is dehistoricizing history, unfolding events through an anti-pageant. Serenading and romantic rhapsodies, more Hispanic rituals, are also distorted and twisted in *Camino*. Typical of the entertainment in this Hispanic/American republic is the show put on by the "hideous old prostitute Rosita who grins horribly . . . hitching up her ragged filthy skirt" (444). As Rosita dances, she asks, "Love? Love?," profaning the sacred bond. Her entertainment, like politics in *Camino*, is corrupt and corrupting; the voluptuous tart is transformed into the old crone, rather than the other way around. Her actions and her name debase the sacred Williams's mantra *Rose*, tantamount to a devaluation of love. The desolation of the Plaza "*suggesting a city devastated by bombardment*" is metamorphosized into human form through Rosita.

Suddenly Last Summer, a later Hispanically influenced play, is the most sexually predatory in the canon. Its Hispanic locations are sites for the explosion of

darkest desire, where oppression and canonization paradoxically empower Williams to advance an agenda of social disruption. Interrogating Catharine's memory of Sebastian Venable's death in the city of Cabeza de Lobo, her insipid brother George—an easy Williams's target—declares: "You cannot tell such a story to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country" (47). But as the emancipated voice of the Other—the witness of an apocalyptic sexual/political experience—Catharine Holly speaks for Sebastian who "resembles Williams closely" (Hayman 175). As Paul Hurley notes, Catharine is the true poet (399). A survivor of the Camino Real, Catharine has returned to George's "civilized up-to-date country" on the Fugitivo only to remind audiences of the circularity of the trip, the predatory similarity of both sites. As in *Camino*, a Hispanic landscape gives Williams the opportunity to express revolutionary ideas with greater impunity than he otherwise might have. In the sexualized travelogue of *Suddenly*, Williams may be mythologizing "a homoerotic . . . sacrifice" (Clum 133), but he is also articulating a radicalized politico-sexual credo through three Hispanicized sites of cannibalization.

The first is Mrs. Venable's Gothic home in the Garden District of New Orleans, which offers all the lush topicality of an Hispanic landscape, including "*a fantastical garden which is more like a tropical jungle*" (9). With its "semi-tropical climate," her garden is charged with Latin-like passion and danger, found in *Summer and Smoke* and even *Camino*. The house and garden are manicured with the deadly precision of the Spanish Inquisition, yet the garden is "*inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of a savage nature,*" (9) the griffin in the green. Chief among the predators is the Venus flytrap, the carnivorous plant, the perfect Williamesque symbol for the rampant cannibalism, or the way people destroy each other, at the other two Hispanic locations in the play—the Encantadas and Cabeza de Lobo. In this Hispanic garden Williams stages the ultimate confrontation between the castrating, cannibalistic mother and the poet's representative Catharine. In the 1959 film version of *Suddenly*, Katharine Hepburn's Mrs. Venable resembled the Venus flytrap herself when she descended a long stairway threateningly enclosed in her own predatory-looking elevator chair. As he did through Pablo and the blind Mexican woman in *Streetcar*, Williams Hispanicized New Orleans, something easily validated historically and imaginatively. As a Spanish colony, New Orleans flew the Spanish flag and, surprisingly enough, the architecture in the Quarter is more Spanish than French. Extending the Hispanic diaspora of his imagination, New Orleans for Williams in *Suddenly* further and repeatedly allowed him to problematize a conventionality at odds with his conflicted world.

The Galapagos Islands, the second Hispanic site in *Suddenly*, some 650 miles off the coast of Ecuador and a province of that country, proleptically situate the crimes of repression enacted in Cabeza de Lobo and in Mrs. Venable's Garden District home. Visiting these islands, referred to as the Encantadas by Herman Melville, Mrs. Venable continued to desexualize her son to control him. These islands are contradictory sites of perverse enchantment and tragic entrapment, a

typically Williams uneasy juxtaposition of Hispanicized martyrdom and celebration. The emerging turtles in their “desperate flight to the sea” are annihilated by the birds on the “bleak black beach” in the same way Sebastian was trapped by Mrs. Venable’s control and later cannibalized by the boys of Cabeza de Lobo. Yet Sebastian is enchanted by the site, spending “the whole blackening equatorial day in the crow’s nest of the schooner watching that thing on the beach” (19). Metonymically, the crow’s nest encircles and arrests Sebastian just as the engorging birds do to their trapped prey.

Mrs. Venable’s narrative about her and Sebastian’s adventures in one Hispanic location—The Encantadas—sequesters with Catharine’s story about events in the third Hispanic territory of *Suddenly*, Cabeza de Lobo. There, naked children who “looked like a flock of plucked birds” (84) cannibalize Sebastian who “screamed just once before [they] pursued him and overtook him . . . they devoured parts of his . . . and stuffed them into the gobbling fierce little empty blank mouths” (92). Catharine tells a parable within a parable as Williams constructs an elaborate allegory using Hispanic sites. Although critics disagree about whether Cabeza de Lobo is in South America or in Spain, I suggest it is in Spain, the mother country from which the cannibalistic violence at its most grotesque, most elemental was exported through colonization to the New World. Appropriately, Williams starts *Suddenly* in New Orleans—the former Spanish colony in the New World—and ends it there. The centrality of Cabeza de Lobo to the play is significant, with events building up to and away from this site. In between Williams situates events in Spain (human cannibalism) and South American (animal cannibalism) as if to explore the emergence and destructive force of colonization Spanish-style, from where such violence radiates. Allegorically, Mrs. Venable is the most Hispanic-like dictator in the New World, importing Old World terror into a New World setting. Violet’s oppression, like Catharine’s truth, are brought back to the New World of Williams’s New Orleans. As in *Camino*, Williams’s Hispanic geography follows a complex plan of progression into circularity, far more intricate than his use of Hispanic characters or allusions in *Summer and Smoke* or even *Streetcar*.

Similar to other Hispanic locations in Williams’s plays, Cabeza de Lobo is a flyleaf for larger issues. The name of the city translates as “The Wolf’s Head,” a highly evocative signifier psychologically and theologically. “Wolf’s Head” suggests predatory bestiality, Sebastian’s fate among the wolfish urchins of the city. It also stamps the ravenous, wolf-like Mrs. Venable intent on devouring her son and her niece. Further, with this name Williams possibly alludes to the means of Mrs. Venable’s wolfish designs on Catharine—“lobo” in Spanish suggests *lobitima*, or “lobotomy,” though the words come from entirely different roots in Spanish. It may also eerily point to “Wolf’s Hour,” the title of an earlier Williams poem exploring that time of night when most people die of heart attacks, another reflection on Mrs. Venable’s revengeful plan. Given the religious symbolism of the play, too, the name of the city may allude to Golgotha, the place of the skull, substantiating Clum’s view that Cabeza de Lobo is a parody of the Eucharist as well as the site of

homoerotic martyrdom or crucifixion (133). Sebastian Venable, the venerated San Sebastino de Sodoma, is executed at the place of the wolf's skull. *Suddenly* thus incorporates an elaborate network of Hispanic places, characters, and allusions for horrific purposes.

The Mexican setting for *The Night of the Iguana*—all action takes place near or at the Costa Verde Hotel—gives Williams's yet another Hispanically-energized location to explore a variety of issues and times, biographical and political. Mexico in *Iguana* is a country rich in the topography of contraries. The first stage direction significantly details three distinct geographic features mirroring the range of contraries in which *Iguana* is embedded. Maxine's hotel "sits on a jungle-covered hilltop" that overlooks "the 'morning beach' of Puerto Barrio" while "the rain forests above it were among the world's wildest and loveliest . . . places" (253). The jungle suggests the predatory assaults confronting Shannon; the "morning beach" mirrors Hannah's serenity; and the rain forests, among the oldest creations, offer a way to achieve religious fulfillment. Foreclosing easy consistency, Mexico in *Iguana* reveals the full success of Williams's dynamicism.

Iguana is unregenerately an autobiographical pilgrimage for Williams through the past, present, and future. It collapses time—set in early 1940s yet produced in 1961—much like *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, a play which describes events in Williams's life from 1940 but was not produced until 1982. Aztecan as well as contemporary, Mexico in the summer of 1940 was for Williams, as for Shannon, a place of discovery. Unlike the students from the woman's college in Texas who "want to be at home away from home" (345), Williams lusted after the forbidden. What he found in Mexico, as Shannon did, was a land of primal heat, burning passion to be tasted and tested. Speaking of his "final tour of bodies through tropical countries," Shannon exclaims:

Why did I say 'tropical'? Hell! Yes, it's always been tropical countries I took ladies through. Does that . . . signify something, I wonder. Maybe. Fast decay is a thing of hot climates, steamy, hot, wet climates and I run back to them like an . . . [i]ncomplete sentence. . . . Always seducing a lady or two. . . . (369)

Substitute "boys" or "young men" for "ladies," and we hear Williams's homoerotic delight.

More profoundly, Shannon's speech foregrounds one of the key contraries that haunted Williams—delight/decay. Expressing more of Williams's own sexual fantasies, Maxine reveals: "the Mexican kids are wonderful night-swimmers—taking two hundred foot dives off the Quebrada" (270). In a later stage direction Williams more directly rhapsodized on the vicarious pleasures of fellatio—"The Mexican boy reappears, sucking a juicy peeled mango—its juice running down onto his throat" (283). Yet Williams's erotic love was tied to a costly price. A sequel of sorts to *Camino*, *Iguana* focuses on what's for sale in Mexico. These boys are just "Mexican concubines," Quebrada harlots "kicked . . . out for being

overattentive to the . . . guests" (270). Like Shannon again, Williams found that Mexico was the land of passion without love. The homoerotic unions he forged there rarely survived the night.

Besides the boys, other things are for sale in Mexico, introducing another key set of contraries for Williams—flesh versus spirit. Expressing a cardinal truth about country and playwright, Shannon historicizes that Mexico is:

caught and destroyed in the flesh and corrupted in its spirit by the flesh and corrupted in its spirit by the gold-hungry Conquistadors that bore the flag of the Inquisition along with the cross of Christ . . . (305)

Irreconcilable yet doomed to be yoked together, Christianity and Spanish colonization left their mark on Mexico, and on the conflicted Williams, the rebellious Puritan (Tischler). Williams saw first-hand the confrontation of the spirit and the flesh in 1940 at the Mexico City whorehouse where a picture of Christ hung on the wall while syphilitic boys struggled for a livelihood in their cubicles (*Memoirs* 37). Shannon's predicament in the church and in Mexico symbolized Williams's, too. With "destroyed flesh" and "corrupted spirit," Shannon undergoes great bodily torments ("I got a fever"), a side effect of his destroyed flesh and spirit. Still gold-hungry, Shannon fears losing his job as a tourist director with a company that has Inquisitorial standards. His "gold cross with amethyst center" (300) becomes the barter of the Conquistador in Mexico. Confessing that it blasphemes in the sight of the ladies from Texas, Shannon perverts religious language to describe the mercenary deed: "They know I redeemed it from a Mexico City pawn shop, and they suspect that's where I got it in the first place" (300-301). Pawn shop and priesthood follow the same flag in Mexico.

But Shannon's cross had immense value confronting Conquistadorial values in the last act of *Iguana*. Tied in his hammock, Shannon undergoes necessary torture to purge the body and soul, flesh and spirit. Hannah pronounces:

There's something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in the hammock—no nails, no blood, no death. Isn't that a comparatively comfortable, almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon. (344)

Hannah speaks the ultimate biographical truth of the play. A voluptuous crucifixion, such as that experienced by Williams's patron San Sebastian de Sodoma, affords priest and playwright a catharsis to shape and perfect the tragedy of their lives. Shannon is truly redeemed when trying to alleviate Hannah's misery by "*snatch[ing] the gold cross from his pocket*" and giving it to her. Ironically, he denies the very symbol which substantiates his Christianity in the land of the Conquistadors. It is only in giving away his cross that he lifts the burden of his

own heart. Shannon is restored to the promise of the future as the young Williams would be through faith in his craft, script becoming scripture.

As in other Hispanic plays, Williams fictionalizes Mexico in *Iguana* as a political sounding board for his own (and America's) ideas. *Iguana* is a tri-lingual politicized play. Maxine's hotel is a microcosm of an emigrant-full Mexico shortly after the outbreak of World War II. Inhabited by Americans and Germans (as well as Mexicans), the hotel is a site for bitter adversaries. Herr Fahrenkopf and his family represent the Fascism Williams deplored in *Camino* and *Suddenly*. Trying to take over the hotel, Fahrenkopf demands silence so he can listen to a "recording of *Der Führer* addressing the Reichstag . . . and transmuted by *Deutsches Nachrichtenburn* to Mexico City" (295) and then precipitously "bursts into Nazi marching." Unconscionably, he cheers the news that London is ablaze because of the Luftwaffe night bombing. An angry Shannon (a patriotic Williams!) informs Maxine, "You're turning this place into the Mexican Berchtesgaden" (293). Shannon's comment would resonate as ominously in 1940, when the action takes place, as in 1961, when *Iguana* was first produced at the height of the Cold War, the period when any foreign government's intervention in Monroe Doctrine-protected Latin America was gravely feared (e.g. Russia in Cuba). Historically, America had been wary of German (or any foreign) interest in its neighbor to the South. In the nineteenth century, Maximilian and Carlota tried to make Mexico an extension of the Hapsburg Empire. Shortly before World War I, the intercepted Zimmerman telegram disclosed Germany's plans to invade Mexico. The representation of the repulsive Fahrenkopfs in *Iguana* is saturated in historical antecedents, suggesting that Williams synchronously incorporated historical events into his play.

Undeniably, Williams characteristically linked geopolitics to body politics south of the border. The Germans, whose "Rubenesque" corpulent frames inevitably burn in the Mexican heat, are also represented as being as freakish in their political beliefs. Williams's stage direction, for example, portrays Fahrenkopf as non-human; his voice

like a mad dog's bark emerges from the static momentarily . . . Herr Fahrenkopf despairs of hearing the broadcast. As he tries to leave, the light catches his polished glasses in that he appears for a moment to have electric light bulbs in his forehead . . . (295)

The man with rigid, lock-step ideas is transformed into something mechanistic, robot-like. Unlike the voluptuous Shannon and Maxine, or even the compassionate Hannah, the Germans are out of place in Williams's sexualized Mexico, except as objects of scorn.

Although fifteen years separate *Iguana* from *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, the two plays are imbedded in political intrigue intermixed with love triangles, illustrating Williams's continuing yet deepening interest in things Hispanic. In one major sense, *The Red Devil Battery Sign* is the culmination of Williams's use of emblem-

atic Hispanic ethnicity. In this late play, first produced in 1975 and subsequently revised and performed in 1976, 1977, and 1980, Williams recycled earlier Hispanic paradigms but extended them even more affirmatively. *Red Devil* contains the most fully developed Hispanic character in the canon—King Del Rey, who with Woman Downtown, is the major character in the play. An early stage direction reads that King was “*Texan born with some Spanish-Indian blood in him*” (291), yet later he admits “I was born close to the border, but I’m Texan. My mother told me my father was gringo, but his name was Spanish—Del Rey” (298). Border-born characters, as we have seen, were close to Williams’s heart and, not surprisingly, King is Williams’s most benevolent Hispanic character. When Woman Downtown inquires “You’re Mexican, aren’t you?,” King dispels a negative stereotype: “Don’t let that scare you. Some people, y’know, they think all Mexicans are criminals like, like rapists . . .” (298). Williams portrays King as savior, an Hispanic Big Daddy in love for the last time.

Like Anthony Quinn, the first actor to play the role, King’s ancestry privileged the Hispanic over “the gringo.” He is intimately associated with Mexican rituals, especially musical ones. The leader of a mariachi band fallen on hard times, King is reduced to playing in less distinguished hotel lounges, while previously being featured at the Reforma in Mexico City. Mariachi music infuses the play, an inescapable sign of Latin strength and romance. Like other Hispanics, too, King is proudly virile; we see him half naked on his sexual throne—the large satin-covered bed in Woman Downtown’s suite. Though the reviewer for *Variety* called him “Stanley . . . transmogrified” (“Red Devil”), King is far less vindictive than Kowalski. James Schlatter is much closer to the truth: King “carries himself with relaxed sexual authority and un-self-conscious ease that Williams perceived in and came to love so much about the men of that culture” (96). King bears a typically Williamesque wound; the “cyclone in my head” (331) is a tumor from a car crash which, as the play progresses, turns his speech into words without syntax. But the tumor more reflects the “malevolence of the Red Devil Battery world” (Kahn 366) than King’s culpability. Strong-spirited, King deplores being his wife Perla’s “invalid dependent” and longs for reunion with his daughter La Niña, who left his band for a larger one but returned home pregnant to seek her father’s blessing. Incorporating the mythos of Hispanic romance and family, King joins Woman Downtown against Red Devil tormentors.

Opposing the Del Rey Kingdom are the Red Devil Battery conspirators. Set in Dallas, *Red Devil* projects an absurd society filled with political intrigue reminiscent of the Kennedy assassination. This world is personified through the unseen, malevolent husband of Woman Downtown, the tycoon who leads the Red Devil Battery Company, and is perhaps influenced by Howard Hughes (Radin 26). Through his partners and undercover agents, the Red Devil mogul attempts “to engineer a fascist coup against the U.S.” (Whitehead 27). In one production, a bold neon light flashes as the symbol of his futuristic Big Brotherism (Kullman 669). According to Elizabeth Ashley, who played Woman Downtown in 1996, the

play “brings up Eisenhower’s last speech, the one about beware [sic] the military-industrial complex, and this was what Tennessee was concerned with” (qtd. in Lipton 18). But Williams contextualized an even more contemporary threat in the play. *Red Devil* emerges from the Watergate era of suspicion and conspiracy, with Woman’s husband threatening America the way Nixon and the Watergate conspirators did. According to Williams, Woman Downtown was modeled after Margaret Mitchell who, because she had knowledge of her husband’s plans, was under surveillance in a Washington hotel. In *Red Devil*, phones are bugged, CIA and FBI types—“crewcuts”—lurk everywhere, and Woman Downtown’s kindly guardian and symbol of justice, Judge Collister, is assassinated. Also inhabiting this world are gangs of wild youths, blowing up “squad cars with bottles of nitro” (289) and turning the city into a wasteland, just as the boys of Cabeza de Lobo did.

Dallas in the *Red Devil Battery Sign* is the city of the living dead, the apocalyptic, nightmarish landscape of *Camino Real* 22 years later. In fact, Dallas contains many characteristics Williams associated with the earlier grotesque Latin landscape—suppression, assassination, dictatorship. In 1953 Williams had to situate a McCarthy-threatened America in a fictional Latin American country and invoke an American icon/hero—Kilroy—to bear the dangers for audiences. Yet by 1975, the tables of history as well as Williams’s representation of a place had changed, and he was able to symbolize what he termed “the moral decay of our nation” (qtd. in Gussow) in an American city and chose a Hispanic hero in whom the audience could place its sympathy and trust. In the wasteland of *Red Devil* America the Hispanic King personifies love and freedom. As Williams pointed out in his program note to the Vancouver *Red Devil* in 1980, the play “was of dangerous importance” to him (Program). Williams took the risk, as King Del Rey did.

Opposing the fascist, mechanistic world of the Red Devil junta is the love the King and Woman have for each other. Sy Kahn too quickly denies the redemptive efficacy of that love by describing them as “deposed royal lovers, victims of inexorable forces that permit neither love nor justice to persist” (366). To the contrary, they are the only hope in the phantasmagoria of Red Devil monsters. King and Woman are the Hispanic Antony and Cleopatra creating new heavens, new earth among the ruins; he escapes from a mundane wife—Octavia/Perla—and Woman tries to outwit Caesarism/Red Devil Batteryism. Their passionate lovemaking affirms Williams’s universal belief in the power of love/desire to dispel loneliness. Woman helps King reach the tragic heights of love as surely as he does for her. As her savior, he enters her life as he lives it, rescuing her. In Act One, King helps her evade the spies her husband places around her, and in the last act he defiantly shoots the Drummer who attempts to despoil her. Her life has become circumscribed in his as he gives her new hope and a new name. As she tells him shortly before his death, “My life began that night and is going to end this one” (369). Delivering her from Red Devil anonymity, King re-christens her in loving Spanish: “!La Verdad! Truth. I give you that name now” (375).

In some of the most lyrical lines Williams wrote in the 1970s, Woman comforts King when he is too sick to make love: "Love? It's all right, you know. King. King. I've moved to a room with no Red Devil grinning through the window, a room opposite from it but with a bed king-size for you to live with me once more . . . There are—roses, fresh linen, clean air. Mariachi. I will undress you. I'll hold you" (369). She has internalized his music. The love of a Hispanic man for a Hispanicized bride is the triumphant antidote to Red Devil absurdity. Thanks to King, Woman Downtown understands "love is no accident." King is the fulfillment of Williams's own struggles and achievements effected through his Hispanic characters, the apogee of Hispanic nobility in the Williams canon.

From King Del Rey backwards in the canon, Hispanic characters—and settings—for over 40 years held a persistent fascination for Tennessee Williams. In this Hispanic world, Williams found much that was available to and compatible with his own rebellious, romantic vision. Through the Hispanic Other, Williams could vicariously enter and energize his theatre of danger and desire. The marginalized Hispanic world accommodated the new frontier of Williams's dramaturgy. Yet, as I have argued, the Hispanic world also contained the flexibility of indeterminancy that furthered Williams's sexualized and politicized agenda. If the Latin culture represented an alternative to Anglo respectability, it just as paradoxically indicted that society by mirroring its most pernicious fascist impulses. In his Latins, Williams characterized the imaginative risks he asked his audiences, including himself, to take. Buenos recuerdos, Compañero Tenn.¹

Notes

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